

Eternally Mortal

By

T. Cobey

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Author Thomas Cobey

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This book is a work of fiction

Prologue

In 1934, William Fennerman worked for, Dornier Flugzeugwerke, in Weingarten, Germany as an engineer. His expertise focused on hydraulics as they applied to aircraft landing gear. Because retractable landing gear was new technology, he was a highly valued worker.

Being a man who had witnessed much in his lifetime, William paid close attention to the changing political world. Especially how those changes applied to him. Being Jewish in Germany was not a good place to be. Not wishing to change profession, but more than happy to change location, he secured a position with a Japanese firm, Kawasaki Aircraft Industries, working on the same landing gear issues he had experience in.

Although both countries had embraced the militaristic stance that would carry them into WWII, Japan had no problem with him being Jewish. So, in the fall of 1934, William moved to Japan.

Eleven years later, William tried to dress without waking his wife; dawn was still over an hour away. Birds were beginning to sing somewhere beyond

the garden as a warm breeze from the open-door ruffled papers on his desk. This wasn't his favorite time of day, but he understood how it could be for so many. He stuffed a haversack with food, painting supplies and hoisted the sling over his shoulder. As he stepped over the threshold to leave, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Where are you going so early?" The voice sounded soft and thick from sleep.

William turned toward his wife. "Good morning."

Compared to Europeans, William's six-foot three-inch height bore above most contemporaries. By Japanese standards, he had no contemporaries. The door behind him seemed small in comparison to his mass. Although he loved the old farmhouse, the builders did not have his comfort in mind when the walls were plumbed and the doors hung.

Yoshi propped herself on an elbow. "You were leaving without saying goodbye?" She did her best to sound truculent, but suspected the effort wasted.

William removed the pack, and then sat on the bed. "I left you a note. Thought I'd take a trip into the hills and catch the sunrise on canvas." He wished for the power to make time stand still. Women were no mystery to him; he loved many in his life, but none like this. Yoshi stood five feet tall. Her black hair ended at the curve of her back. She was smart as he, if not smarter, with a will to match her intellect. She challenged him in almost

every way.

"You said you would come with me today to visit my mother. Remember?" Yoshi studied her husband's face. Most days William wore a tight ponytail. When he painted, he let it flow free. She brushed the hair from his face. "She'll think you don't like her."

"Your mother loves the arts. Tell her I went into the hills to paint, she'll understand." His excuse for not traveling with his wife sounded feeble to his ears. He disliked the city. The buildings crammed together with filthy alleys between, the mass of humanity living in squalor, the smell, the stink, all these things burdened him with a sadness only his farm could lift.

He was right; her mother did love the arts and would understand if her husband spent the day in the mountains. Her frown faded as she thought of another way to keep him from leaving. She lifted the sheet. "You left the door open. Now I'm cold."

The attribute William acknowledged most effortlessly was his love of the female form. Yoshi's countenance exuded a provocative demeanor, while her nakedness exuded a simple truth. When grown men and adolescent boys were alone with their thoughts, this is what they dreamt of. His resolve to leave began to unravel. William closed his eyes and drew deep from an inner strength. He took the sheet and gently covered her. Now he brushed the hair from her face. "I'll be

back by the time you return from the city. Now go to sleep. You have more than an hour before it's time to get up."

Yoshi pulled the sheet tight to her face and settled back down. Maybe tonight she would make his favorite dinner. And what about her mother? She would never admit it openly, but occasionally she liked to visit her mother without her husband. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

William rode his bike along the small road leading out of the village. It was a hard ride. Despite being in good shape his legs burned and cried out for rest. To lament over his age and blame it on the pain came easy enough.

In the time before light when the sun is an orange haze on the horizon, objects have form, but no color. From this colorless transition, William noticed the outline of a man sitting on the side of the road. At the moment, any excuse to stop would be welcome. Besides, the man looked in need of something. Whether that something was the rest he appeared to be taking, or medical assistance, it did not matter, William would investigate and at the same time give his legs a rest.

He had been a soldier in another life and in his own opinion a good one. Still, the memories were not so removed that he forgot how to approach a seemingly benign situation with the caution due any unknown. The man looked harmless and probably was. But these were

dangerous times and here a man lingered where he normally would not at a time of day when most were home. William set his bike down and approached with a focused concentration not used in years.

From a few feet away he noticed the man looked old. Moisture from the previous night's dew made his flimsy shirt translucent; it clung to his bony torso revealing the tired body beneath. Apart from his shirt, the moisture gathered in his thin, white hair and held it firmly to his brow. Older people wore jackets on comfortable days, the man before him had neither jacket nor a proper shirt. William relaxed, slightly. This did not appear to be a threatening situation. The man leaned against a fence post with his chin resting on his chest. William placed his pack on the ground, knelt on his left knee, and held the man's hand as he searched for a pulse. After a time, he found it. Its rhythm felt slow and weak.

"Hello, you with me friend?" William asked. The man stirred but did not open his eyes. William reached for his pack. It held, among other things, tea, and a flask of his favorite French cognac. Despite his years living in Japan and acceptance of the culture, he still preferred some things from home, French cognac being top on that list. He rationed the cognac carefully. At the start of the war, he had a full case. Now, years later, only one bottle remained, and the contents of the flask.

William held the man's head upright and put

the flask to his mouth. Some of the liquid went down his chin, some went down his throat.

William removed his jacket and put it over the man's shoulders then gave him another shot from the flask. This time most of the cognac stayed inside, and he opened his eyes. "Good morning," William said. "Wasn't sure if you were coming back."

The man reached for the flask and gave himself a third shot. William sat on the ground beside him. "So, you going to tell me your name, and why you are out here half dead from the night air? Or are you just going to finish my flask and move on?"

"My name is Haruo Watanabe and I've come here to die. You have interrupted me."

William took the flask from Haruo's shaking hands and put it to his lips, then paused. Looking around he noticed pastures, a quiet country road and picturesque mountains. "Yes, if I had to pick a place to die, I might choose this same spot." Although it was too early to be drinking, the cognac went down easily. Considering the conversation, he had another shot. "Would it be rude to ask why you want to die? You see, I'm not from around here and I don't know your customs. I'm curious and would like to help, but I don't want to be rude."

If Haruo's thoughts were clear he would have noticed the stranger was not only a foreigner, but spoke perfect Japanese, and anyone who spoke

the language that well would know Japanese culture. "My life is over. My family is gone. I'm old, tired."

"Where's your family?"

"My two sons are dead. My oldest died four years ago in China. A child with flowers killed him. Last night we received word my other son died fighting in the Philippines." Haruo reached for the flask and took another drink. "They were good men. They had families with children and both worked hard. When the Emperor said it was time to fight and kill, they went without complaint. Now they're dead."

The man had never spoken of his grief, but the stranger was easy to talk to. "My brother and his whole family were killed in Tokyo two months ago by American bombers."

"Where's your wife?" William asked as he pulled a good size stone from under his seat.

"She's home... ill. I don't think she has much time left."

"And your grandchildren, where are they?"

"They live on my farm. I have five grandchildren. I pray the war is over before..." The old man stopped and closed his eyes.

"So, your wife is sick and you have five grandchildren. Things *have* been bad, and you are very old. Please forgive me if I'm out of line. It sounds like your family still needs you."

The old man did not answer.

"Your wife is sick. Isn't it better you are with

her, and your grandchildren, they need a man around. You know it is true. It's also true that you're old, but children need a man's influence, especially one with your wisdom, and you know the farm can't run itself. You might be thinking, what do I know, a stranger. Well, I'll tell you.

"Life should never be given up without a fight."

Haruo did not answer.

"Maybe I have something that will help." William rummaged through his pack. "Something other than my cognac, which you have taken a liking to." A moment later he said, "Here it is, I never leave home without it." He held out his closed hand and offered Haruo what help he could.

Haruo thought nothing from the stranger's bag could help, but he seemed sincere in his effort to share. Not wishing to appear rude, he held out his hand. When the stranger grabbed his hand with a speed faster than his old eyes could perceive, fear rocked his body and death was suddenly something detestable.

William knew the man would be afraid, and he was sorry for that.

He closed his eyes and let it happen the way it happened countless times before. This time, instead of removing life, William reversed the flow and gave. The world around the two faded to a sepia haze, and then winked out entirely.

In measured time, only a few seconds passed. Yet their meeting had encompassed a

lifetime.

William nudged Haruo. "Open your eyes and look at the dawn, you don't want to miss it."

When Haruo opened his eyes, his age had decreased by one year. Instead of being seventy-four, he was now seventy-three. William's body responded to another year. Another year added, whatever that came to. He still did not know.

One short year did not make a large difference in Haruo's life. Nevertheless, William's nudge had rallied enough strength for another day. They did not speak at first. No words were necessary. No words felt adequate. Haruo's memory of their meeting would fade in a few hours, but at this moment, as the two men faced each other on the side of the road, the awareness of what occurred felt real. "I'm going home to be with my wife," Haruo said.

"And I'm going up the road to paint the rising sun, while I still can." William picked up his bike, and then bowed low. Although it had cost him a year, he smiled. It was costly, but worth it.

After an hour, he stopped by a ridge overlooking the village. The houses, shops and farms looked small, distant and full of life. For seven years, he lived in the farmhouse with Yoshi and had grown fond of the locals. His job at Kawasaki Aircraft came to an abrupt end courtesy of more American bombs. Recently, he paid local officials for the right to live unmolested among them. For the

money, William thought he should be a full citizen. He shook his head. The reality did not escape him. "Considering how the war is going," he said to no one, "I suppose I'm lucky not to be in prison, or dead in a ditch."

The view looked suitable for his canvas. After a brief policing of the area William set up an impromptu easel then rolled a small log to sit on. He felt comfortable, satisfied. The light changed as dawn became early morning. William considered his options. Start painting while the light is right, or eat breakfast. He smiled and said, "Maybe my legs need food." William reached for his bag.

Breakfast consisted of simple food; leftover fish from the previous night, a wedge of his own cheese, two biscuits and tea to wash it down. He wished the tea were coffee. Not that he disliked the local tea it tasted fine. But dear sweet Lord, how he missed a cup of coffee. Before the war coffee was scarce, now, it was impossible to find.

After eating, he looked at the sun and considered the time between 8:00 and 9:00. He thought of Yoshi and her destination about forty minutes south by bus. If he guessed right, she should be pulling into Hiroshima in about. Hell, she is there now, he thought.

William brought himself to his canvas. Pencil ready, the view etched in his mind.

Then, from the south, a light like no other dimmed the sun.

He turned away. When he looked back, a

large cloud billowed from where the light had originated.

It was a bomb, probably American, and without a doubt the largest in history. Every major city in Japan had been bombed by the Americans, except for Hiroshima. They had saved it for this? Yoshi's mother lived in Hiroshima.

William leaned heavily against a small mountain pine and wished for death.

Chapter 1

May 2022

Her refuge from the madness, sleep. It was a comforting void she sought often, and made no apology for.

Now she had nowhere to hide.

On May 29, at two in the morning, Joanne Arnet woke when struck in the back. The force drove her off the bed, through the air and onto the floor. Bright lights flashed across her eyes. She could not breathe. Her pulse raced and rational thought became impossible as her mind screamed and her body convulsed. For an hour she lay there, sprawled like a corpse.

When the pain eased, Joanne tried to assess her situation. She feared something might be broken. Maybe a rib snapped when she hit the floor; it had happened before, she knew the symptoms. Her lower back throbbed and her legs were numb. A voice in her head whispered, spinal injury. Her kidneys felt bruised, wetness radiated from her lower half. All these possibilities would become clear when she moved and the inevitable second wave of pain set in... she knew that from experience as well. It was not the pain keeping her still; it was the sounds coming from the bed behind

her.

He spoke softly as though in conversation with an old friend. He even laughed in all the right places. Joanne cried silently as she listened to her husband's one-sided conversation. When mucous clogged her nose, making breathing even harder she neither sniffled nor coughed. She would not bring additional attention to herself.

After his lengthy dialogue with the ceiling, Michael Arnet masturbated, and then fell asleep.

When she heard his deep, throaty snore, she pulled herself upright with the help of a chair. To keep from crying out she bit her lip; the taste of blood filled her mouth and helped wash away the phlegm. Slowly, like an old arthritic, she walked to the sofa and spent the remainder of the night there.

For Joanne, mundane tasks worked like an anchor to the real world. Despite the violence of the night before, she focused on doing some shopping.

Walking slowly made the pain tolerable. She wore a pair of stretch pants with an elastic waist, they were not her first choice, but her jeans cut across the twelve-inch bruise that tattooed her back and buttocks. Buttoning them, not to mention movement afterward was out of the question. She donned her frumpy clothes and called it good enough.

Thankfully, the store was quiet. The only other person in the aisle did not count. Thirty feet ahead a young man worked on his knees stocking a

shelf, she knew he would not make eye contact. All the better.

The pain hit when she reached high for the instant coffee. It raced from her lower back to her calf muscle and brought a ringing to her ears that sounded like the world's largest tuning fork vibrating inside her head. Her right leg quivered as though all the electrical connections were shorting out. Joanne fell forward on the shopping cart and held tight to keep from landing on the floor between the instant coffee and the powdered milk.

Leaning over the basket, she feigned interest in its contents. Tears welled in her eyes as panic began to set in—she could not straighten up. Joanne concentrated on breathing, taking in long, slow breaths of air. Experience had taught her that muscle spasms go away in time, on their own. She had to concentrate on relaxation, not an easy accomplishment in the middle of a supermarket. She willed herself to relax.

"Are you okay? Should I get somebody?"

The stock boy stood in front of her basket. He looked young, and despite her predicament, she wondered why he was not in school. "I'm fine," she said. Her words sounded strained as she pushed them out between deep breaths. "Just go back to whatever you were doing." Joanne hated rude people and felt bad for being the kind of person she disliked most. Still, considering the pain, she thought it an accomplishment to say anything at all.

Slowly the muscle-lock eased. When movement became possible, she wheeled the basket to the checkout, paid up, and left the store. Once in her car, she rummaged through the glove compartment, found her private stash of Percocet and took one with the help of a warm Coke.

The letter from Darcy arrived later that day. Joanne slid it under a stack of bills piled next to the refrigerator. She would open it, but not now, not today. Maybe in a day or so she would sit by the kitchen window with one of those special coffees and allow herself, her time. Time to read a letter from an old friend. Time to compare notes. Time to what? Darcy's image kept coming to the front of her thoughts like the ghost of a hundred-watt bulb lingering on the inside of her eyelids.

She removed the letter from the pile, sat at the kitchen table and began to read.

May 24

Dear Joanne,

Normally my first question in any letter is to ask how that person is doing. I'm not going to ask you. I've been trying to talk to you for a long time. All you have given me in return is silence, or worse, indifference. Mom said people drift apart and relationships end. I know it's true. Is that what happened to us? Have I said or done something to offend you and not realized it?

Maybe it's something else. I'm not a mind reader. If it's my job or my lifestyle that's come between us, let's talk about it. We can work it

out.

I'm going to be in New York two weeks from Monday (June 12) on business. Should be an all-day thing. Can we have lunch on Tuesday? We could meet anywhere you like. Won't be a hardship if you're still working the evening shift. You needn't tell Mike if that's a problem. If you don't respond to my letter, I'll assume you wish our friendship to end. Joanne, please come. I miss you more than I can say. There's so much I want to tell you. You're my best friend and no matter what happens, you'll always be.

Love,

Darcy

"What have I done? Dear God, what have I done?"

Joanne covered her face with her hands and felt the question's mandate pull on her emotional foundation with the strength of an outbound tide. How could she face Darcy and share the reality of her life? Her shame was complete.

She thought of her home; the stained walls that needed patching and wondered, would she invite Darcy in to see it? Would she show her the orange, shag rug that should have been ripped out years ago? And what about her lovely neighborhood?

Junk cars dwelled in every third driveway like decaying teeth in a snarling, angry mouth. Hoods, motors and discarded tires lay in oily dirt where grass once grew. Porch railings and spindles that looked adequate when new were now two-by-fours and plywood. A cancer grew in her

neighborhood. A cancer most people associated with the inner city and she lived in the core of the malignancy.

Joanne thought of a hundred reasons why she could not face Darcy. She wrote two letters saying as much, only to tear them up. The third draft made it to the mailbox, its total length, two sentences. It said she would meet, and gave the place and time.

They met in the restaurant parking lot, hugged, and went inside.

Nervous pleasantries were exchanged as the hostess led them to a table by the window. Darcy waited until the waitress moved off then set the menu down. "I have so much I want to say... and so many questions." She paused, the sight of her friend tore down whatever doubts she had and feelings took over. "Joanne, I've missed you."

Joanne's throat closed tight and her eyes began to fill with tears. She tried to speak but could not. Instead, she nodded and reached across the table. Darcy held Joanne's hand and the expanse of seven years vanished with the touch.

She had forgotten how a simple touch could bring such a feeling of love. Her throat relaxed and she found her voice. "Yes, I've missed you too. Please don't be mad." She took a sip of water and looked around. "This place is beautiful. Do you like it? Mike brought me here for our first anniversary."

For the moment, small talk seemed fine. Darcy looked around. The place was not that nice. "Yes, it's lovely. The menu looks good too, but I don't know if I can eat. Nervous, I guess."

They ordered wine and drank slowly, the conversation staying on easy subjects like the weather and how old friends were doing. Darcy had not eaten breakfast and had no desire for lunch. By the end of the second glass of wine trepidation had departed. As the alcohol found its way through her system, her reluctance to ask the difficult questions gave way. "When I think of a best friend, I think of you. You're more a part of me than you know. Where have you been? Talk to me!"

Joanne thought talking about herself would be the most difficult thing in the world. Now, at this moment, she knew the words would come and it felt right. She finished her wine and ordered another. A warm feeling crept through her body. She closed her eyes and was young again, sitting with her best friend on the floor in her bedroom. Yes, the words would come and the location did not matter. What made the difference? What made the tiniest spark of optimism want to ignite a fire capable of burning away her past? Somebody cared, really cared about her.

"It's Mike."

For days Joanne had wondered how to explain what she longed to say. After ruminating on the subject and finding no answer, her words

began to congeal into a coherent form as if fashioned by somebody else. "He's changed, Darcy. He's changed and I'm afraid he's going to kill me."

Joanne braced herself for a reproach.

Darcy set her wine glass down and leaned closer. "Joanne, just say it. Tell me everything from the beginning. I love you. Now tell me what's going on, and you'd better tell me the truth."

Joanne smiled. "You're my only friend who knew Mike before we were married. You thought he was a good catch, too. You told me so, and nobody would argue over his looks. He's still good looking, when he bathes. We wanted the same things. A house, vacations to Florida, a career, friends, family, you know, a decent life together." Joanne paused. Darcy motioned with her hand to continue.

"Okay. This is very hard." Joanne set her wine glass down, the tremble in her hands made its contents slosh dangerously close to the lip. "His father died of cancer the year after we were married. One day his mom called, she'd been crying. She said Larry had cancer. I think it was around Christmas, maybe just before. The doctor didn't say how much time he had left, but we knew he didn't have long. Mike's parents were good people. In fact, everybody in his family seemed so normal. As naive as it sounds, I've always believed the adage; the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree. If the parents are nice, and the family is sound, the

odds were in my favor. Right?"

Darcy nodded understanding.

Joanne went on. "I've had a lot of time to think about this. At first, I thought he acted strange because of his father. You know, the stress of watching his dad die somehow making him not be himself. It was his father's illness that—how can I say this? His dad's death was the catalyst for his illness.

"I'd come home from work and he'd be on the couch staring at the wall. Other times he'd explode over nothing. If I was ten minutes late getting home from work he would give me the third degree, and he didn't stop with 'where have you been?' He would go on all night wanting to know who I was with for those ten minutes. He acted as though I had stopped for anonymous sex with some person I just picked up."

Darcy flagged down the waiter and ordered appetizers.

"Things went from bad to worse after Larry died. The more depressed Michael became, the angrier he got. He smoked pot every day. You didn't know he liked to get high, did you? It was fun when we were dating. Every now and then, he'd get high; he talked me into having some, too. It was innocent fun, nobody got hurt. After his father died, Mike began smoking it every day. I would come home from work and the cloud of pot smoke would almost knock me over. The house reeked of it. One day I opened a window to air the

place out. I might have said something like the place stinks. I never saw him coming. As I turned from the window, he hit me in the jaw. Broke it in two places. I've read that abusive husbands are sorry after they beat their wives. Not Michael, afterward he went back to Netflix and I drove myself to the hospital.

“I never met a woman who didn't say, if her husband ever laid a hand on her she'd leave him. Here's the funny part, the real *funny* part. None ever experienced an attack by their husband. None were beat until the word self-respect became meaningless rhetoric spewed by clueless women who haven't the slightest idea of what their talking about. It's easy to say, leave the creep, it's indescribable to explain the fear.

“One day he said he needed something for pain. I thought we were out of Advil. That is not what he meant. He told me to bring home something from the hospital. He didn't ask, or say how it could be done. He didn't mention what it might do to my nursing license if I was caught. He said do it, and I did.

“At night, after I'd go to bed, I could hear him downstairs talking as if somebody were sitting across from him; trust me, he was alone. He would have whole conversations with himself. The things he'd talk about were horrifying. Try to imagine the most perverse thing one person could do to another, that's what I listened to as he talked to, whomever.

“Once, instead of pain killers, I brought home medication for mental illness. I spent a lot of time reading on the subject and I think he’s schizophrenic. I told him the pills were the most powerful painkiller yet, and if he wanted the full effect to take one in the morning and one at night. That’s the recommended dose for a person his age and weight.

“The books say most schizophrenics aren’t violent. The key word here is most. Mike happens to be one who is. I’m not a doctor and I might be wrong about him being schizophrenic, but I don’t think so. Within a month after he started taking the new pain pills, he changed for the better. It didn’t last long. How long could I steal medication from the hospital without getting caught? Like most people with mental illness, he’d cycle. For a few months, things would not be so bad. Then for the next six it would be hell.”

Although she was not hungry, Darcy ate the appetizers. Joanne’s words sliced a wide path of pain through her heart, and if it were not for the distraction of the food, she would be crying for her friend. “Could you get him to see a doctor?”

“Never,” Joanne said. She picked up an appetizer and was thankful for the distraction.

“Well, now I know why you haven’t wanted to talk to me.” Darcy moved her chair around the table so she was next to Joanne instead of across from her. “All I’m saying is, I understand. Not that I agree with your decision not to talk. The thing is

what do we do now?"

Joanne focused on the word, *we*. For one small syllable it held much power, and the question, although straightforward, implied action. An action other than self-preservation. Action as in, I'm here and this is what will be done, not just discussed over appetizers and white wine. Joanne looked Darcy in the eyes. "I'm open for suggestions."

"You're coming home with me." The statement resonated as neither a request or an order. Darcy's words were more like the answer to a math problem she had figured out after long consideration. "We have the room, and I'm sure you would like my significant other. She'd be glad to have you stay with us. How does starting life over in a new city with the help of an old friend and her lesbian partner sound?"

To dream of having her life back, to allow that mental indulgence seemed almost sinful, almost cruel. But the dream did exist. She kept it in a secret place, a place she rarely visited. To look at this dream, or speak of it, to take it from its hiding place and acknowledge its existence only brought pain. Looking at it now in the light of day filled her with fear and something she denied out of habit, hope. Over the years, Joanne's ability to problem solve had withered. "How do we accomplish this? How do you propose moving me to DC without Mike creating problems?"

"I expect problems. Nothing worthwhile

comes easy. How will we do it? The simpler the better." Warming quickly to the challenge Darcy launched into the logistics of the plan.

"First thing in the morning I'll go back to Enterprise and trade the Benz for a Cadillac Escalade. I've never driven one, but hear they have lots of room. You give me a call on my cell phone after Mike goes to work and I'm there in ten minutes. We pack your clothes, papers, and you carry your pocketbook. That's it. No furniture and no tears until we are on the road. We freeze your bank accounts from the car with the phone, and then close them when we get to DC. Believe me, with a little help, starting over can be easier than you think." Darcy wiped a tear from Joanne's cheek. "This can be done. You are a licensed professional; you'll find a good job. It's time for this. Say yes. Come away with me and start your life over."

Joanne's mind raced as the road to freedom began to materialize. Now a completely new set of problems began to replace the old ones.

Will he follow me? Will he care? She knew the answer to that one. Yes. Joanne filled the role of enabler. She made it possible for her husband to remain in the community without being hospitalized. She cleaned His clothes, maintained the house, paid the bills (for the most part), purchased and prepared the food he ate, and cleaned the mess afterwards. Every aspect of day-to-day life for Michael Arnet had been managed by

her. Despite the long-term effects of his illness and the reality-warping effects that went along with it, he knew Joanne kept him in the limited stream of society he occupied, and she knew he would not give up his life support without a price.

"Yes Darcy. Take me with you." The words came out of her mouth before the fear making her tremble forced a no. She had loved her husband and knew if it were not for his illness things would be different. Nevertheless, his life was, through no fault of his own, destined to be one of illness, emotional turmoil and most definitely violence. They spent time going over details for the next day. The plan remained simple. Joanne would call Darcy; Darcy would arrive with the Escalade. They would load some clothes and whatever papers Joanne considered critical for her new life, and be out of there.

"What happens if Mike finds out?"

"It won't happen."

"Will he follow us?"

"He doesn't know where to start looking."

"Will I lose my nerve?"

"No. I'll be there the whole way."

Chapter 2

The Uber driver blew his horn for the second time, then gunned the engine as though he were about to leave. Tabatha stepped onto the porch and shouted. "She'll be right out! One more minute!" Then she went to the second-floor landing and shouted in the other direction. "Come on Darcy! The Uber driver says he's got a hot date!"

Darcy slid the strap of her carry-on bag over her shoulder as she came down the stairs. "Tell him to keep his shirt on." Darcy glanced at her watch. "The only one who is running late is him. Next time I'm hiring a limo."

Tabatha looked into Darcy's eyes. "The next time you go away on business you're taking me, and I'll drive to the airport."

"Okay, it's a date." Darcy put her bag down. "Come here and give me a hug. Better we say good-bye here than on the sidewalk. Don't want to give the neighbors more to talk about."

"The hell with them," Tabatha said as she threw her arms around Darcy's neck.

By the second day of Darcy's trip Tabatha had watched every old movie she cared to see. Out of

boredom she decided to do some house cleaning, some real house cleaning. She took on the heavy stuff first, rearranging the furniture. Because their bed abutted the west wall, it was time to see how it looked on the east wall. Of course, the dresser had to be moved to suit the bed's new location. Cobwebs were vanquished from dark corners, and a gloss finish gave the wide plank, pine floors a warm glow.

Although she knew the sofa would never look right blocking the French doors, she had to give it a try. There was nobody to critique her sense of style so, why not?

The beast proved more difficult to move than expected. After much grunting and some swearing, Tabatha positioned it where she wanted. She studied her work from a distance then thought a new angle might make the difference. With a flying leap she threw herself onto the sofa and settled in. Leaving the sofa blocking the doors was ridiculous, but she loved the new perspective it gave the room. She stretched out to ponder the situation, and maybe take a short nap, when the phone rang.

"Hi sweets, miss me?" Darcy spoke low, her tone salacious.

Tabatha smiled. "Of course not, I've been too busy going out and having a good time. Didn't even notice you were gone."

"You're bad," Darcy said. "Well, I miss you even if you don't me. So, what have you really

been up to?"

"Maybe you don't want to know."

"Dear Lord. You rearranged the furniture again—didn't you?"

Tabatha tried to hold the giggle in. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. And you're going to love it, except maybe for the couch. I'm not so sure about that. But everything else looks good."

Darcy was about to ask the obvious, then thought better of it. "Listen, I have a serious question for you."

"A *serious* question?" Tabatha mocked Darcy's use of the word serious. "If you think I should be sitting for this, you need to know I'm lying on the couch. So don't hold back, give it to me."

"That's a nice mental picture, but way too distracting. Business first. What do you think about sharing the house with one more weary traveler? We have the room, and it wouldn't be for long."

Prior to leaving for New York, Darcy had explained about Joanne and how she had finally agreed to meet. Darcy further explained how they were best friends while growing up, and now an unknown drove them apart.

Tabatha listened closely to her friend's words. She felt genuine interest in Darcy's life before they were a couple. The word envy eluded her, but the emotion did not. She wished it had been her growing up with Darcy, making memories, being a part of each other's lives from

earliest childhood. "It's Joanne, isn't it?" Tabatha asked.

Darcy paused, "Yea, it's Joanne." She knew Tabatha would not object to the request, yet she thought it important to convey the why. "Her husband's sick, and not with the flu. He's seriously sick in the thinking department. Joanne's afraid for her life, and I believe her."

Tabatha sat up on the couch. "I don't like the sound of this."

"I don't either. Joanne told me he's quick to use his hands and doesn't see anything wrong in it. There are some other things she said, but I'll tell you more when I see you."

Something reached up and took the air out of Tabatha's lungs. This thing had no name and like a coward hid in that gray area of reality called feelings. Not real enough to grasp tight in her hand, yet real enough to turn her bright home, cold and lonely. The walls were closer now and the sun's rays, which were so full of everything good in life, now confused her perception with odd geometric shapes. She'd never had a premonition before, and if anybody had asked her, up until a minute ago, if she believed they were real, the response would be a most definite no. But that no was a lifetime ago. That no was a whole minute ago. Fear grasped her heart so tight she felt pain. She licked her lips and swallowed. If death had a taste, Tabatha knew its flavor. She opened her mouth to speak. Nothing came out.

"Hello, you still there sweets?" Darcy asked.

Tabatha closed her eyes. Maybe if she didn't have to see the room slanting and shifting, she could focus her mind enough to make a sound. "Sure, I'm here." Her own voice sounded alien and distant. "Darcy, don't be angry with me, or think I'm nuts, but I have to ask. Is there any danger here? Her husband, is he going to let her leave? What exactly do you have in mind?"

Would it serve any purpose to explain all the details over the phone, other than create worry? Darcy thought not. She wasn't in the habit of lying to Tabatha and didn't want to start now. So, if she omitted a few details her conscience would be satisfied, no lie would be told. What Tabatha didn't know couldn't hurt her. At least that's how she thought it worked. "We should be back tomorrow night, late. And to answer your question, he's not going to know where she is. It's safe and nobody is going to get hurt, honest."

Tabatha hung the phone up and considered Darcy's cavalier attitude. She suspected there could be a real chance for problems and would give Ms. Darcy "I can do anything" Bordu, an earful when she saw her in person. As for the other, the premonition, she did her best to push the creepy feeling away, mostly away.

And if Tabatha had an inkling that she would never hear Darcy's voice again, she would never have gone back to rearranging furniture.

Chapter 3

He performed the ritual daily, without exception. The function, as compulsory as putting on his shoes, chain smoking Newport cigarettes, or listening to the voices that sometimes whispered, but most often shouted from deep inside his own head. Michael Arnet searched his house.

He waited until his wife was at work. Such business required uninterrupted time. If she were home there would be questions, and questions meant distractions. Although Michael did not know what he would find, he knew something had been hidden by those looking to harm him. Maybe a listening device planted by the CIA. Or a pipe bomb cleverly concealed by the mob. It appeared somebody wanted to fuck with him. The question was, who?

In the beginning, when he first realized things were hidden in the house, he searched haphazardly. He'd rummage through the hall closet on the second floor, stop to smoke three or four Newport cigarettes and watch Shannon Breaun on Fox News. Now there's an ass he'd like to know better. One day he might have to write the sleazy bitch a letter. Let her know he loved her (or, at

least wanted to screw her brains out). He could make her happy. He knew she wanted him.

Did he search the kitchen?

He had forgotten if he searched the whole kitchen, or just the cupboards. He had to backtrack; he could not overlook anything with a bomb tucked away in a dark corner just waiting to take him out.

In time, Michael fell into a practiced routine. After Shannon, he searched the house from bottom to top: kitchen first, bathroom on second floor last. He never disturbed so much as the dust on a single magazine. It would serve no purpose for his meddling wife to know that he knew she's one of them. In time his meticulous compulsion to put things back in their original location mushroomed into a full-blown obsession that had nothing to do with keeping his search secret. What once took fifteen minutes now took two hours.

He found the letter in the bathroom wastebasket an hour and thirty-five minutes into the search

Michael's father died on a Monday morning, in his own bathroom, while lathering his face with Gillette Foamy. Despite the blood splattered everywhere, his death occurred quickly. At 7:12 a.m., an aortic wall weakened by localized radiation treatments bulged into an aneurysm the size of a fist, then burst. One seconds later his heart stopped.

Larry Arnet left no inheritance for his two sons. He lived a modest, working-class existence and had nothing of real value to give. Michael's mother needed those functional items traditionally divided between siblings to maintain the house. The same house his parents had lived in for the last twenty-five years.

Michael did not need any additional possessions, anyway. Their town house was small, the property almost nonexistent. The front yard consisted of a driveway and one-hundred square feet of yellow grass laced with weeds. The backyard looked the same. The real estate agent called it, "A low maintenance charmer." Somebody with more home buying savvy would have said, "You get what you pay for." But Michael and Joanne were young, newly married, and wanted the trappings of adulthood.

What Michael did get after his father's death was a box. The box.

The white pine box measured twelve inches deep, and twenty-four inches long, with a heavy hasp and lock to match. As a child, he saw it many times hidden in his father's closet behind old work boots and a twelve-gauge Mossberg that seemed impossibly long. His father never spoke of the box, and the brothers never asked.

That's not to say he lacked curiosity about its content. One month before his twelfth birthday, while his parents were working, Michael pulled the dusty prize from the closet. Sitting cross legged on

the floor he spent an hour trying to pick the lock. When Paul came home from school, he made Michael put the box back. Although the two brothers got along, from that day on Michael considered Paul's personality and overall worth as an individual nothing shy of an ass kissing, scrotum headed, coward. The box was there, they had the time, and he said, "Put it back."

Michael forgot about the box that tormented him as a child. Two months after his father's funeral his mother said, "If you want that old thing of your father's, I'd have no objection. It's been collecting dust in the closet for a long time. So, take it if you want." Michael felt beside himself with anticipation. His mother never admitted to knowing its content. He didn't think she knew. She told him his father came home with the box after his tour of duty in the first Gulf war and never spoke of it.

He was about to open the box. Although he didn't know why, he never told Joanne of its existence. He waited until she went to work then stole out to his car and fetched it in.

This time there were no paper clips to fumble with, no nail file to bend, no safety pin to poke him with, and no brother to barge in and tell him to "Put it back." About three minutes work with a hammer and chisel and the box gave up its secrets.

Michael's illness crept into every corner of his brain like an ivy's relentless climb up a brick

wall, its progression taking solid root by his twentieth birthday. Now, as his thinking became increasingly fogged, the disorder made its presence known in a more obvious fashion. Things seemed more than what they were and he heard voices talking to him. Despite his new slant on reality, he easily grasped the significance of the box's content. Michael held his father's war diary from 1990 to late '91.

He spent the next three hours reading about a side of his father he never knew. Under the diary were battle ribbons, a purple heart, pictures, and a snub-nose .38 tucked away in an ankle holster.

The gun looked in good shape for being so old. Oil covered the cold, black steel. According to the diary it had been used to execute an Iraqi prisoner. Michael held the mechanism close and inspected every moving part as though it were a relic from another planet; or at the least, a time traveler. The gun felt integral to his hand. As he squeezed the trigger, a new chamber jumped into the business end of the weapon. He wondered if most men liked the sound and feel of such a thing, he surely did. The thought of getting rid of the gun never crossed his mind; it was, after all, the only thing of value left him by his father.

He put the gun back under the old photos and correspondence then hid the box behind the furnace in the space under the stairs.

Over the years, he often visited his father through the diary. After Joanne went to work,

Michael huddled on the floor by the furnace room door and read the journal repeatedly until he knew every line. He studied the writing like a Christian zealot studies the bible. During the good parts, he'd slowly roll the gun's cylinder across his cheek, and if he happened to get an erection, well, that was okay, too.

Now, instead of reading his father's diary, he read Darcy's letter to his wife. The words, "You needn't tell Mike if that's a problem" shouted at him and seemed to obliterate the rest. There were secrets here. This smacked of a conspiracy; a plot that would somehow touch him. He knew Darcy, vaguely. In high school Joanne and Darcy were always together, for a while he thought they might be queer for each other. Although he had no reason *not* to like Darcy, the fact was, he hated her.

Chapter 4

Joanne had resolved to give up the responsibility for Michael's morning care. If he wanted to lie in bed all day, so be it. He went through numerous jobs during their marriage, being late for work was a factor in many terminations.

When Steve's Sunoco fired her husband, the reason was, according to Michael, one more example of Steve's stupidity and willingness to do anything to destroy his life. Additional culpability for his termination fell on Joanne's shoulders for not awakening him on time.

What he failed to tell to his wife; he was late for work thirty days in a row, and rude to the customers. Steve (of Steve's Sunoco) saw an eighteen percent drop in business during Michael's employment.

After Steve's he started working for a small landscaping company and did not have much contact with the public. Every morning at 7:45, a small, blue dump truck pulled into their driveway and picked Michael up for work. Joanne returned to accepting responsibility for seeing that Michael got out of bed.

The sound of Michael moving around, pulling on his boots, coughing up phlegm and spitting into the sink, made Joanne tremble—he was coming. Normally they shared no morning conversation. No chitchat. No civility. And up until this day, Joanne hated it. Now she prayed to God (the same one she gave up on two years before) that Michael stays true to routine and leaves for work without saying a word. She looked at the clock for the fourth time in two minutes and thought about Darcy.

Joanne paced the floor and feared her pounding heart would be visible through her blouse. She told herself, act normal. Normal was quiet and withdrawn when her husband blew through the kitchen. Her hands shook, coffee spilled on the floor. Her legs refused to hold her weight. Then a wave of nausea engulfed her body like a tidal wave. Joanne again prayed to a God she now wanted to believe in. She prayed for the strength to survive the next five minutes.

She thought; I made a mistake.

Leaving him would never work. She'd call Darcy as soon as Michael left for work and tell her running away was not an option. It had been nothing more than a fanciful dream. A dream she allowed herself to be caught up in like an impressionable child believing in fairy tales.

The thought of calling the whole thing off eased her tension, so she ran with it. In her mind the words, call it off, it will never work, tripped

over each other as she tried to repeat them enough times to drown out her paralyzing fear. The words were out of her mouth before she knew it. Her lips moved only as an extension of her racing mind, and the spoken word soothed her raw nerves. "Have to call it off. He'll know. Call it off, call Darcy."

"What did you say?" Michael asked from the archway to the kitchen.

Things in life can go horribly wrong. For Joanne things had been going wrong for a long time. Now more than ever she found herself believing in God, and how he did things in small ways as well as big. And the small thing she thanked him for, she had been sitting when Michael spoke to her, not standing. If she were standing, she would have fallen to the floor, or fainted dead away.

Lying never came easy to Joanne, nor did she approve of it. Nevertheless, one came out of her mouth with the ease of a snake oil salesman pitching his wares to a crowd of backwater Arkansas farmers on a hot August night. "I said; I have got to cancel my hair appointment. I need my hair cut desperately, but we don't have the money. It's the third time I had to break this appointment. Debby is going to have a fit. She books early and always confirms. She might not let me have another slot." Joanne ran her hand through her hair. "What do you think, do I need a trim?"

More words were about to tumble out of her

mouth. She wanted to say more. She wished she could go on forever assuring him that, all's well, it's just another day and nothing's wrong. But Joanne didn't ramble. Normally, few words were passed between them, and that's how it should be today. Not spitting out words and pleasantries in rapid succession like a demented game show host in a ratings war. Besides, the look on her husband's face stifled any remaining urges of spontaneous conversation.

His eyelids were puffy and red, bits of dried skin that seemed to defy gravity stuck firm to the soft tissue there and danced up and down with every blink. Joanne tried to look away, but her gaze became fixed, staring. His eyes appeared glazed over and colder than anything she ever experienced. His hair stuck up in random spikes, held in place by the thick oil of neglect. She turned away from his stare and wondered what had she done so wrong to deserve such a life.

Without a word, Michael turned and left the house.

Joanne watched from the kitchen window as the blue truck disappeared around the corner. Then she cried. It seemed she'd done a lot of that lately. Next, she called Darcy.

Darcy answered on the first ring. "I'm ready if you are."

No hello, no good morning, no wrong number, no we should just forget about this. Or, better still, can't do it today love, got soap in my

eyes and can't find a thing to wear. Joanne paced the floor holding her phone. "Darcy." She didn't know what to say. "I can't!"

"Got cold feet?" There was no ridicule in her voice, only strength. A strength that Joanne clutched for like a drowning person grabs for a lifeline.

"If that's what it's called, yes. My feet, my hands, everything's cold. Darcy, I'm scared. If you saw the way he looked at me. It's almost like he saw through me and knew what was going to happen."

Darcy was not a naive woman and she did have fear. Unfortunately, she didn't have a real notion of how bad a situation like this could get. What she lacked in experience, she hoped to make up in surprise and boldness.

If she had trained to be a police officer, she would have known.

If she had been in the military, she would have known.

Darcy's success had been in business with a healthy focus on the academic. Almost everything she attempted fell to her tenacious resolve. Her assumption and fatal mistake regarding Michael Arnet, had been putting all her chips on logic and nerve. In doing so she underestimated the true volatile nature of his sickness. "We can do this, Joanne. I know you're scared. This is the worst—taking the first step always is. But I promise you, in a month from now, maybe two, you'll feel like a

new person with a whole new outlook on life. I'm ready, the SUV is ready, and I'm only a mile from your house. Say yes and in less than an hour we'll be on our way to Washington. Think of it Joanne, in less than an hour. Say yes!"

Joanne closed her eyes and drew strength from Darcy. "Okay, I'm ready."

Five minutes later a black Cadillac Escalade pulled into the driveway. Joanne realized her thoughts were drifting to the ridiculous when she caught herself wondering why they called it a sport utility vehicle. As far as she could see it was large as a full size F150. She put her hand to her mouth and sounded a half laugh, half moan "Dear God, I'm losing my mind," she said. Then, "Just breathe Joanne, deep in, deep out."

Other than a nod, no greetings were passed. Darcy moved quickly through the front door. Joanne pointed toward the stairs indicating the way to the bedroom. Without hesitation Darcy climbed the stairs.

"Okay, this is how we'll do it," Darcy said, as they stepped into the bedroom. "We put all your clothes in these." She held out a box of double strength lawn and leaf bags. "You take the closet and I'll take the dresser. These bags can hold a lot so take all of your clothes. And move fast, Joanne, the clothes don't have to go in the bag neat. You'll have time to iron out the wrinkles later."

Clothes flew from the dresser to the bag. Darcy moved so fast that a handful of Michael's

things ended up in the bag by mistake, she didn't give it a second thought and piled more of Joanne's on top. She looked at her friend and noticed her movements were maddeningly slow. It appeared every decision on what to take, and how to take it, required full and detailed thought. "Joanne, honey, just throw them in the bag. It's okay—honest. Take everything, the Caddy can handle it."

She wanted to convey a sense of urgency and at the same time not push her friend more than she had to. Obviously, Joanne was running on adrenaline and faith, faith in her. It would serve no purpose to push her closer to the edge.

Joanne's arms felt heavy as lead weights, and her mind refused to focus on the seemingly simple task of removing clothes from her closet and dumping them into a trash bag. "Okay, I'm moving," she said.

Darcy smiled and made a thumb up gesture. She had finished the dresser and turned toward the closet when the front door slammed.

Both women froze in place as if they were stone, and always had been.

There could be no mistaking the sound of her husband coming through the door. Joanne knew that sound as well as she knew her own voice; which, by the way, was nowhere to be found.

Darcy stepped toward the middle of the room. "It's him, isn't it?"

Joanne managed a nod.

Darcy whispered, "Let me handle this."
Again, a nod.

The sound of footsteps echoed off the stairwell walls. Joanne likened the sound to the last moments of her life, like a clock ticking away the final seconds of a condemned person's fate. Not too fast, not too slow, but inevitably in motion and destined to end much too soon. She wanted to hide in the darkest reaches of the closet. The one thing keeping her from diving headlong into the inviting darkness was Darcy. Darcy now stood in the center of the room. To Joanne she looked tense but strong and in some odd way almost radiant in her resolve and in full control of whatever the next few moments would bring.

Joanne tried to draw strength from the image of her friend the way she had a lifetime ago when the sound of her voice over the phone helped bring the world into focus and shore up her own weakening resolve.

Whatever happened, Joanne could not dive into the closet while her friend stood her ground. They would face it together.

They looked at each other for the last time and tried to connect with their eyes, but it did not happen. Time ran out as Michael Arnet stepped into the room.

Darcy saw the gun in Michael's right hand. He held it down parallel to his leg. She didn't think Joanne saw it. As she considered her first words carefully, Michael raised his arm and shot Darcy

four times.

Reality reeled and contorted for Joanne. She saw her husband turn toward her with the gun held high and knew she was about to die. Cringing toward the darkest part of the closet, she covered her face and called for her mother.

He hadn't meant to shoot her four times. He intended to shoot her only twice.

He thought the .38 had a life force. For Michael, the gun did have its own life, as it had its own voice. It talked to him. Over the years there had been other inanimate objects that talked to him. One of his personal favorites had been the television. Other than the normal broadcast, he received all sorts of special communications. Now, it was mostly the gun's voice he heard, and occasionally he heard his father's voice talking to him through the dull black weapon. In fact, it had been the .38 that reminded him to look in the garbage after he had forgotten.

And oh, what he found. Darcy's letter to his wife had been shredded and stuffed into an envelope that originally held junk mail, but he put it to rights. Strip, by wet, smelly strip. Michael cleaned and taped what was not meant for him to see. His heart raced almost as fast as his runaway thoughts. He had an assignment; he had proof of wrongdoing against him.

As they did every morning, Norm Keese and Michael stopped for coffee. The Country

Convenient store sat down the road from his house less than a mile. When he climbed out of the truck, he noticed a black, SUV in the next parking stall. He also noticed a sweet looking bitch sitting in the driver's seat talking on a cell phone. She meant nothing to him; then again, she did look familiar. The .38 confirmed his suspicions. The gun reminded him that people do change, but not that much, and if the bitch in the van wasn't Darcy, he would never fire another round again. It also said, if he (Michael) had any hair on his balls, he would get his nasty ass home and take care of business.

His father reminded him on the walk home what that business might be. Because the old man seemed so talkative, Michael took the opportunity to ask why he hadn't bothered to remind him about the meeting between his wife and the bitch. Michael thought it only reasonable that between the three of them, somebody should have remembered. His father said he forgot, and by the way, don't you take that tone with me you little shit. The .38 said he couldn't think of everything. Michael kicked his right ankle in an effort to shut the two of them up and only succeeded in tripping over his own feet. He hit the side of the road scraping his hands and face on the hard packed stones. Everybody laughed. The drivers in passing cars laughed, his father laughed, smart ass .38 laughed and called him the stupidest fool that ever lived. He picked himself up and started walking again, and as he walked it became clear what had

to be done.

It would be two rounds for that interfering cunt Darcy, the rest for his treacherous wife. But sometimes plans don't go the way you want them to. The first round slammed through Darcy's heart and simultaneously ripped through two of its four chambers. Death came as close to instantaneous as it could get. The next round came close to the first, missing the original entry wound by seven millimeters. Darcy fell where she stood. The .38 told him to give it to her again, and hard. Michael straddled her prone body and put two more rounds into her upturned face.

Michael Arnet shot his wife in the head.

The first round threaded nicely between her index finger and middle finger, and then slammed into her forehead just below the hairline. The second-round tore into the flesh of her right breast as she fell backward into the closet. It entered her body cleanly and exited almost intact by her right shoulder.

He wanted to shoot her more. He squeezed the trigger again and again as the hammer came down on spent cartridges, but to Michael it didn't matter. To him the deafening sound of the .38 doing its business could still be heard and the image of senseless violence made perfect sense. A culmination of every twisted thought that chased reality over the far horizon and back was being played out in the bedroom he shared with Joanne. He put the .38 back in the ankle holster then

calmly walked out of the bedroom. When he reached the front door, he kept on going. He walked the three miles to the Short Line bus terminal and bought a one-way ticket to Jacksonville, Florida.

Chapter 5

Tabatha deftly negotiated the heavy, midtown traffic and silently cursed her timing. She knew better than to be caught up in the rush of government employees on the way home from work. She glanced at the boxes on the seat next to her. She didn't need the new shoes, but had to have them. As a matter of fact, she could blame her excesses directly on Darcy. If Darcy had been home and not traveling about the country helping old friends, she would have said, "Tabatha, you already have a closet full of shoes. Why in the world do you need two more pair?" But Darcy wasn't home to say those things. Therefore, Tabatha felt no culpability for her recent purchases. The blame fell directly on Darcy's shoulders.

June fourteenth turned out hotter than predicted. As Tabatha broke through the heavy traffic and entered the faster moving flow of the Belt Way, she pushed the air-conditioned button and got a face full of warm air for her effort. "Come on girl, you can do it." She hit the dashboard with her hand, and then opened all the windows. "Okay, don't worry about it. We're

almost home anyway." She loved her car and often talked to her, as long as nobody was watching. Ten minutes later she pulled into the driveway with nothing more on her mind than taking a long shower and a short nap.

The police were waiting in front of her house. She couldn't say how she knew they were the police, the car was unmarked, yet she knew.

She thought the pair looked like husband and wife as they approached. Both were impeccably groomed, and seemed genuinely comfortable with each other. They could have been selling Amway, or collecting for the Watch Tower. They could have been soliciting for a hundred things but she knew who they were without being told. And for an inexplicable reason, a reason that went beyond the normal anxiety that accompanied a police visit, she didn't want them there.

They identified themselves and asked if they could talk. Tabatha fought an urge to tell them they had the wrong address.

She invited them in.

After commenting on the warm weather, Detective Marcia Osborn started the conversation in earnest. "Ms. Lancaster, are you acquainted with Darcy Gordon? We were told she lives at this address."

Marcia looked away after asking the question. The absurd notion that the detective was nervous flashed through Tabatha's mind. Then she knew. Marcia, or Ms. Osborn, or Ma'am, or

whatever the hell she insisted on being called, was having a hard time. Tabatha felt a lump form in her throat. She stifled an urge to pace the floor as her heart kicked into high gear. Although she never felt real panic in her life, she realized with sickening dread that panic now knocked on her door from wherever it lived deep inside her boiling emotions. It wanted to bolt like a horse from a gate and she could do nothing about it. Tabatha leaned on the couch, which still sat in front of the French doors. "Yes, I know her. We share this apartment together. We're—married. Why?"

"I'm afraid we have some bad news," Detective Williamson chimed in when he realized his partner's need for an assist.

Three years working together not only made the two friends, it also provided valuable insight into the other's weaknesses. Marcia could be hard as iron when she needed; in situations like this she didn't like the lead. Now, after picking up the ball, he wished he hadn't. He was no better at this than his partner. And although they suspected the two women were more than friends, it became a new ball game when their suspicions were confirmed.

"We received word that your wife is dead," Guy said. He waited for the words to sink in. It always took a minute or two for the actual meaning of the words to register; unless, of course, the loved one happened to be the killer. Then the theatrics started the second the words were out. They were pretty sure Tabatha Lancaster did not

kill Darcy Gordon. As the words became reality, the reality became etched on Tabatha's face. Both officers felt for her in a way that defied condolence.

"Please, Ms. Lancaster. Sit down." Marcia Osborn pointed toward the chair. Tabatha sat in the chair.

As far as Marcia knew, sensitivity training was mandatory for every law enforcement officer. What she also knew couldn't be gleaned from some blue manual taught by a well-meaning social worker on a Saturday afternoon. Tabatha was hurting. Marcia hoped she would never receive information about the death of a spouse from a stranger at her door, police officer or not. "Did you also know Joanne Arnet?"

"Yes, no." Tabatha's mind felt as if it were going a thousand miles an hour toward a brick wall and she couldn't find the emergency brake. "I didn't really know her. We never met." She closed her eyes for the second time in 24 hours to keep the room from whirling out of control.

"Take your time, it's okay," Marcia said. She motioned for her partner to get some water.

"Darcy talked about her..." Tabatha stopped when the tears came. After a few minutes she regained composure. She didn't know if her words would make sense, but she gave it her best effort. "How did you know I live here?"

"This was the address on her drivers' license, and your friend had an emergency contact

card in her purse. Your name was first, her parents in Illinois, second," Guy Williamson said. He looked toward his partner for support. She nodded her head. "Can you think of anybody who might have wanted to do either of them harm?"

"You didn't say anything happened to Joanne. Did something happen to her too? Did he kill her too?"

The two detectives didn't need to look at each other to know what the other thought. "Well, we didn't say anything about murder. But yes, your friend was murdered and we think the same person tried to kill Mrs. Arnet as well. She's in serious condition. The doctors wouldn't say if she's going to make it. You asked, did he kill her too? Who is he? Who do you think might have done this?"

Tabatha grasped the glass of water Guy held out and took a large swallow. "Darcy called me yesterday." She talked about the previous day's phone conversation; the detectives took notes.

Her words came as if spoken by somebody else. She heard them coming out of her mouth and marveled she could talk at all. Was her story accurate? Did it make sense? Could they see her shutting down on the inside? Tabatha didn't think so.

She could not remember when the detectives left or how the conversation ended, only that it did. A business card leaned against a small candle on the coffee table. Tabatha sat in the middle of the living room floor with the lights out and rocked as

her mind shut down for the night.

Time took on a new definition. Seconds felt like hours, and hours crept by with a languish of endless years. If somebody told her how bad emotional pain could become, and how an otherwise happy person might wish for death (or the death of another), she would have said they were crazy. Yet somewhere down where ideas are born, before they have words to congeal the thought into logical coherency, something began to grow. A something she could not recognize for its alien form. Whatever the something turned out to be, it waited, as Tabatha waited.

Darcy's mother and father ignored Tabatha at the funeral. They treated her as though she were directly responsible for Darcy's death. Or, perhaps their lifestyle had produced the rejection. Whatever the reason, their snub made a bad situation worse.

After saying her good-byes at the closed coffin, Tabatha turned and tried to connect with Darcy's mother in the front row. Marybeth Gordon turned her back, and all noticed. Tabatha turned to Darcy's father Frank, who, taking his cue from his wife, also turned his back. Instead of returning to her seat in the rear of the funeral parlor, Tabatha kept walking. She went to her rented car, drove to the airport and booked a flight home. The next flight to Washington happened to be at 11:00 P.M., a four-hour wait. Tabatha sat in a chair by a large window and to all passing looked as though she

were watching the planes come and go. In reality she slept and her mind drifted to a new place. Her dream of death left her heart racing and her clothes damp with perspiration.

Darcy had asked Tabatha to stay home and not seek full time employment. If Darcy had said they were moving to Alaska, Tabatha's response would be, "fine" and "should I start packing?" To some, it appeared Tabatha had taken a subordinate role in their relationship. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although she did compromise her own career to support Darcy's, Tabatha assumed that's what partners did for each other, they sacrificed. Tabatha had no doubt that when the time came, Darcy would reciprocate and give of herself.

Now Tabatha found herself in a tight spot. Although she had a master's degree in special education, years out of the job market left her ill prepared for what she had to do, find a job.

Tabatha sat at the kitchen table and talked to herself as she tried to sort out her life.

"Combined checking and savings, five-thousand. Okay, that'll hold me for a while. Mortgage, two-thousand a month, not good." She wrote the numbers on a notepad. "Money coming in per month... zip. Job applications completed, seventeen. Callbacks... zip again. Expenses: electric, gas, taxes, water, garbage pickup, food, car payment, no scratch that one," she said in triumph. "Darcy's went back to the dealer, and

mine is paid for." Tabatha wanted to smile and put a star next to the word transportation "Honda." Then, "Damn, car insurance." So, the car was a liability.

Tabatha tore the paper from the pad and threw the notes in the garbage. Whatever way she wrote it. Whatever way she looked at the problem, the fact remained clear; she couldn't afford to stay in the house. And if she were really honest with herself, with the money coming in she couldn't afford to live anywhere.

On the same pad, she drew a trident with a long shaft. At the base of the shaft, she wrote "Me." Then, at each point of the trident, she wrote a phrase. The point on the left said, "Physical health," the center, "Mental Health," the last, "Financial Health." It was a plan, and it seemed sound enough. Each of the trident's points would be worked on daily (or as often as possible), and with some luck she might get through this, although at the moment she had her doubts.

Tabatha closed her eyes and drifted for a moment and the dream came again.

She held a trident and power coursed through her arms. A power never felt before; and accompanying that power, an indifference to consequence that sent fear to the core of her Midwest roots. Yet the same indifference held her rapt and strangely excited as blood flushed her face. She stood naked but not ashamed. Sweat

glistened off her hard and powerful body. The trident's points were bronze, with large barbs. The ash shaft felt smooth and warm to her touch. The setting sun burned red behind her. An unknown being stood before her with its own weapon. Although she had never actually seen a Roman gladius sword, she knew it brandished one. Powerful and faceless, her opponent crouched low in an attack position. It reeked of a killing lust. The stench of a dead carcass emanated from its center.

It came at Tabatha with a speed that took her breath away.

The gladius moved fast through the air. Light from the setting sun glinted off the shiny metal in red fire that served to excite her more, she had the advantage. Tabatha crouched low and smiled. She had him. The sword flew high. She thrust for the kill and felt excitement. A passion almost erotic in its intensity enthralled every nerve ending. She screamed as the trident buried itself in flesh, and felt very satisfied.

An hour had slipped by while Tabatha sat at the kitchen table salivating on her note pad. The dream left her feeling strange; she made a note on the now damp pad and left it on the kitchen table, like she might forget. It said one word, "Doctor."

One month after Darcy's funeral, Tabatha took herself to the doctor.

They were a consortium of doctors new to the community and highly recommended by her

good friend... Actually, she could not remember who recommended them. She also couldn't remember turning off the iron. And if she were being honest, perhaps she forgot to get out of bed most of last week. Maybe there were a few more days that slipped by without a shower, and not counting the time spent "zoned out," she hadn't slept in two days.

A nurse took her blood pressure (or somebody who looked like a nurse). She poked Tabatha in the ear with a thermometer, drew blood on the third stick, and then directed her to the scale. "Is all this necessary?" Tabatha asked.

The nurse smiled and said in her best placating tone, "Oh, yes. Every new patient in our group receives a thorough physical."

Tabatha took a step away from the scale. "All I want is to talk with a doctor. If I decide to accept treatment, I'll get on the scale."

Next to the section on the chart that listed weight, the nurse wrote, refused. "Okay, what's the problem that brought you to our group?" She then smiled and held the pen ready, like a college sophomore eager to write down every word the history professor utters.

Tabatha wanted to slap the pen out of her hand. "I'm not feeling well. Can't I just talk to the doctor?"

Still smiling, the nurse said, "I'm sorry. Policy. We have to document why you are here, for the doctor. So, Ms. Lancaster, what brings you to

our group today?"

An image flashed through Tabatha's mind as clear as if it were an actual memory. She saw herself grabbing this woman by her Walmart scrubs and pulling her with viciousness so intense the fabric would rip. Then she was throwing her against the wall, and smashing her head with her own clipboard. The impulse to do what her mind already considered done felt irresistible. Instead of following through on her fantasy, Tabatha picked up her pocketbook and headed for the door.

"Oh, no. You have to wait for the doctor," the nurse said with a hint of panic in her voice.

"Just get away from me. Now!" Tabatha gave the nurse no recourse.

"This is not the way things are done here at the group." It was the nurse's attempt to have the last word and regain control of the situation, as she knew she must.

Whatever fragile containment Tabatha had over her shattered reasoning ability ended when she heard the words, "The group." She moved toward the nurse not caring what happened next. The door opened and Tabatha's forward movement stopped when she turned her attention on the new person entering the room.

The doctor stepped through the door.

He appeared well groomed and not much older than she was. Tabatha's rage subsided, and then vanished. The emotion left her body like water funneling down a well vented drain, and the

intensity of her anger rolled toward the sewer like so much gray water returning home.

He wore faded jeans that showed off a trim waist, a white shirt with two buttons open at the top and a comfortable looking pair of sneakers that rounded out his casual ensemble. The only clue anybody might have that he was a doctor would be the stethoscope draped over his shoulders. He extended his right hand and smiled, "My name's Arthur Paul. You can call me Doctor, Arthur, anything you want." He turned toward the nurse. "Okay, I can take it from here. Just leave the door open halfway on your way out."

"If you need me, I'll be outside." The nurse said. She then dropped the chart on the counter, gave Tabatha a longer than necessary stare and left the room.

Arthur Paul, when compared to other doctors in the group, had not been practicing for long and unlike his peers, did not concern himself with money, social status, or receiving "proper respect." His parents were wealthy; thus, money would never be a problem. He had a passion for the science and art of medicine. Helping people had been an ancillary that made him one of the rarest people of all, he genuinely loved his work. He looked at Tabatha's chart, and then smiled. "You know, I don't think she likes you very much."

The stress of the past weeks boiled over and came out as nervous laughter. Tabatha held her stomach and tried to control herself. "I wasn't too

fond of her either." The laughter started all over again, but this time it crossed the line and tears of giddiness made the transition to tears of pain, and she could not stop.

Although he had sworn an oath to ease suffering, Arthur felt no need to intervene. Instead, he sat on a small stool and waited. In time his new patient gained control. "So, do you feel like talking?"

Tabatha pulled herself together, wiped her eyes and considered her options. If she walked out now, she would be no better off than when she came in. If she told him her problems and he couldn't help, she would be no better off than when she walked in. The last option, if she opened up and he could help, maybe she could get a grip on her emotions. She decided to talk. "One month ago, my—the person I cared for most in the world was killed." She waited for something, anything, the doctor said nothing.

"She went to help a friend in another state and was murdered for her effort." Tabatha had decided she would not share her lifestyle with a stranger. Despite her reluctance to open up, she could not have this conversation without saying more. "Her name is Darcy and we've been together for seven years."

Arthur shook his head as though he understood, then set her chart back on the counter. "I don't normally talk about my personal life while at work, but I empathize. If my partner were to die

suddenly, I'd go out of my mind. His name is Philip, and I love him very much."

Tabatha's body visibly relaxed, her shoulders diminished in size like air deflating from a balloon. "I haven't been doing too well lately. I'm forgetting things, I can't sleep. Sometimes I don't get out of bed for the whole day." She had no intention of mentioning the weird thoughts, but the words wanted to be said, she didn't stop them. "I've had thoughts of hurting myself or hurting somebody else, him." There, the words were out. She expected condemnation, none came. "I don't have a job. I have to move out of our house, and if I pay you today, something doesn't get paid tomorrow."

Arthur stood, rubbed a kink out of his lower back, and then walked over to the window. "I'm not a psychiatrist. Do you really think you might hurt yourself or somebody else?"

Tabatha gave the question serious consideration. "No, I don't think so. I'm very worried about my health, my mental health." The word "mental" came out inaudibly low. "Please don't think I'm blowing this out of proportion. And don't you dare stereotype me as just another complaining woman, because I'm not. As things are now, I can't function. I have to find a job and another place to live. With those things to deal with, all I think about is, how will I go on without her?"

"Okay, if you want me to run a batch of tests, I can. It's going to cost, though. If you want

my opinion, you look in good health. If you don't want to go that route, and I don't think you need to, what I can do is put you on an anti-depressant. There are some very good ones on the market. They don't work overnight, but they can make the unbearable at least tolerable enough to function."

Tabatha did not like putting drugs into her body. However, under the present circumstances she felt willing to make an exception, "Whatever you can do would be appreciated. I'll take the medication."

Arthur smiled as he wrote the script. "Can I mention two more things that might help?"

"Yes?" Tabatha said as she gathered her things to leave.

"First, you don't need to be totally alone. With the moving and finding a place to live, I mean. I've belonged to a gay and lesbian group for a few years now. We're not very militant, and we're few in number. At last count there were twenty-three of us. We help each other out and basically have a good time. There are no dues, no leaders and we're always ready to help. If you want, give a call." He handed her a business card with four phone numbers on it. "Any of these numbers will work. Give it some thought. We don't put pressure on anybody and you might find some friends."

Tabatha put the card in her purse. "I think I could use a friend. Maybe I'll call." She took a deep breath. "So, what's the second thing?"

"Okay, this is your doctor talking. Even

though you didn't get on the scale, I see you are about twenty pounds over your ideal weight. The medication I'm giving you will help. There's something else that could help. If you get regular exercise, you'll vent some of your rage. And don't say it isn't there, because I know it is. Go to a gym, start riding a bike, walking, whatever you want. Light at first, okay? And I want to see you in one month, job or no job."

Tabatha felt too overwhelmed to consider his last suggestion seriously. She wanted to get out of there. The need for fresh air and sunlight overrode everything else. "Thank you." She held out her hand and said goodbye then walked into the bright summer sunshine, and despite the temperature being over ninety, savored the daylight as a miner returning to the surface.

Chapter 6

Joanne's coma lasted ten days.

The first three days were spent attached to a machine that forced air into her lungs, and then took it out again. Her world had reduced to a nothingness so cold and deep that dreams could not penetrate her sleep. Nobody sat at her side to keep her company. Nobody held her hand and whispered words of encouragement. Despite being closer to death than life, her hands and legs were bound to the bed with lamb's wool straps. Frequent thrashing had removed her intravenous tube, twice.

A police officer on temporary duty sat outside her door. Another officer, this one in a suit, stopped by twice, despite the doctor's assurance that Joanne would not be answering questions anytime soon.

On the tenth day, Joanne's eyes moved to the sound of her doctor clapping his hands, thus ending her coma. She could not speak, walk, feed herself, go to the bathroom without assistance and she had seizures. Her left hand began to contract into what looked like a claw, and the left side of her face had sagged. It would be two long years before her recovery would peak. But this day, ten

days after her husband put a small hole in her forehead and left her for dead, Joanne Arnet was as helpless as an infant and, more importantly, starting life over.

Years later, she would deny having any memory of the hospital, and for the most part that statement was true. Still, small snippets of memory did remain. Memories that felt more dream than factual. Her mother appeared looking worried, wringing her hands and not staying long. Then there was the man feeding her an awful tasting substance while he paid attention to a sporting event on the television. And finally, a big man asking questions.

The man asking questions was a cop. Joanne could never remember what his questions were about. Regardless, her memory of his image had lingered.

The door to her room stood open. Peter knocked then introduced himself from the doorway. "Hello, Mrs. Arnet, my name is Peter Johnson. I'm a State Police Detective from Troop C. I'd like to talk with you if I could. The doctor says it's up to you. What do you say?"

Small talk and real cognition were still weeks away. Joanne's instinct for politeness took over. "You can sit," she said and motioned with her hand toward the chair. Her words were slow and slurred.

The myth that fat people are jollier than others annoyed Peter to distraction. He had been

an obese man all his adult life and detested his size. He sat in the chair, his bulk balanced close to the edge. To do otherwise would have him slide back in the chair and, in his mind's eye, make him look too much like Raymond Burr. "First. I'm sorry to be in your hospital room asking questions, but I don't have a choice. Do you know what happened to you?"

Besides not knowing what happened to her, Joanne could not remember her own name. "No."

"Is there anything you can tell me about how you came to be in the hospital?"

"No."

Peter tapped his pen on his pad. "Would you like me to tell you about your injuries? Or, what we think happened? "

"No."

"Okay, I'm a patient man. When you're able to talk, I'll be around. Don't make it too long, I retire in eighteen months." Peter had intended the last comment to illicit a smile, it did not. He took her hand and shook it.

Joanne held steadfast in her denial of any memory, and she meant it. Peter Johnson returned to visit once more and received no more information than his first visit. As days turned into weeks, Peter stopped coming and Joanne's memory of him faded until it too, seemed more dream than real. Real for Joanne now limited itself to the constant pain in her muscles and joints, and her body's refusal to respond on demand. She would

deal with identity and what to do about it another time.

Six weeks after she entered Westchester Medical Center, a bright orange and white ambulance drove Joanne to Pine Brook Head Trauma Center, in Massachusetts. Despite her pleas to ride sitting up, the driver insisted she travel lying down, and strapped into the stretcher. Their only concession was to loosen the straps once they were underway.

Because head trauma recovery frequently required months of inpatient care, and sometimes years of outpatient, centers like Pine Brook began to appear all over the country. They were lucrative and their services needed. Their specialty: physical, cognitive, occupational and emotional recovery. All phases of head trauma were dealt with as aggressively as the patient could tolerate. The philosophy of aggressive treatment for head trauma had been accepted nationwide. It also played hell on those who lived through it. Joanne Arnet would bear witness to the fact that recovery was hell.

Every day brought a new level of pain.

The bullet had entered in the middle of her forehead and left an ugly indentation. The treatment team assured her that before she left, with the help of plastic surgery, the scar would be almost nonexistent. After passing through the bone of her forehead the bullet followed an angle of trajectory that sent it through the right side of her

brain, thus the weakness to her left side. Daily treatment focused on her left side.

Steve Tracy looked like he graduated high school the year before. He was a physical therapist, Joanne's physical therapist. In time she convinced herself that somewhere deep down in his heart dwelt the man's true self, a sadist. He worked her hard, brutally hard, Monday through Friday.

Four months later Joanne still had trouble remembering the days of the week, this day it did not seem to matter. Gray clouds moved across the sky as a steady rain beat against the picture window. Bright yellow and red leaves stuck to the window of the expansive physical therapy room, and what few people she could see walking in the weather, moved quickly with their heads down and collars turned up. It came to her; the last memory she had of life outside this place had been early summer.

A sense of sadness fell over her as powerful as a tidal surge. Her life felt in shambles. Parts of her body wanted to contort with atrophy and she had constant pain. Her mind seemed to be working. Words came, concepts were grasped, yet things like memory were still foggy or not there at all. All the things a person does on a daily basis that give significance, substance and definition as to who that person is, was gone. Joanne had nowhere to go and felt low as the day was wet and cold.

Fall had arrived and she could not even remember summer.

Steve walked over to where Joanne sat in her wheelchair in front of the window. He stood behind her for a minute and they watched the storm throw sheets of water against the building. "Sometimes I feel the way this day looks," he said.

Joanne closed her eyes and thought about the words she wanted to say. If she didn't concentrate her brain often froze the way a computer will when you needed it the most. "I want out."

Despite his youthful look, Steve had been around. He knew the meaning to Joanne's words without coy innuendo. She wanted out of everything. And considering all she had been through, he could understand. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Maybe... Maybe right now you do want out; we're not going to let you out. Most people in your situation feel bad for a long time."

"This isn't the way I pictured it to be." Joanne motioned toward her body with her one good arm. "People are in comas, then they wake up and life goes on, I've seen it a hundred times in movies." She paused, then. "I know that sounds naive, but I don't care."

The complaint had a familiar sound; he heard similar statements from other patients he worked with. He looked away for a moment, then back at Joanne's eyes in the reflection of the big window. She was crying. "Okay, I have it. This is

the way we wish it would be, a Hollywood version, it goes like this. Marty is mangled in a car crash and receives a serious head injury. There he lays, Intensive Care, wires and tubes sprouting from every orifice. Everybody in his family is wringing their hands and praying in the chapel. His wife is at his side day and night. Hollywood fails to tell the audience that no hospital's Intensive Care Unit would allow a family member to camp out indefinitely. So, will Marty make it through the night? Will he wake up at all? If he does wake up, will he be a vegetable. His wife cries and prays to God to forgive her. She's not sure for what but considering the recent misfortune, whatever it is it must be very bad. Then, after she cries herself to sleep at Marty's side, Marty opens his eyes and gently strokes her hair. He says words of love and shows a bit of wit while doing it. The wife is happy, the family rejoices and Marty promises never to give in to road rage again.

"The general notion is that people pop awake from a serious head injury. In reality nothing is farther from the truth. Consciousness, awareness of self, awareness of the world around you, is something that happens over an extended period. Most doctors can't say how much awareness will return; they can't say with any certainty how long the recovery will take. Right now, from your point of view, things look pretty bad and they will for some time. The truth is you just started your treatment you have a long way to

go. It's going to be hard."

"Why does it have to be so painful?" Joanne felt foolish asking such a basic question. In her mind she should already have all the answers to her medical questions. She had been a nurse and worked in a hospital. That memory persisted.

Steve sensed what she really wanted to know. Will I ever be normal? Will I ever remember? Will I walk out of here? Will I ever work again? And probably a dozen more questions that nobody could answer. "At the risk of sounding like a football coach trying to inspire the team to victory, I beg you to try harder. Accept what has happened and what is going to be happening." He looked out at the storm. Gray and black clouds boiled across the sky so fast they looked supernatural.

"Maybe this will help, then again, maybe it won't." Steve sat on the narrow window ledge and faced Joanne. "Sometimes the more information a person has the better they can handle a situation. So, here goes. According to police records, for some reason the bullet that did all the damage to your brain could have done much more. The report says that at the range you were shot the round should have flattened out much worse than it did, what they call mushroom. And it also should have traveled through your head and come out the other side. It did not. What it did was slow down considerably when it hit your forehead. It came to a complete stop only a short way into your brain.

Normally the doctors have a hard time retrieving bullet fragments from a head wound. In your case, it went relatively smooth. The damage was much less than otherwise expected for a person shot almost point blank."

Joanne leaned forward in her chair, "Why would it do such a thing? Why would a bullet slow down so much?"

"All the police can do is speculate. Maybe it was a defective round from the factory. Or maybe the bullets were old and the chemical reaction that forces the round out the gun somehow diminished due to age. Either way, for having such lousy luck, you also had some good."

"Excuse me." Joanne held her right hand up and looked away. "At the moment, I do not consider myself lucky."

"No, I guess you wouldn't, and I wouldn't either if I were in your position. What makes all this physical therapy hurt the way it does and why do we push so hard, you might ask?" Steve thought he noticed Joanne relax slightly. He also noticed that the woman before him looked more than attractive, and given the right time and place she would be considered beautiful.

"As you have noticed, you have a weakness on your left side. The damage was to your right. Guess you could compare it to a stroke. Anyway, with the initial damage came the paralysis you see every time you look into the mirror or try to walk. As you heal, you'll regain some of what you lost.

By that I mean your facial control should, for the most part, come back, your limp will diminish and your arm will become useful. If you are lucky most of the obvious signs from your injury should be slight."

"If the use is coming back to my arm and leg, then why all the pain and effort right now? Why put the effort into something that will evolve on its own?"

"Well, here's the thing, the kicker if you please," Steve began. "If you don't work and stretch those tendons and muscles now, when your brain heals, and sends a command to your body to move those parts, everything will be so atrophied and shrunk they will never work. We work them now when a small amount of shrinkage has occurred. And it hurts, a lot.

Joanne nodded her head in understanding. "What about work? Will I ever be able to go back to work?"

"Nobody can say for sure." Steve normally looked a person in the eyes when he talked, today, he had trouble. "Everybody is different, and every injury is different. If you were a steel worker, I'd say no, you couldn't go back to doing that for a living. Your physical ability will return but it will never be the way it was. On cold wet days you'll feel it. And if you were a research scientist, who knows. Maybe you would be able to go back, maybe not. Like I said everybody is different. One thing I do know, a lot has to do with how bad you

want it. I've seen some incredible recoveries and I've seen people give up. Guess it's up to you what happens. You might think that's unfair and it is. It's also very true. So, you want to give it another try?" He nodded toward his work area.

Joanne resigned herself to the pain for another day. "For today anyway," she said as she wiped the tears away.

That night after dinner Joanne wheeled herself into the bathroom. All the patients had private rooms and baths at Pine Brook, an arrangement that suited her fine. She never considered the concept of "handicapped accessible" as having merit, until now. What had once been an obliging annoyance to accommodate people in wheelchairs quickly evolved into understanding and gratitude. Joanne easily wheeled up to the sink, saw herself in the mirror and reached the hot and cold-water levers without problem.

Taking a deep breath, she hauled herself to a standing position. She felt some pain in her legs and experienced slight dizziness; otherwise, it did not seem too bad. She reached out and adjusted the mirror to her new inclination and saw a woman on the mend. A woman who once liked the way she looked and now felt embarrassment at her reflection. The weakness on her left side seemed to grow as the day waned. She thought it would always be like that no matter how strong she became. Whenever fatigue set in, things were

going to be noticeable.

She brushed her bangs over the scar in the middle of her forehead then reached high on her cheek and pulled the skin taut. Joanne thought, with a touch of makeup she wouldn't look all that bad.

"Did the doctor say you can stand like that?"

Joanne closed her eyes at the sound of the voice. "Hello mother. No, it's not okay for me to stand like this. The doctor said I could have a stroke. That's why I'm doing it. I'm trying to kill myself."

Brenda Vanderwald did not know if she believed her daughter or not. One thing seemed certain though, stroke or no stroke, Joanne should not be standing. "You won't be joking if something bad happens to you while you're standing there. Sit down now and let me help you."

Joanne dropped back in her chair. She didn't want to argue with her mother yet they fought all the time. "It's not the weekend, what brings you here on a Thursday night?" Joanne asked as her mother wheeled her out of the bathroom.

Brenda walked her daughter down to the visiting area. "Well, I received some paperwork in the mail today. It's from the insurance company. I was hoping you could help me with it. You know how I always muddle those things." She parked her daughter by one of the high circular tables designed for wheelchairs then went to the vending machine.

"Mother, what if I wanted to stay in my room?" No answer. Joanne knew she heard. Steve held true to his word and that day's workout had been exceedingly brutal. Joanne felt exhausted and in no mood for verbal gymnastics with her mother.

Brenda placed two diluted looking cups of Coke on the table then got a chair for herself. "It's in here somewhere." She said as she fished through her pocketbook.

Joanne touched her mother's arm. "Mom, it's okay, we can do the paperwork this weekend. Whatever it is, it'll keep—honest." Her mother stopped rooting through the bag. "Mother," Joanne began, "I know you didn't come here for that anyway. You might as well tell me now. You know I'll just keep asking until you tell me the truth."

"I had a talk with your doctor today."

Joanne hated her mother talking to the doctor and asked her numerous times not to do it when she wasn't around. Besides, it made everything more complicated. She considered herself an adult and entitled to handle her own affairs and if she wanted her mother as a "go-between," she would have asked her. "Okay, mother. What did you and *my* doctor talk about?"

Brenda heard the sarcasm in her daughter's voice and with a practiced technique developed over years of not listening, paid it no mind. "Well, he said your recovery could take a long time. He said that after you left here you could go home."

Joanne recognized the conversation's

direction and felt her blood pressure begin to rise.

"I asked him if it would be better if you lived somewhere where you could have assistance." Brenda waited for a response from her daughter. When none materialized, she continued. "He said it could be a possibility. It really depended on how you were doing. He also said you could be eligible for Federal Disability benefits. Of course, I said I didn't know about those things and he assured me the social worker here could help. Anyway, I thought if you were receiving benefits and your recovery slow, then you might consider living home with me."

This had been her mother's third broach of the subject. Twice before, she talked of the two of them moving in together. She talked as though it were a done deal, a forgone conclusion. Joanne would live with her mother, end of story, no discussion. Joanne didn't know who would benefit most from the arrangement, she suspected maybe mom.

Regardless, something akin to instinct told her to resist. Yet the offer had its allure. Somebody to make her meals, do her laundry, somebody to talk to, even if it were just her mother's inane chatter. A new place to start over. Yes, it was tempting indeed.

Joanne did not know where she got the nerve, perhaps from Steve's talk earlier in the day. Maybe she had it in her all along. Wherever it came from the words were clear and her meaning

unmistakable. "Mother, when I'm through with my treatment here I'm going back to nursing." She had never said her desire out loud. Saying the words brought the whole concept into focus. "I know going back to nursing sounds farfetched, I don't care—it's going to happen. And there's something else that might seem, optimistic. I'm getting my own place, and don't start asking me a thousand questions, like how I'm going to accomplish all this, because to tell you the truth, I have no idea. All I know is that I'm going to do it." She took a long sip of her Coke and looked at her mother over the cup's rim.

Brenda knew her efforts thwarted, at least for the moment, but there would be other opportunities.

Two weeks later, while watching a mindless comedy on television (in truth she thought all comedies on television were mindless), a knock sounded on her door. Joanne leaned forward in her chair and pulled her robe closed, "Who is it?"

The voice that answered sounded female. "It's me, Sharon, your social worker. You may not remember me; we met on your first day here. May I come in?"

"Sure, come on in." Joanne did remember her. They were about the same age, and could pass as sisters; except Sharon did not wear life's knocks and dings on her face. As a matter of fact, Joanne thought, Sharon might actually be beautiful.

Somebody Darcy would turn her head for.

Darcy.

Without fanfare, and a minimal of pain, a perfect mental image came into Joanne's mind and the memory that went along with the image.

"You're working late?" Joanne asked.

"Yes, once a week I work late. Sometimes it's easier to have a conversation in the evening, without all the hustle and bustle that goes on during the day. May I sit?"

Joanne motioned toward the bed. "Sure, be my guest."

Sharon sat on the end of the bed and looked around the room. As of yet there were not many personal effects about, nothing stuck to the walls or hanging from the ceiling. Generally, that came later, when the patient had been at Pine Brook for an extended time and homesickness really dug its heels in. "I never know when a patient is ready to see me," Sharon began. "Most are in bad shape when they first get here and to bother them too soon creates more trouble than it's worth. On the other hand, leave a person alone for too long and they begin to think we don't care. Anyway, there are a few things I wanted to talk about. Do you feel up to a little conversation?"

Joanne was delighted for the conversation. "I guess I'm up to it. Then again, I'll know better after I find out what you want to talk about. I wish I'd known you were stopping by; I would have dressed more appropriate."

Sharon waved her hand in a, "don't mention or give it another thought" way and smiled. "First, if you don't mind me jumping into it. I'd like to mention disability, as in Social Security. The odds are you'll be entitled to some benefits. The rules say a person needs to be disabled for a year or more, and have it verified by a doctor before they receive a benefit. Would you like me to do the paperwork? All you need do is sign where I show you.

Joanne felt uncomfortable with the notion and did not know why. "What happens if I don't want to apply? Does something bad happen to me? You guys kick me out?" She paused trying to find the right words and wondered if her injury were to blame for her inability to express her feelings. "Please don't think I'm crazy, and don't think I'm talking through brain damage. But I'm not sure if I want to be disabled. And while we're on the subject, how is my bill being paid?"

"No. I'm pretty sure you're not talking through brain damage. If you don't want this benefit, you don't have to sign up for it. The problem is money after you leave. We're pretty sure you don't have a fortune stashed away somewhere. If you don't have the Social Security to fall back on, how will you get by?"

After tightening the sash on her robe, Joanne asked, "Can't I go back to work?" The question sounded more like a plea, and her voiced cracked as she got the last word out.

"Of course, you can go back to work," Sharon said, and felt appalled somebody on her caseload would have the mistaken belief that returning to full time employment was not the goal of everybody's efforts at Pine Brook. "The question isn't whether we won't let you go back to work. The question is will you be ready to go back to work? Treatment here can last for a year, sometimes more. When a person leaves this facility the most common practice is to return home for a time, then return to work." Sharon considered for a moment, "If you want to go back to work right away, I suppose we can focus the treatment team in that direction. Just because it's not common practice doesn't mean it's not done."

"And what about my bill, how is it being paid for?"

"Part of it is covered by your own health insurance, Medicaid picks up the balance. Not to scare you, but if a person had to pay for their care out of pocket, only millionaires could come here." Sharon shifted her position on the bed so she could see the television.

"There's a detective that calls from time to time. He wants to know how you're doing. I don't know if you remember him, he saw you while you were in the hospital. Anyway, until recently we thought you weren't ready to talk to him." Sharon realized how that sounded after she said it. "I don't mean to imply that we screen calls. Considering how you came to us; the treatment team thought it

best that you have some time to concentrate on yourself before the police started asking questions again. Do you want to talk to him? If you don't, I'm pretty sure I can put him off for a while longer."

"You're right, it does sound like you are screening calls and, yes, I can talk to him now."

"We haven't pushed the issue of what you remember. This police officer will likely stir up unpleasant things, very emotional memories. Maybe things that you haven't even considered yet. You know, recovery isn't just in your arms and legs. Recovery is also emotional, and although unpleasant, facing certain realities can go a long way to speeding up the healing process. Do you remember anything of the day you were injured? Would you like me to fill in any blanks?"

"Not to belittle your abilities, but what could you possibly tell me I don't already know?"

Sharon caught the sharp edge to Joanne's words. "Okay, it's no big deal right now. You'll find I'm not a hard person to talk to, and I listen well. When you want to talk, just ask. I'm always around." Sharon got up from the bed then turned to leave; as she did, she gently patted Joanne's leg. "It's okay, honest." Almost anything can trigger a memory, a song on the radio, or something simple as touch can do the job. A person reaching out can be a powerful thing. When Sharon touched Joanne on the leg, something did come back. It was, at first, the smallest wisp of a memory, and then it came back with the momentum of a freight train

she could not have stopped if she wanted.

Another day a lifetime ago.

A day sitting in a restaurant with Darcy and the touch of her hand. A touch that said somebody cared for her. A touch that said she was somebody and as such deserving of respect, of consideration. "She would have liked you, I think," Joanne said more to herself than to Sharon.

Sharon had halved the distance to the door when she heard Joanne's words. "Who would have liked me?" Besides being good at paperwork, Sharon's skills as a therapist were exceptional. She just heard an invitation to sit back down—as long as she didn't seem too eager.

"Is anybody ever ready to talk about a thing like this?" Joanne didn't expect an answer. She reached for the remote and turned the television off. The room felt warm, the light, soft and muted. She wanted to talk about it, and at the same time, she did not. "A little more comes back every day. I'll be sitting eating my lunch and remember something about my husband. Or talking about my medical condition and remember that I was a nurse. That's the way it's been going, a bit here and there. You want to know if I can remember exactly what happened. Well, I can't. Steve told me about the damage the bullet did to my brain, and I ask myself, what bullet? Who shot me? Nothing is there, and if I had to guess, I'd say nothing is ever going to be there. So why don't you do me a favor and fill in some of the missing pieces. Like, who

am I, and what the hell happened to me?"

Sharon liked being a social worker, although sometimes the job did not seem particularly rewarding; except for times like this. To reintroduce this woman to herself would not be an easy job and the task required all the professional competency she could muster. Sharon sat back down on the bed. "Okay Joanne. I'll fill in the blank spots, and if you want, I can sit with you tonight. I read your police report and the news articles from your hometown. I also talked to family members and your friends. I'll start at the beginning. Your name is Joanne Arnet; your husband's name is Michael Arnet...."

She talked for the better part of an hour. As part of her job Sharon wrote detailed histories of every person on her case load. She loved the task. A written history always brought all the pieces of a person's life together like a mini biography. It also let her play detective and led to discoveries of why things turned out the way they had. Why one guy drove drunk and killed three people. Why a woman happened to be walking in just the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) time when a falling brick struck her on the head. Most histories took about an hour or two of research, then an additional hour to type up. If Sharon's supervisor knew she had spent two days researching Joanne's history, she'd receive a written counseling in her file. Her supervisor didn't know; thus, Sharon had a pretty good grasp of Joanne's history. When she

filled in the blanks—she filled in the blanks.

When Sharon finished, Joanne sat in her chair stunned into silence. She felt engulfed, swallowed up by a large beast that ruled her life. Something stronger by far than she and whatever controlled her fate had no desire to relinquish the reins. But there would be a fight for control.

Details of the last few days with her husband eluded her; they resisted her efforts at retrieval. Nevertheless, what she heard felt true. Her husband and his illness, and that chapter of her life were coming out of the fog like a huge dead ocean liner. Devoid of life, it came into view with an unstoppable momentum, and instead of gliding gently to its moorings, it slammed bow first into the fragile pier of reality Joanne had built over the past few months.

She looked out the window into the night, alternately crying and remembering. Sharon sat quietly and waited until Joanne fell asleep, then asked the night nurse to keep an extra sharp eye on her.

Most of her identity came back. As it turned out, she didn't like herself before the bullet tore through her forehead. Now she liked herself even less. Sharon gave Joanne the police report and newspaper articles relating to her injury. Still, only small vignettes of memory revealed themselves for the days leading to the shooting, and nothing of the actual deed. She knew Darcy was dead, it said so

in the report.

Bitter memories and fear of the days to come dominated her thoughts. For sanity's sake Joanne liked to purge her mind at least once during the day. And the only way she found to turn off her runaway thoughts had been through hard physical work. Luckily, she found herself in the right place for hard physical work.

In all his years as a physical therapist, Steve never told one of his patients not to push so hard. Yet that's what he found himself doing when it came to Joanne's new found determination. He put her on the leg extension machine. "I'll be back in a few minutes. You know the routine. Work your legs, and then take a break. Start your arms and shoulders if you want. I have to help Mr. Millson get set up, I'll be a while. You okay with that?"

Joanne nodded an affirmative and gave thumbs up. She always did the leg machine after riding the bike. A fine sheen of sweat coated her forehead, a single drop gathered in the angry purple indentation above her eye. She looked at her legs. "Okay girls, you going to do what I tell you?" she asked. Then, as she went through her sets, she discovered what thousands of runners and gym junkies already knew. Push yourself hard enough and your mind shuts down and the buzz takes over.

She did not count how many times she repeated the exercise. Joanne went from one leg to the other with a focused, single-minded

determination. She extended her leg and a stack of weights lifted twenty-four inches off the floor. The resistance made her upper thigh work till it bulged. Ten extensions working the left leg, ten with the right, and then ten with both legs. She took three deep breaths, rubbed her thighs, and did the whole set over again. Five minutes later the thin coating of sweat she had acquired from the stationary bike turned into a deluge that soaked her clothes. Her intensity frightened those around her. Her neck muscles strained and pulled as she grimaced in pain, and still, she did more. Her breathing turned to short painful bursts as her heart pounded faster and faster. She closed her eyes and her mind went blank.

"Okay, Joan. That's enough of that. I think you can give it a rest," Steve said when he returned. What he saw sent a bolt of fear through his body. He genuinely thought she might experience cardiac arrest and hoped his anxiety not too obvious. Nevertheless, he mentally went over his CPR training, one-thousand one, one-thousand two, blow. "Pushing it a bit hard today, aren't you?"

Joanne closed her eyes and reveled in emotional oblivion. "I'm okay, Steve. Honest, I'm fine." Her body-rush tasted almost palatable. She thought it might be an acquired taste. Therefore, she would put the effort in to acquire the taste.

Steve threw her a towel. "Why don't you go clean up? The doctor wants to talk after lunch." He

looked at his watch, lunch was fifteen minutes away. "He wants to meet with you and the team in the large conference room. You need to rest. Okay?" The doctor had no plans to meet with Joanne after lunch. Nevertheless, considering what he just witnessed and Joanne's recent work with Sharon, Steve thought he could get the team together. He never heard of suicide by aerobic exertion, then again, he hadn't heard of everything.

A calmness that Joanne accepted greedily bathed her in alpha waves. "Sure Steve," Joanne said. She opened her eyes. "God, you look positively pale. I'm sorry if I frightened you that much." She considered the meeting. Maybe the time had come to ask how long she needed to remain in Pine Brook.

After lunch she made her way down the long hallway toward the large conference room. A thick carpet covered the floor and extended two feet up the walls on each side. The effect muffled her footfalls and the overall deadening of sound made Joanne feel claustrophobic. Her legs still felt weak and rubbery from their earlier workout. There were no therapy rooms here, just offices. This end of the building reminded her of a plush hotel, as opposed to a bustling health care facility. Joanne didn't know how long she had been at Pine Brook, three, maybe four months. Time enough. She stopped at room E, took a deep breath, knocked twice, and then entered.

There had been two meetings prior to this

one, or so Steve claimed. Joanne found it hard to believe that she could have the equivalent of a memory tar pit. A place in her brain where information went in, but could not be retrieved. And this tar pit didn't exist in the Jurassic period of her life. The last team meeting had been five weeks ago. This would be the first meeting she remembers—maybe. An involuntary shiver went through her body.

Steve sat at a long table, Sharon on his right. Her nurse, Sue, sat at the head of the table. Her doctor leaned against the wall talking on the phone. He was a short man, well-proportioned and very well groomed, with an infectious smile. It seemed like a relaxed scene and she appreciated that.

"Coffee's behind me, sit here." Steve motioned to a chair next to him.

Joanne sat. The doctor finished his conversation and joined them. The nurse put away the chart and gave her full attention to the gathered group.

Her doctor started the meeting. "I have to say, Mrs. Arnet, you're looking considerably better than the last time we met. How are you doing on the inside?"

The question sounded sincere. Or, the doctor might be feigning sincerity. Either way Joanne needed to make her needs known. "Please don't call me Mrs. Arnet." She looked around the room and hoped the people there didn't consider her over

reacting. Then, after another thought, this one a bit more resigned to the inevitable, she convinced herself that it didn't matter if they did see her as over reacting. She detested the sound, and thought of being connected to him. "You can call me Joan or Joanne."

The doctor nodded. "That sounds fair enough. I think if I were in your shoes, I'd feel the same. So let me rephrase the question. Joanne, how are you feeling? You look good. Are you doing as good on the inside as you appear to be doing on the outside?"

After listening to his question, a second time, Joanne believed his sincerity. "It's hard to put into words how I'm feeling. Physically I still hurt, but I know I'm getting stronger. "Emotionally?" Joanne smiled and shook her head. "I don't know. It seems the more I remember the more I don't want to know. At the same time, I find myself going over almost every detail of my life, and I hate it. My husband killed my best friend and almost did the same to me. I'm embarrassed over the way I look. My mother wants me to live with her and the thought is enough to make me scream. I'm out of work and not sure if I'll ever work as a nurse again." Joanne paused as a lump crept up her throat. She would not cry. "I want control. Control of my life. As far as I can remember I have never had control. Can I have control of where I go? Before, I had to go where he said, and he told me what to do when I got there. Is it too much to ask?"

Can I have a normal life where I go to work and come home?" Now the tears started to come despite her effort not to cry. "When can I leave? When can I have a normal life?" Joanne looked down at her hands and considered she said more than expected, all the doctor wanted to know was how she felt (on the inside).

Everybody in the room felt Joanne's anguish. And despite being a team with much experience in similar matters, all were moved by her most simple wants. It was not for a perfect life, or for riches or social status. She asked for no material goods. She asked for the right to her own pursuit of happiness; in her case, a place to live and a job. The doctor cleared his throat. "You've come a long way in your recovery in such a short time. I think I can speak for the team. Whatever you want to accomplish is what we will help you with. If you wish to return to work maybe we can help. I can't promise a place to live, that's not normally something we help with, but who knows? We'll look around. I think you might have another month with us. Use the time well. Work hard, get rest, and continue to talk to the staff about your feelings. That's what we're here for."

The meeting lasted a few minutes more. Joanne felt satisfied with what she heard. The doctor said another month. If she had to guess, she too would have said another month at Pine Brook. And the talk of helping to find a job and a place to live seemed too good to be true. She didn't know

how these things could be done, yet somehow, she knew they would be. The pain would subside and something would replace it, something she once considered unattainable—a normal life.

An irresistible fatigue came over her. As if an unseen hand had pulled the plug on her energy reserve, all she wanted was go to her room and take a nap. Walking down the hall a delightful fantasy of what her apartment might look like played through her mind in splendid detail. Where would the furniture go? Would one bedroom do? Would she continue to work as a nurse? She thought she might, although the rigors of hospital work seemed far beyond her abilities at this point in time. She did not care; it was wonderful to dream again.

As Joanne closed her eyes for a deserved mid-afternoon nap, it suddenly occurred to her. In the time she spent talking about herself, and how she came to be here nobody mentioned what happened to *him*. Her eyes were open now and the need for sleep gone.

God damn him, Joanne thought.

Chapter 7

The bus terminal sat squat and lacked any semblance of inspiration. Its walls were made of cement block painted alternately red and white. On the left side of the building a faded sign read, The Seven Eights Cab Company. The other side of the building housed a mom-and-pop restaurant, everything the weary traveler could possibly want. On the inside of the bus station, an ATM machine sat next to the ticket booth. Three ancient looking pinball machines lined one back wall; plastic green chairs covered the other walls. Michael thought it an excellent location for the ATM machine and reminded himself to thank the person who put it there. But not now, now he had other business. Business of travel, to finally go places and do the things he could never do before.

Then, a line popped into his head. A line from that black guy he sometimes saw on History Channel. "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, free at last."

The girl at the ticket booth looked up from her Nora Roberts paperback. She snapped her gum and clicked her long fingernails. Her nails looked like an eagle's talons painted gloss black. "I'm

sorry, were you talking to me?"

Michael turned away quickly and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He thought he might be drooling. He also needed to get some control over his emotions. Not total control, just enough to respond to this busybody, book reading cunt. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself. "I said great, an ATM machine. Is that a good book?"

The girl picked up the book in her right hand. "Oh, this is just a trashy romance." She sounded almost apologetic in her tone. "It's something I do to pass the time." She put her head down and continued to read.

Michael turned back toward the ATM machine. He could afford no fuckups. He had to get money for a ticket to Florida, then, home free. He took the card from his wallet and proceeded to clean out their bank account.

His wife never came right out and said she didn't want him to have access to their joint account yet he knew she thought it. She always did things to keep him down. And if it hadn't been for the attitude adjustments, he administered she would not have agreed to let him have an ATM card. His hands shook as he punched the buttons, fifteen seconds later three-hundred dollars spit out of the machine.

Psst. Hey you. You up there.

Michael looked around. He stood alone in the bus terminal, except for the bitch, and he did

not think she had whispered to him. For some reason he didn't think a mouth like hers capable of whispering. He figured her mouth might be good at other things. Still, he thought he recognized the voice.

Now come on boss, you couldn't have forgotten me already. Down here on your ankle. It's me your partner in crime.

The walk to the bus station traversed two miles of a hot and busy thoroughfare, and except for the passing cars had been a blissfully quiet walk. His father hadn't said a word, neither the .38. Michael looked around the room and found what he wanted, the men's room. He put the cash in his pocket and walked to the bathroom.

Once inside he peeked under the stalls, alone. The small room held two stalls on the left wall, and two urinals on the right. Under foot, small green tile glistened wet with urine. Wadded toilet paper blended like soup greens with the moisture on the floors thus adding dimension to the broth. The walls were covered with simple yet graphic graffiti. Several wide spread drawings of female genitalia with attached pelvic area and gangling legs covered one wall. Penises drawn to gargantuan proportion were scattered about on the other walls. Also, phone numbers, poetry, and some words in Spanish covered the remaining area. The air felt heavy and smelled stale. Michael thought of a stock yard that held goats and cows. All in all, he liked the room. "What do you want?"

he asked.

What do you think I want, you horse's ass? The .38 asked. We need to talk about the plan. You know, our plan to get away. You with me, bro? Maybe talk about slowing down and taking a breath. I know you don't want to get caught.

Michael leaned against the wall next to the far urinal. "Okay. You see me taking a breath." He took a deep breath. "You going to give me a hand here. Not that I need it. But you're in this too—as deep as me. And if you want to get away, you have to help *me* get away."

Sure, sure. We're partners in this and I'm here for you. But listen to me. Good, God boy! You got to use your head here.

If you start acting stupid now and drawing attention to yourself, things are bound to go wrong. So, what we're going to do is this. I'm going to be talking to you all the while, you can't answer me. You can't be talking to me when other people are around. Got it?

"I got it. So, what do we do first?"

Good boy. You listen to me and we'll both go far. Now, first thing; take out that ATM card.

Michael removed the card from his wallet.

Now rip it up and throw it in that garbage can over there.

"What the hell are you talking about? This is an important thing. This isn't an old picture to be ripped up and thrown away. You stupid motherfucker. Are you trying to mess me up?"

Michael shoved the card back into his pocket and turned to leave the room.

Hold up there big guy. You better not do that. If you want to live, you better listen to me. Right now, I'm your only friend, and if you dis me, I'm going somewhere else. You want to be on your own? Or, maybe you can be my lieutenant and we can have some real fun—think about it, just don't take too long.

Michael grabbed the sides of his head and threw himself into the green separation wall between the stalls. The thought of going home crossed his mind; maybe waiting for Joanne to make dinner. It would be nice to have her come home from work and make dinner for him. And when she cleaned the house, sometimes he'd help. Although he hadn't been helping much lately, and what about...

Better stop that thinking right now, 'less you want to completely blow a gasket. You're going to listen to me. And you're going to do as I say. Now rip up that card. You already took all the money you could on it and if you try to use it somewhere else, like in the state of Florida, the cops will know right where you are—got it?

Most days he accepted the fact he had a problem. That maybe he had a hard time concentrating on the little things in life, and if Joanne gave him a hand from time to time, well, what's the crime? Now the gun wanted control. It wanted to take over everything, the way he feared

his wife might have eventually done. Still, Michael knew what it said was true. The card was useless. He also knew the police could track him through its use. Given time he could have figured it out for himself.

He would keep the gun for whatever help it could give, and when the time came, ditch the overbearing prick faster than it could say, don't dis your sis. Michael bent the ATM card in four places and threw it in the garbage. Before leaving he stopped and used the facilities. Then, with soot from his lighter he wrote on the ceiling:

I'm sorry Joanne

Michael did not remember writing his apology, only the conversation with his new best buddy.

Once at the ticket counter he felt calm, ready for action. "Can I get a ticket to Jacksonville, Florida, please?" he asked in his friendliest tone.

The girl closed her book and smiled. She liked what she saw. Perhaps the romance novel put her in the mood, or maybe it was the guy's jeans fitting tight in all the right places. Whatever the reason, she allowed herself a five second fantasy before answering the question. "Can't get there from here, hon."

Michael's heart went into overdrive and hoped it did not show on his face. "No, why not?" He asked.

The girl leaned out of her window and took her first good look at the guy's face she had

fantasized about. Now, actually looking at his face, as opposed to his bitchen ass in those great jeans, she didn't like what she saw. She had seen eyes like those before, and had noticed the same smile on men who traveled without destinations; men who do not know the meaning of sensitive, men who liked to hurt. "You go to Jacksonville on Greyhound. To get on Greyhound you have to take that bus." She pointed to one loading in the parking lot. "That bus goes to the Port Authority. You ask them down there what bus to take, they'll tell you. But if you want to go, you better do it quick. The bus is leaving in four minutes. That will be sixteen dollars."

Michael gave her a twenty and completed the transaction in less than a minute. Without further conversation he boarded the City bound bus.

Later, when the police questioned Connie Smith about the man who bought a ticket to New York City, she said, "I knew he was no good. Would have called the police myself if I didn't get so busy at the window." She failed to mention the fantasy she had about the guy, and those great fitting jeans.

The ride to the city had been quiet and uneventful. He took a window seat toward the back of the bus. No other passenger sat in the immediate area. The gun spoke up as Michael began to drift off.

You did okay back there.

"Fuck you," Michael mumbled.
That's the spirit, partner.

The bus pulled into the Port Authority building with a sharp rocking motion to the right, then back to left. Michael's head struck the window hard. The resounding crack prompted the bus driver to look into his rear-view mirror. Michael stretched, opened his eyes and rubbed his head. He thought his scalp might be bleeding, his hand came back dry. His mouth tasted pasty and foul, even by his standards. His head pounded and the light felt like a dagger in his brain.

Michael closed his eyes; there were no voices. Despite the quiet and the serenity that accompanied the silence he liked the conversations with the .38. But right now, with his head throbbing and feeling like it was about to blow the top of his head off Michael felt grateful for the silence.

Purchasing the ticket to Florida had been easier than expected. A short walk from where he got off the Short Line, sat Greyhound's ticket window. Five minutes later he had ticket in hand. Michael had dreamed of Florida. New York winters stopped being fun somewhere around age fifteen. Florida loomed more than a destination, more than a dream. Somehow the state's very name conjured an image of newness. A place that promised, if only in his mind, an assurance of a normal future. As soon as he crossed the border his

mind would magically heal and all his problems would be left behind with the New York winter. Michael gave the ticket to the bus driver then sat in the first seat to the left of the door. He wanted to see his new life unfold, and that required a front row seat.

You got to get off this bus, bro.

Michael knew the rule for not answering the voice aloud, but what the pushy bastard wanted was not in the game plan. Whispering, he said, "This is where we wanted to go. This is the bus to Florida. Now shut up before you get us both in trouble." Michael leaned back in his seat, satisfied he'd set the record straight. Let there be no mistake who's in charge here.

I'll go slowly for you, okay? The voice sounded mocking as if it were talking to a child. First, that little twat back at Short Line heard you say you wanted to go to Florida, she even told you how to do it. Now, I'm going to be honest with you. You been lucky up to this point and the only reason you been lucky is because nobody has found those two stiffs yet. But they will find them, if not today then tomorrow. It's two days to Florida on this bus. Who do you suppose is going to be waiting for you when you get off in Jacksonville? It's not going to be the neighborhood welcoming committee. Here's what you're going to do. Right now, while the bus driver has his head in that storage compartment, you're going to get off this bus. And when the police ask the driver when and where you got off,

he's going to say, "How the fuck do I know? I got a bus load of people here; you expect me to remember where everybody goes?"

Still whispering, Michael's voice began to crack. "I don't care about that. I've got to get to Florida. You don't understand."

No, I don't and I don't want to understand. This I understand, if you do not get off the bus in the next ten seconds your chance will be gone because he's almost done putting those bags away. And if you miss your chance, I'm going to make your life hell by turning that pitiful little brain of yours into mush, and you know I can do it. So shut up and move. NOW!

Michael got off the bus.

He walked out of the Port Authority the same way he had walked out of his house earlier that morning, a morning that seemed like a lifetime ago. He walked with his head down and his hands in his pockets with no destination in mind. Every now and then he'd bump into somebody walking the opposite direction. Mostly he looked at his feet and walked, and his mind shut down.

Michael walked for a long time, how long, he hadn't a clue. His feet ached with two new blisters and his stomach grumbled. To his left stood a black lamppost in front of a small church and next to the lamppost a man stood behind a pushcart selling things that smelled good. One deep breath of the thick smoke rising off the cart and Michael stopped, turned, and followed his

nose. He bought two hot dogs, meat on a stick and a can of soda. Bright yellow mustard clung to his face as well as his shirt and pants. The mess did not matter; a lot of things did not matter.

After finishing his meal Michael looked at his surroundings. I'm home he thought. With a swipe, he wiped his face with the paper from the hotdog then dropped the garbage where he stood. It never occurred to him to put the paper in the can ten feet to his right.

The small church had stone steps that stretched the entire width of the building. With intentions of sitting Michael walked toward the section on the far left. His feet were now throbbing and he needed to figure out his next move. Most of the open space already had squatters and nobody looked friendly. At the far left on the fourth step up he noticed a man lying down watching people go by. The man had on a white T-shirt-stained coffee color and a pair of black sweat pants stained white around the waist. With one hand he supported his head the other burrowed downward, masturbating. Michael couldn't help but stare. Not that he had anything against masturbation, because he didn't. But to do it here on the church steps for the whole world to see. Despite killing his wife and her cunt of a girlfriend that very morning, Michael felt revulsion for what he saw. After all, society had to have some limits.

"What'da fuck you lookin' at motherfucker?" the masturbating man asked. Then he added, "You

better get your fuckin' eyes out'a my business or I'll fuck ya up."

Michael turned around, not realizing the man had spoken to him.

"Don't be lookin' `round fool. I'm talkin' to you. Don't make me come down there and bitch slap you punk ass."

Without a second thought, Michael went down on one knee and slowly removed his .38 from the ankle holster.

Now wait just a second there cowboy, the 38 chimed in. You know we don't have any more bullets. What are you going to do if he pulls a bigger gun?

"Shut up," Michael said under his breath. "I know what I'm doing." Looking to get the last word, the 38 said, *now that I think about it, it would be nice to put a round where that guy would feel it most. Good God all-mighty, wouldn't that be a hoot?* They shared a chuckle. Michael brought the gun out.

"Now don't be thinking you all bad and shit, because I will fuck ya up." The man on the steps knew a pussy when he saw one, and the guy with the mustard on his face smacked of it. "If you don't get out of my face now..." He saw Michael take the .38 out of its ankle holster. He also heard him talking and laughing to himself. "Oh Fuck. Oh Snap!" The man in the black sweats and the erection jumped to his feet and moved fast as his legs could send him.

Michael noticed the swelling had gone down.

Larry Struck saw it all from where he sat across the street. As the man with the gun walked slowly down the sidewalk Larry jumped down from the stoop he occupied and walked over to the same food vendor in front of the church. He glanced down the sidewalk toward the man with the gun, then back at the food vendor. "I want one of those hot dogs there," he said as he fished in his pocket for some change.

The vendor handed Larry a hot dog then took a handful of change from his customer. "Hey, this be not enough money," the food vendor said as he pushed the change around in the palm of his hand.

Already twenty feet away and walking fast when he heard the vendor complain, Larry turned back. "Ah shut up before I turn you in to the mayor's office. You know what he thinks about foreigners."

The vendor threw his right hand up and said something in his native Pakistani. But the small black man with the baldhead and no teeth never heard the insult.

Larry came up on the man's right side. He knew messing with a person who carried a gun on his ankle might not be the smartest thing to do; nevertheless, he thought the risk could be worth the effort. When the guy bought the hot dogs he

paid from a wad of money, a thick wad. Luckily nobody had noticed but him. There was something else about the guy, something he knew from his gut yet could not put into words. He looked familiar or his actions seemed familiar. When Larry got alongside, he said, "Here, this is for you. Saw how you liked them so I went and got you another." Larry held the hot dog out to the man with the gun and big wad of money. "Go ahead, it's okay to take it, I ain't nobody to be worried about."

When Michael sat in his living room, he often spewed racial insults at the television. If an African American were arrested, he'd say, "Look at them, they're always in trouble with the police." At such times his wife would tell him he shouldn't talk like that and people were people no matter what color they were. Her words drove him to spew even more racial insults and not because he believed what he said, rather, when he said cruel things about minorities it annoyed her.

Michael stepped back from the little man with the big eyes. He wondered if the black man could read his mind and hear all the things he ever said about black people. He looked around and became really aware of his surroundings. There were lots of black people. He thought everybody within shouting distance might know what he thought of their color. And oh yes, he thought of them as black people now. Michael cringed, I can't even think that word, somebody could be listening to my thoughts. It could happen, he knew it could.

Somebody could hear him think the N word. Black people were on every street corner. They were in work clothes and they were in three-piece suits. They were in every car and truck that went by and everything seemed normal, so maybe nobody heard him think, the N word. He took the hot dog to appease the native. See I'm not so bad.

"Thanks," he said and slowly ate the hot dog.

As Michael ate, the little man with the big eyes looked up at him and smiled. "Do you know where you are?" asked the little man.

Michael looked around as he pushed the last piece of dog into his mouth. Because his mouth was full, all he could do was shrug his shoulders and shake his head no.

"Well look down the street there. You see that building? That's the famous Apollo Theater. And down the road that way," he pointed to the left. "Down there is the Cotton Club. But it ain't the famous one. They just want you to think it is." Larry winked and nodded his head as if to confirm the conspiracy between us locals, and ain't you the lucky one to have this insider information. "You still don't know where you are?"

Again, Michael shook his head no. Even if he did know his location he didn't know if he could answer. As with the man masturbating on the stairs Michael had become momentarily transfixed into silence by what he saw. The man talking to him looked like a toothless, black owl.

"You be in Harlem boy. Right where you's

standing is 125th Street, and that's about as famous as any building." Then the little man with the big eyes held out his hand. "My name's Larry Struck and you'd be needing me if you going to be here. I can show you around and where to get things. You don't know where to get things, do you?"

"What kind of things do you mean?"

Michael asked.

Larry started walking down 125th Street.

"Well, you need to have a place to sleep. You don't look like you got a place around here and I know where the soup kitchens are. You know what they are don't you?"

"Where can I go to get some rest?"

Larry thought for a minute. "Well, I know where all the shelters are. I seen what you got there," he pointed to Michael's ankle. "They have metal detectors at the shelters and the shelter police would make trouble if you went in there with that thing. They ain't city cops, even though they think so. No, we couldn't go to no shelter as long as you got that around your ankle." They walked in silence, then. "I know a place we can go. It's a hotel that don't charge much money at all. It ain't the nicest place you ever seen, but it's good enough just to get someplace to sleep. You got some money? Want to go there? I can show you."

Michael's brain slid into overload. He needed to put his head down, his body felt as though it were going to crash on the sidewalk. "Okay. Let's go to the hotel. I have a little money.

It's cheap, right?"

Larry smiled wide his gums as prominent as any set of pearly white teeth. "Oh, it's cheap all right, you'll see. It's only a few blocks that way." He pointed to a street on their left. Michael fell in behind his new friend and they walked in silence to the hotel, and although he could never know it at the time, a team was born.

The building stood large and occupied a corner lot. Michael thought it might have been a furniture store he could not be sure. Someone had stacked furniture high and haphazardly in the large front window. Now the place looked dusty and deserted. The hotel's entrance sat around the corner. A hand painted sign that read "Hotel" hung on rusty supports over a dented, metal door at the end of a long flight of narrow granite stairs.

Larry smiled, "This is it, we're here." Then he noticed the look on his new friend's face. "It's okay, it don't look like much on the outside. You can get a room cheap and nobody knows nothing, as long as you pay your rent. Follow me." Larry led Michael up the stairs and through a narrow hall that looked to have an inch of paint built up on the walls. The last coat, a dark red, seemed to undulate when looked at directly; Michael tried not to look at it.

A man, who could have been between the ages of forty-five and seventy, sat on a ripped, green swivel chair. He drank a can of beer and watched YouTube videos on a small laptop that sat

in the middle of a desk cluttered with papers and a container of half-eaten Chinese food. Michael noticed a large roach run for cover when they approached; he thought there might be more somewhere in the area.

"I know you," the man at the desk said as he put the can of beer down. "Didn't I tell you never to come back here?" He leaned back in his chair and kicked the office door shut with his foot. Then, in the same action, he stood and went to the Plexiglas window to his right and talked through the holes drilled there. "I can get my guys down here to show you the way out. Is that what I should do?" He hesitated when he noticed Larry's companion. "Unless, maybe you have the money you owe me? Well, you got my money?"

Larry held his hand up "Give me a second with my partner here, okay?" Larry turned toward Michael. "Listen, this is a good place to hold up in. It don't seem so nice, but nobody comes bothering you here, know what I mean?"

Michael got his meaning. "So how much you owe that prick?"

Larry smiled. "Just go along with what I say and I'll show you how we can get some more money, just you and me. Pay the guy and we'll talk about it when you been rested."

So, Michael paid the guy behind the Plexiglas one hundred dollars for the next week and another hundred for what Larry owed from six months before. The room had two beds, a dresser,

and that was all he remembered until the next morning.

When he woke, he could smell Joanne's coffee. She always made good coffee. He pushed himself to a sitting position and felt a momentary disorientation. He'd slept in his clothes and his bed went from a nice floral comforter to this green blanket and gray sheet. When he saw the short black man, everything came back. He played yesterday's events through his mind as though it were a video, fast forward here, slow motion there and when he got to the part where he shot his wife and the other one, he stopped the movie, hit rewind, and watched it again a few more times. He liked the show. And today a new show was about to begin. He liked this show even better. Okay let the fun begin he thought. There were two coffees on the table along with a box of assorted doughnuts. Michael cleared his throat, then asked, "That coffee there for me?"

"Sure, it's your coffee; you can have both of them if you want. I already had mine." Larry walked from the bathroom to one of the two small white chairs next to the table and sat. "You slept a long time, don't know if these are still warm though."

Michael pulled himself out of the hole in the middle of the bed, and then sat down at the table. "You buy this stuff?"

Larry looked down at his hands. "Well, I bought it down on the corner, you paid for it. I

took money from your pocket. Thought you'd wake up, you didn't." Larry slid the coffee closer to his new friend. "You pissed off I took your money? Cause if you're pissed, I got some ideas on how we can make more. Just you and me, partners."

Michael took a doughnut and shoved the whole thing in his mouth then walked into the bathroom. As he voided his bladder he talked. "How are we going to make money?"

"Well, I seen you pull that gun yesterday. Think you got the nerve to pull it on somebody for real?" Larry popped the lid off the last cup of coffee and started to drink.

Michael came out of the bathroom and sat in the opposite chair. He leaned toward Larry and said, "I killed two people with it yesterday. That's why I'm here in this shithole of a room with you. I can use it all right." He took a sip of his coffee, and then had another doughnut. "What's on your mind? Tell me and maybe we can do some business here. The only problem is I'm out of bullets."

Larry rummaged through the box of doughnuts. "That ain't no problem; I can get you all the bullets we need. Somethin' here might be a problem, and if you and me going to be workin' together then you might want to know." He paused. "I got the AIDS." He pointed to a brown paper bag on the dresser. "That's my medicine. I got to take it three times a day, and I go to the clinic, the one by Harlem Hospital. Guess I can find a clinic anywhere."

Michael didn't know much about AIDS. What he did know, he gleaned from television. Watching the television confirmed all sorts of things in his mind. Basically, it affirmed and sliced into digestible chunks the reality of how sick the world had become. Political corruption, they were all on the take. The government watched and kept a detailed file of his every move outside the house (and in it). Murder, violence, it all knocked on the door of every American, and there wasn't a fucking thing anybody could do about it. Dirty air, contaminated food; let us not forget that cars were destroying all life on the planet. And if you lived through that, cancer and heart disease waited around the corner to take you out.

So, did he know AIDS...? He knew it killed people and the treatment was expensive. He thought of it as one more thing. One more piece of proof that the world had slid dangerously closer to the edge of total collapse. He knew druggies got it, and so did faggots. His mother had a saying. What goes around comes around. And if you are doing things, you shouldn't be doing, then you might have to pay a price for doing that thing, whatever that thing is. If you're taking a needle and shoving shit in your arm, you made a choice, everybody knows the risk, it's no secret. If you were letting some guy bend you over and take it up the ass, then maybe you got what you deserved. To Michael, whoever had this disease gave it to himself. What goes around comes around.

If that were truly the case, and what goes around comes around then what about what he did? If doing drugs is bad, and taking it up the ass is bad, then where did killing your wife and her friend fall? Would he be paying a price for what he did? He didn't know. Whatever force gave AIDS to all the junkies and faggots just might have something special for cases like his. He felt sure somebody held a lean on his life, and it was only a matter of time before the bill collector caught up to him. In the meantime, he had no problem running the bill up some more.

Some days his symptoms were less than other days, and they were symptoms, he did have an illness. He admitted it to himself. The voices in his head controlled every waking hour. Most times they didn't tell him to do bad things they just talked to him. Then again, every now and then they did say to do bad things. Today the voices weren't too disagreeable. He could hear them; they were in what he thought of as "The back room." They sounded muffled, like talking coming from behind a closed door. Yesterday's events closed that door a little tighter on most of the voices—except for his .38. Michael ran his hand down his ankle. His new friend had not taken the .38, and a good thing for him.

"You ever been in the hospital because of your AIDS?"

Larry moved his left arm in a slow wave, "Shhhhhittt, I been in almost every hospital in the

city. Most, more'n once. Sometimes for the AIDS, other times for my head." Larry emptied his brown bag on the table. "Look here." he said as he held up a small brown container. "Almost every one of these comes from a different hospital. You tell them you got the AIDS and they give you the medication. Most of this I use, some of it I sell. This shit always took the voices away." He picked up another container. "This one for my Thrush, I get it a lot. This is...."

Michael spoke up, "What was that other one? Let me see it." Larry handed it over. Michael looked at the label closely. "I've taken this one before. My wife said it was pain medicine." He held it up for Larry to see.

"Oh, yea, that takes the pain away fine." Larry tried not to laugh. "That shit's Clozaril, it's medicine for your head. You know, to take the voices away. Your wife's been fuckin' wit you boy. I took that stuff a few times and it takes the voices away; it makes you stoned all day." After a moment of quiet, Larry added. "Fuck, I been living wit the voices all my life, they ain't so bad."

Michael leaned back in his chair. The little man who sat across from him looked butt ugly, no doubt about it. He had no teeth, no hair on his head, his skin flaked in patches and his bug-eyes looked scary. He either took it up the ass or did drugs with a needle, probably both, and was black. Yet, he liked him. Larry talked openly about his sickness and about the medication Clozaril. Of

course, he did things for his own benefit, that's the way things are. Everybody looked after number one, and another reason why he liked the guy, he heard voices. "Sometimes I hear voices, too." There, he'd said it aloud for the world to hear.

Leaning forward, Larry said, "I knows you do, saw it right off. That's why I picked you out. No problem, right?" Larry held his hand out across the table. Michael took it and the two men shook hands. "Okay, so do you want to hear my plan?"

This turned into the first day of his new life. He traded his wife and home in for this little man and a shithole of a room. Regardless of what had been, this felt more right more real. He felt home for the first time in his life. The voices pushed the door open a crack, sort of testing the waters. The waters were just fine. "Okay, tell me your plan."

Larry pulled a map of New York City from an army type duffel bag and unfolded it over the small table. Michael thought his friend looked like a crazy dwarf general, a concept not totally repulsive. With the map opened fully it covered the table. Larry asked, "You ever been to Queens?"

"This is my first time to the City, how the fuck you think I been to Queens?"

Holding his hands up, Larry said, "Just asking, no need to catch an attitude. All I meant was, we on our way to Queens, tonight. I think you and me will go there and catch us a Chinaman as he comes out of his restaurant at the end of the night. They always have lots of cash at the end of

the night. They don't leave it in the store thinkin' somebody might break in and rob them. So, you got the gun. You and me, we go up to him together. I do the talkin' and take the money. You cover him. It ain't hard. Unless something goes wrong. See here?" Larry stood and motioned over the whole city with the palm of his hand. "It's a big city and I know most of it good. If we do this right, we can go to a new part of the city every time we need more money. We don't work the same spot the way some fools do. That's why they get caught, they just doing the same thing in the same spot and the police are waiting for them. We move around, go to Fort Lee, one night, or maybe hold somebody up here so they don't know where we are by where we ain't been." He sat back down. "We don't need to hurt nobody much. The cops don't look so hard if you ain't been killin' folks. But it's work. Don't think it's easy cause it's work to do it right. What do you think; you want to give it a try? We could do it a time or two and if we don't work out together, you go your way and I go mine."

"You sound like you done this before."

"I got caught in '02, they give me twenty years. Let me out after twelve. It weren't my fault we got caught, my partner did it. He wanted to keep going to the same neighborhood all the time because his woman lived there. We'd hold somebody up, and then he'd go get himself laid. Every time we went out, she made him tell her everything of what happened and the more he told

the more hot she got. So back we went to the same area so he could to see this woman. Like I said, the cops was waiting for us. And you want to know the best part?"

"Yea, tell me the best part."

"When they caught us, they put fear in his woman. Told her she's part of it and they'd put her in jail if she didn't say what she knew. She had this kid to think of. She said what we did and didn't leave out anything." Larry shook his head and snorted a laugh. From his pants pocket he brought out a new pack of Kools, lit one, and then flipped one across the table. Michael grabbed it like a starving dog grabbing a chicken bone.

Larry watched his smoke blow over the map. "Now, you say you killed two people yesterday. Maybe you did, and maybe that's reason enough for you to use your head and do this right. Keep your mouth shut. You don't have to be telling anybody what we doin'. Ain't nobody's business but ours." Larry got up and took his noon medications. Then said, "If you want to do this, give me the money you got left. I'll get the bullets."

Michael fished the money out of his pocket and threw it on the map. "Don't take off on me now. Even though I don't know my way around, I will find you. Believe me?"

"I believe you. Go sleep some more, you'll need it for tonight. As of today, we working the night shift." Larry picked up the money, put it in

his pocket and walked out the door.

At midnight they left the hotel and boarded a train bound for Queens. Larry explained how there were fewer of them when it got really late. Michael tried not to look excited, in truth, he felt exhilarated as he watched the City's lights for the first time.

Before leaving their room, Larry handed Michael a brown paper bag with a large oil stain on the bottom. The bag held one box of .38 hollow point bullets and two greasy hamburgers with a side order of fries that tasted like they were cooked in oil older than dirt. Michael devoured the food and coveted the bullets.

The .38 sounded excited to be getting a fresh load and talked to Michael while being reloaded. Although the two men had borne their souls, so to speak, Michael refused to answer the .38 as it talked to him. Most of the chatter sounded inane anyway. Things like: Keep your eyes open. Shoot if you have to, shoot if you feel like it, shoot first, don't let anybody shoot you, and for God's sake shoot somebody.

They got off the train on Queens Boulevard; it looked to Michael like a main thoroughfare. It was past midnight and an endless line of cars drove by. Street lights, car dealer lights, and storefronts lit the area so brightly it gave an aura of daylight.

Larry looked into a storefront, then back toward Michael. "We can do what we want here. I

mean, we don't got to find just a Chinaman. If somebody else looks good to us, we can do him. Okay?"

No response. At that moment Michael was experiencing an emotion most hunters associate with the first day of deer season. He felt nervous, excited and unable to communicate. He nodded understanding. His senses were tuned fine as any machine ever made. The gun on his ankle radiated warmth, it breathed, and it lived. Instead of being a .38 caliber revolver, it grew big as a cannon with enough power to stop an elephant.

Larry glanced at his partner, and despite the bravado, he worried. The image of the kid freezing when the time came, or killing everything in sight, played persistently through his head. "Take a breath and chill. Things will work out fine. Do as I say and we got to get some cash tonight. Let's keep walking down the street here and see where it goes."

Five minutes later Larry found it. "I got about ten dollars left of that money you gave me, feel like Chinese food?"

"Make mine fried rice," Michael said, and although he did not try to sound like John Wayne, Larry thought he did anyway. They both went into the restaurant.

After they ate, Larry led them down an alley to the parking lot around back of the restaurant. "I looked real good and didn't see any of those spy cameras anywhere. You got to be careful of those

nowadays," he said as they walked. He leaned over and spoke out of the corner of his mouth like George Raft in an old convict movie. He pointed the way to a low concrete wall holding back a small berm. "Just sit here for a while and he'll be out soon enough. He made some good food. Yes sir, he knows how to skin cat."

It never occurred to Michael to watch for surveillance cameras. He wondered about other things he could be missing, and decided to trust his new friend, for the time being anyway. Now something else bothered him. Whatever troubled at him, hadn't gained too big a toehold. While they were on the sidewalk, he felt terrific, better than terrific. Back here in the dark he started to feel jumpy. As if there were something out of sight in the dark. Something out of his control. Besides the .38, other voices started to make their presence known.

In the dark, sitting on the wall, they came alive.

At times, the voices were deafening and it became hard to hear or see the world around him. Michael felt sure others could hear the voices as well. Others had to hear it, how could they not? Most recently it had been his dead father who did the talking, but there were others. People he knew from school and people he worked with.

Then there were the people he did not know.

The unknown people came mostly at night. They were the ones who made him ice cold with

fear. During those times when he listened close, he would stare at a light, any light. Staring at the light helped when too many were talking at once. The light acted as a focal point and time seemed to move faster. He had lost many an hour while staring at the light.

If a whisper could also be a shout, that is what Larry tried to accomplish. He leaned over toward Michael's ear and with his mouth about two inches away, said, "Now. We got to move now. The man's going to his car." He leaned back and for a moment considered slapping Michael in the face the way he'd seen it done in movies. Instead of a slap he grabbed his new partner by the shoulders and shook. "You in there motherfucker?"

Michael slowly turned his face directly toward Larry. Spittle covered his face. When they were eye to eye, Larry involuntarily sat back. His new partner looked stoned. His eyes were blank, vacant of personality, at least the personality from earlier in the day.

Reaching down to his ankle Michael pulled the gun. "I'm okay, let's do it." He jumped off the retaining wall and walked quickly toward the elderly Chinese man about to get into his car. Larry did the only thing he could; he fell in behind the man with the gun.

Their approach looked threatening, two guys walking quickly through a mostly dark parking lot at two in the morning. Mr. I. Chi Lee, formally of Taiwan and San Francisco, sensed the meaning of

their actions. He closed his eyes and said a short prayer for his family and himself, and then they were on him.

The parking lot's illumination consisted of one, sixty-watt bulb hanging over the back door of the restaurant. Normally a powerful mercury street light lit every corner of the lot. This night it didn't function. Larry led Michael around behind the old man to position themselves so the light from the door shone from behind. Larry thought, and rightfully so, that the old man had no way of making out facial features because of the back lighting. He didn't plan the tactical move prior to doing it and only recognized its wisdom as they walked toward the old man.

Michael did as instruct; he held the gun in front of him and let Larry do the talking. "You know what we want. Just give us the money and all's cool. Don't, and we'll take it any way. Understand?"

Even though the man had not opened his mouth, Larry knew he didn't speak English. Despite being stooped with age, he thought the Chinaman's body language had an arrogant attitude. The man stood by his car and looked past Larry as though he weren't there. The foreigner had a business, and money, and respect. Larry's nervousness did not come from fear; it came from the satisfaction of getting something back. The same satisfaction a young man feels when he realizes his efforts of feigning affection were

paying off and the bitch said yes. Larry liked this part. To see somebody who wouldn't normally give him a second thought, other than disdain, now pay attention. It tasted sweet, he had forgotten how sweet. Nevertheless, something looked wrong with this picture. The old guy didn't look frozen with fear. He held his hands up and talked in gibberish. Larry thought there should be a law to speak only English.

Then, as though he took a Mike Tyson uppercut, Larry realized too late that the old man was not talking to him, rather, to somebody behind them.

An explosion vibrated the air around them. Michael's first thought had been bomb. His ears were still ringing hours later. He felt a hot wind blow past his head. Without hesitation he pivoted on the balls of his feet and crouched at the same time. Another explosion. This time the bullet evaporated the fiber of his shirt. Later he would notice a burn about two inches long just above his waistline where the bullet passed close enough to sear skin.

Now the light shown in his eyes, and the figure by the door looked more apparition than real. As if his body were a support system for the gun, Michael moved with speed and accuracy. He shot the man twice. The first round hit the shooter in the throat, the second round smashed through his nose. Michael whirled again and without hesitation shot the old man standing by the car. It

was all over in three seconds.

Michael walked to the old man, turned him over with his foot and removed his wallet. Then he walked to the man by the door and took his wallet, a paper bag with money, and he picked up the second pistol.

They ran down an adjoining alley that led to the next block, behind them, in the dark, father and son lay dead. By the end of the alley Larry grabbed Michael by the arm. "Wait.... Can't breathe." Larry doubled over and gasped for air.

Michael did not think they had traveled three-hundred feet. Off in the distance, and coming fast, the wail of police sirens. *We're screwed*, said the .38. *This guy can't run for shit and the cops are going to be all over our asses in another minute.* Michael ran his hand through his hair and stepped back, trying to think. *No matter what happens that fuck can't go on, leave him*, said the gun.

One-hundred feet south, a lone car sat at an intersection waiting for a green light. Michael crouched low as he ran toward the car from behind. When he got up alongside the driver's window, he stood high and shouted, "If you don't open your door right now, I'm going to kill you. NOW!" The terror was complete. Martha Lopez, an employee at the Ritz Carlton, opened her car door. Bent over and wheezing, Larry came running up the street. Michael thought he looked like some kind of stooped night creature. "No, don't get out. You're driving," he said as they piled into the car.

Martha did as told.

The ride back to Harlem had been quiet except for Martha's crying. It sounded surprisingly soft to Michael, almost musical. A small blessing, he appreciated.

Two blocks from the hotel Larry told Martha to pull over. He leaned over and whispered into Michael's ear, "Give me the gun and get out here, I'll be back later."

Michael felt relief when he remembered the second gun in his pocket. He didn't know what would have happened if Larry insisted on having his father's gun. He watched from the sidewalk as they drove away.

Larry told Martha to head toward the Harlem River Drive. The river sat six blocks east. By three in the morning there was no traffic to slow them down. All during the drive he assured Martha that things would be fine and he had no intention of hurting her. Once by the river he directed her to a small park that ran parallel the water. During the day the park attracted mostly joggers. At night, junkies and the homeless took over. The police were more active than years ago and he knew he had to be fast. He told her to park on a path overlooking the river. Martha started to cry; Larry again assured her he would not hurt her. As she relaxed and allowed herself to have hope, Larry shot her three times.

He maneuvered her body until she lay across the front seat, then removed her shoe and wedged

it into the accelerator. Larry laughed to himself and thought of the times he saw this being done on television; the guy always had the motor racing. He knew better. He knew the motor had to be going just a little faster than an idle otherwise the transmission would never slide into drive without serious shit happening. He leaned through the window, put the car in drive and let it take itself into the river.

Many deviant things gave Larry pleasure, and he never felt remorse. He hadn't set out to kill the two Chinaman, and he hadn't set out to kill the woman. Things went wrong, you had to expect it. The police were the problem; they became more tenacious when murder was involved. Larry shook his head, "Fuck'em—fuck'em all."

When he got back to the hotel Michael lay face down on his bed sleeping. On the table sat Larry's share of the Chinese food, and what looked like one-thousand dollars. The next day Larry bought an ounce of reefer and the two tried their best to smoke it in one long continuous high. For three days a thick blue-white cloud of smoke hung over the room.

Chapter 8

She wanted to teach.

Seventeen resumes to schools throughout the state and no replies put a damper on that ambition. Tabatha put her pride aside and filled out an application for employment at a local supermarket.

Food King paid union wages and had branches of the same name covering most of the east coast. She lied on that part of the application asking about education and put down high school. As an afterthought, she also put down forty-seven credits from a local community college. She intended to take the form home and fill it out there; on impulse she did the paperwork while sitting in her car, then walked it back to the personnel office. Because the secretary looked busy, Tabatha slid the completed application on her desk then turned to walk out.

"Excuse me, mam—hello," the secretary said as she covered the phone with her hand.

Tabatha turned around. Okay, now what, she thought. Did I leave the stupid form in the wrong spot? They haven't hired in two years and they don't intend to start with me. Maybe I didn't sign

the damn thing. What now?

"Mrs. Schubert can see you, if you have the time."

Tabatha had not dressed for an interview. She looked good, but she didn't have on "interview clothes." Her slacks were khaki with a wide brown belt, white linen blouse, no accessories and no jewelry. A nice look for having lunch at a dockside cafe. "Yes of course I can see her. Now?"

The secretary smiled, "Yes, now. If you will go through that door and bring your application." She handed the paper back, and pointed to the door on her right.

She walked through the door telling herself not to have expectations of being hired. If no expectations were realized, she could not be disappointed when told, "Thank you, we'll give you a call real soon." Or, "Sorry, you look like a loser." Or, better still, "We have an opening, but not for a lesbian." Despite reminding herself this interview didn't matter, her stomach twisted into a tight knot—because it did matter, and one more disappointment would be incomprehensible to imagine.

Tabatha had never seen a whorehouse; nevertheless, the word came to mind upon entering the office. Red velvet drapes with cream colored fringe covered the long windows overlooking the parking lot. A Victorian, or Queen Anne style couch (she could never tell the difference), filled one wall. Ornate floor lamps bracketed the couch

along with too many pictures to count. Bric-a-brac and antiques covered much of the remaining floor space. Despite being overwhelmed, her smile felt genuine. The room said overload and welcome at the same time to her wide, staring eyes.

Movement drew her attention to the far corner of the room. There, a woman of about sixty stood on a chair that looked too wobbly to stand on. While on tiptoe, the lady leaned precariously toward the picture window in an effort to water a plant suspended from the ceiling. Tabatha ran across the room as the chair started to rock forward on its front legs. She grasped its back and held it firm to the floor. Then, when the woman finished, Tabatha held her hand as she stepped down from the chair.

"Oh, thank you dear," the woman said as she brushed imagined wrinkles from her long paisley dress.

The woman looked like the epitome of every Hollywood grandmother that ever lived. Considering the room, the voice and her appearance, Tabatha briefly thought she *might* be the incarnation of every grandmother who ever lived. "You shouldn't be up on the chair like that; you could fall and break something." Tabatha's words were out before she could stop them.

"Why, thank you for the worry." She patted Tabatha on the arm. "And yes, you're right; someday I will fall and break a hip, all so I can give that silly fern some water. But you know, my

husband gave me that fern one month before he passed and no matter how I try to ignore it, it's always there. As though Frank was there with it, watching me. So, every third day or so I climb up to give it a drink. And, promise not to tell." She held Tabatha's arm and winked. "I sometimes talk to Frank while I'm up there."

"You seem like a nice young lady, why don't you sit down so we can chat." Tabatha sat in one of two high back chairs covered with thick velour cushions. "My name is Doris Schubert. I'd like you to call me Doris, but I'm told we have to keep proper business etiquette. You can call me Mrs. Schubert." She held out her hand and the two women were instantly friends.

Tabatha felt an unusual ache in her jaw and lower facial muscles. She lamented it as another mystery pain, one of many. Then, as though somebody whispered in her ear, she realized the truth. Her face hurt from the smile now affixed there. "How do you do? My name is Tabatha Lancaster."

"Tabatha, oh what a wonderful name. I remember a television show about a cute young witch and her family. Well, her daughter's name was also Tabatha. If I ever had a daughter, I think I would have named her Tabatha. How can I help you today?"

"I'm looking for a job." Tabatha held up the now wrinkled application "I'm willing to do anything."

"Oh, I don't think it will come to that, willing to do anything that is." Doris's eyes were bright and her expression happy. She accepted the application and started to read.

"You haven't been working for the past five years? Were you starting a family? Doris asked as she read the application.

Without knowing why, Tabatha said, "Yes, my little boy is five now. His name is Jason. He's a wonderful boy."

"We were never blessed," Doris said. "Who watched your boy while you went to night school? Your husband?"

"Yes... Andy. He's a big help, and very understanding. He knew I wanted to go to college. He watches our son while I worked on my degree."

"And what are you studying?"

Animal Husbandry came to Tabatha's mind. She quickly flushed the thought as bordering on ridiculous. Then Geology popped into her head, again she pushed it from her mind. Acupuncture, no. Vet, no. Carpentry, did they teach that in college? She began to sweat when she realized she was sitting there with a blank look on her face.

"Well, I... I haven't really decided on a degree. I'm just taking general courses."

Doris shook her head slowly. "Think you will want to give that little boy of yours a brother or sister any time soon?"

Tabatha lost the conversation. Then, as if hit by a firm piece of pine, "Oh, I don't think so." She

paused, "My husband died recently. That's why I need to find a job." She felt good when she thought of her response, then realized her answer left an opening for more questions, and Doris Schubert had no intentions of disappointing.

"Oh no. I'm so sorry dear. How did Peter lose his life, if you don't mind me asking?"

Now she had to make up another lie and keep it going until Doris seemed satisfied, or told her to move on. "He died in the line of duty. He was a police officer."

Doris nodded, her face a mask of sympathy, "Tragic. Simply tragic. Funny, though, I don't remember reading about your husband in the paper."

Tabatha could feel her story unraveling. "We're not from around here. I guess that's why you didn't see it in the paper."

Doris looked up from the application. "Tabatha?" she asked softly.

Tabatha bit her lower lip, "Yes?"

"It says on your application you lived at the same address for the past five years. Not recently moved here from out of town. I know the neighborhood of your address; it's not an area a police officer and his young family can afford. You said your husband's name is Andy, when I called him Peter, you didn't correct me. Also, on the application you put down that you had no children." She thought about adding, students at the local community college with the credits she

claimed were required to be matriculated. She decided not to embarrass her more and kept the last fact to herself.

She held back her tears. It hurt to be caught in a lie (well, maybe a few). Her embarrassment had been compounded by being caught by this sweet lady who made her smile for the first time in God knew how long. She took a deep breath, and then stood to leave.

"Now just hold on, young lady." Doris said when she realized Tabatha intended to leave. "Sit down now. Maybe we can talk."

Tabatha sat.

"You know, I don't have this job for nothing. Appearance aside, I've been at this for almost forty years and I do know what I'm doing. I'm a pretty good judge of people too, although I have been fooled a few times.

"When I was younger than you are now, I started working for Mr. Stanley Wallace, the owner of all these stores. He's a wonderful man; he hired me as his private secretary. We were both married to other people, and I guess you could say we became close.

"I made a mistake and so did he. Mistakes happen, am I right?

"To this day if I stepped in front of his wife's car, I think it would be my last mistake. Anyway, besides our friendship, we also worked well together. He put me in charge of hiring for the company. Two years ago, after my husband died, I

retired. Stanley said it would be nice if I worked, even if it were in a small way. He said it wasn't right to sit home in that big house, and if I thought about it, I suppose we still enjoy each other's company. And dear, he has been a comfort.

"So, here I am, in the store where it all started, and there you are. You might have made some mistakes. You lied on the application and to me. But I trust my intuition, and I have almost forty years of hiring the employees who have served the best interest of this company.

"We have an opening on the midnight shift stocking shelves. It's harder work than you have ever done; it's yours if you want it. We pay an honorable wage and expect our people to work hard." Doris paused and looked at Tabatha for a moment, scrutinizing her just one more time in order to confirm in her own mind that she had indeed made the right decision.

Tabatha could not wipe the smile off her face, nor could she keep the tears back. She shook her head, "Yes, I want the job."

Sometimes after work Tabatha drove for hours with no destination in mind. While driving she often thought of Darcy and cried. Other days her mind drifted to thoughts of the future, a future that never came into focus, but fear dwelt there, oh yes, there was always fear. A fear that had no basis in reality, and hid only dark thoughts where hope should be. And despite her best efforts not to linger

in that defused image of what might be, she went there anyway.

But today her thoughts were on nothing more urgent than where to get something to eat as she drove through the rolling Virginia, countryside. Thick oaks reached over the road from either side and created a canopy under which her Honda traversed. Distinct shadows and bright sunshine raced over her car; Tabatha felt like a blind person recently given the gift of sight. On this last week of August, the sun shone bright and summer lingered despite the hint of fall in the air.

Tabatha did not know what she wanted for lunch (or breakfast, she struggled to adjust to her new eating routine). She did not want the deli she passed or one of the many diners that seemed to appear every ten miles or so with the regularity of road kill. As she passed through one of the countless burgers, she saw it, an old-time ice cream parlor.

She bought a hot fudge and brownie sundae, and then sat on a park bench to eat. As she ate, her thoughts again focused on the recent past.

Tabatha said to herself, "When bad things happen, they happen in threes." She had heard the phrase often, and considered the solemn air of that silly conviction all too real when tragedy struck. Trite expressions of comfort were, for the most part, meaningless to Tabatha. She leaned toward the pragmatic with an emphasis on logic. Yet she recognized the good intentions of others trying to

make sense when the world turns upside-down and nobody can say why.

After Darcy died Tabatha's slant on the world, and her place in it, cantered precariously, she feared for her sanity if she let her mind linger on the subject. Thus, she shifted gears and counted the three good things that came to mind. She also felt hesitant to ponder these happenings for long. Her fear, to trigger some weird joke of fate. Build her hopes up, and then let's see how hard she can fall--again.

Despite the trepidation, she counted. Number one on her list, the medication her doctor prescribed, it seemed to be doing something. Although at times she had trouble discerning just what that something was. The side effects were real and more than an annoyance. Her mouth felt dry as sand, she had diarrhea one day, constipation for the next three and her vision had become blurry.

Nevertheless, she knew it helped. She found it difficult to put into words just how it helped, but it did. There were no more "blackouts" and the dreams that went along with those odd events were gone. On one level, a level not said out loud, she missed the strange dream and the power that accompanied her through battle. The medication also deadened the emotional pain that consumed every second of her existence.

Number two on the list, her new job. Doris Schubert said it would be the hardest job she ever

did. Doris didn't lie. Halfway through the third night Tabatha had made up her mind, she intended to quit.

That night, while driving to work, her period came a week early. The cramps made it difficult holding the car on the road. She had no Tampax and her arms, back and legs ached from the previous two nights. At 3:30 in the morning Tabatha worked on her knees stocking gallon jugs of Hellman's Mayonnaise on a bottom shelf. Each container felt heavier than the last. She was lonely and pain emanated from every inch of her body—she had enough.

When Tabatha looked up from her position on the floor, she noticed him standing there. He had olive skin and a thick mustache. She had noticed him several times with the other men working this God-awful shift. Her co-workers looked like a serious group of men. Most were middle age and none were friendly toward her. Yet they shared a subdued fellowship with each other, and despite not saying it aloud, it hurt not to be a part of the group, even if they were just middle-aged men.

"Hello lady, my name is Raymond Shake." He smiled, "I brought you tea, you look all done, here, here." He held the tea for her to take.

Sometimes the smallest things make life bearable, somebody holding the door at a convenience store, or a stranger offering a cup of tea. She felt like a fool. "Thank you. I need this

more than you know." Tabatha tried to stand but her body refused to move.

Raymond put the tea on a shelf then braced her under the arm and lifted. "Don't worry, it's to me happening all the time. Please, come with me to sit. My friends want to know you."

Tabatha sat with the men in the dirty break room. She watched and listened as they drank strong tea, turned the room blue with cigarette smoke and talked about their daughters and sons in college. Her co-workers were good men, and she felt shame for not approaching them first with a "hello" or a smile, or a nod of her head.

Tabatha thought herself above these men. She had a Master's degree in English, her co-workers barely spoke it. Yet they were kind, understanding, and the hardest working group of people she had ever known. Then one night, without fanfare, Tabatha became one of them at three-thirty in the morning over a cup of strong tea. She smiled inwardly and thought if Darcy could see me now.

Tabatha learned to sleep in the afternoon, that arrangement worked best for her internal clock. By the second week the constant pain eased. Her body adjusted to the physical aspect of her new life, and although the job's demands were harder than anything she ever experienced, in an odd way she loved it.

Number three on the list, her new apartment.
The same day Doris offered her a job

Tabatha found an apartment.

While eating dinner at the kitchen table, Tabatha searched for something to read. The only thing remotely readable had been the pile of bills sticking out of the napkin holder. There were more bills than napkins. Tabatha watched the pile grow over the last month. Some she looked at; most she shoved in the napkin holder until they began to resemble a strange new flower with peddles made of paper rectangles. Now she went through the envelopes one by one. The bills amounted to well beyond her means to pay, even with her new job. She wondered what happened to people who owed money and couldn't pay. Were they taken to court? Do they shut off the electric until every penny of the outstanding balance is paid? If she moved, could she get the power turned on without paying the old bill? She considered herself a

knowledgeable person, informed on politics, books and all things that comprised a civilized society. Why were these questions so hard to figure out?

The last envelope caught her attention it contained no bill. Tabatha leaned back in her chair and prepared to wing the, Publisher's Clearing House envelop into the garbage. Before letting go, she noticed something stuck to the gum on the flap.

The business card her doctor gave her.

The phone numbers were smeared with rubber gum. She pulled the card off, then tossed the envelope toward the garbage and missed.

Tabatha picked up her phone and called the first number.

The voice on the answering machine sounded female, husky and mature. For a reason she did not question, Tabatha's thoughts drifted to the ridiculous. The voice sounded aged, mellowed. Then, her ambling mind made the next leap. She heard Orson Welles, for California red wine. His voice resonated thick and rich, "We will serve no wine before it's time." The last beep sounded on the answering machine. Time to leave the message.

Her mind went blank, except for residual Orson Welles.

Tabatha had been good at leaving messages on answering machines, not like some of her friends who could hardly pronounce their names under the pressure. She had made fun of those people. Now, after the sultry voiced prompt, and Orson, and the people she made fun of, her mind went blank. A panicked rush compounded her befuddlement. She forced the words. "Ah.... My name is Tabatha. My doctor said. I'm calling for... Oh, never mind." Tabatha knew what she wanted to say, what she needed to say, but when it came time to putting thoughts into words, everything went blank between her tongue and brain.

"I'm here, don't hang up," came the same voice as on the answering machine. "Tabatha, yes, Arthur said you might call."

Tabatha wanted to talk to somebody, but when the time came, she wished she had not found

the card. "The Doctor gave me your number, he said...."

"That maybe we can help?"

Tabatha closed her eyes. "Yes, he said you might be able to help."

"What specifically do you need help with? And did Arthur explain our assemblage of characters? Who we are, what we do."

"The doctor said you were friends. Gay and lesbian friends who get together and do things." Tabatha felt uncomfortable and didn't know why.

A hearty laugh came over the phone. "Yes love, we do things. Sorry, I don't mean to be rude by laughing without you. If I may introduce myself, my name is Margaret Simmions."

Tabatha knew the name and searched her memory trying to remember from where. She drew a blank.

Margaret continued. "Arthur said you might need a place to live. Did he tell you I was his babysitter when he was a child? No, of course he didn't say that. He said you could use a friend and a place to live. He also said you were cute, but what does he know from cute. Anyway, my mother owns a large house in a good neighborhood. There are two efficiencies on the ground floor. One is empty."

Tabatha remembered where she knew the name, Margaret Simmions. The shopping cart at Food King has plastic frames with advertising for local businesses; Margaret had been smiling at Tabatha for the better part of a year through the

center of one of those ads. She looked in her late fifties. A loud red dress covered her sizable body, and topping the outfit, a large floppy hat that had always struck Tabatha as somewhat comical.

Margaret owned her own real estate agency. "I found a job today and I don't have much money."

"Let's not talk of money. For the moment it won't be an issue. We're having a get together a week from tonight at the doctor's house. He just happens to live across from my mother's house. Why don't you come? You can meet everybody and have a look at the place. We all bring our favorite covered dish. Will you be there?"

It didn't take any thought at all. "Of course, I'll be there."

Margaret talked a few more minutes, and then gave Tabatha the address.

After finishing her mid-morning debauch of hot fudge sundae, Tabatha felt downright guilty. Her guilt had been potent, but her defensive ability even more potent. She rationalized all the calories as balancing out her night of manual labor. The lie fit her comfort level, and at the moment, that's all that mattered. As she dropped the empty container into a garbage can, the building across the street caught her attention. The words "Steel City" were hand painted in large red letters on a piece of primer coated plywood. The sign hung above a sizable window. Tabatha considered the structure for a minute and concluded it started life as a

grocery store.

Although the lighting made it hard to see, she could make out a man in the window on a machine doing leg exercises. Tabatha crossed the street, entered the Steel City Gym and her life changed forever.

The front door hung heavy on its hinges with a warp that made it difficult to open. Tabatha pushed with her shoulder and the door reluctantly complied. The threshold linoleum had worn away, now the pine substrate greeted the customer, along with dark paneling that hadn't been cleaned since the seventies. The sound of steel hitting steel could be heard as it echoed down the long store front. Tabatha thought the sound reminiscent of China plates being removed from her mother's hutch.

She stood in the front of the same window she saw from across the street. There were five men working out, and no women, a fact that meant something, but at the moment she didn't know what.

The year before she took a tour of LA Fitness. It had been another of her self-improvement kicks. Nothing came of the tour. At the time Tabatha did not articulate why she never went back. Now she thought about that gym, as compared to what she saw in front of her, and the words congealed into an opinion.

The people who worked at LA Fitness, along with the customers, were clean. As ridiculous as it sounded, everyone's teeth looked luminescent. It

reminded her of the movie, Dodge Ball and all of the clients at Globo Gym. At LA Fitness, everybody wore spandex. They said the right things with clever inference to all the correct issues of the day and always smiled with an eagerness that felt too sweet to digest. Some walked the treadmill and watched soap operas. Others sat on machines and stared at their phones as though hypnotized.

Now she stood on the threshold of Steel City. Hanging florescent lights swayed from the ceiling on long wires. Some of the bulbs were blown and the ventilation smelled nonexistent. The smell of sweat and the grittiness of those doing the sweating had a power all its own. One man wore work boots and a thick leather belt around his waist. Another went shirtless, while another had on ripped sweats.

Toward the back of the room, a man of about thirty worked on the bench press. He had dark skin and long hair that hung wet with sweat. His slim waist, coupled with the hardest body Tabatha had ever seen, made the scene irresistible. She could not look away. Another man of equal physical caliber stood at the top of the bench and shouted to the man on his back. They worked as a team. They pushed each other. They were not concerned with appearance, they were concerned in what they were doing, a concept Tabatha liked.

"Are you from the city?"

Tabatha turned and saw a large man sitting

at a green metal desk in an alcove to the left of where she came in. He looked like the guy on television who sold mufflers for Midas. Although the desk and chair were of normal size, they seemed diminished, more like child's furniture as compared to his bulk. "...Sure, I'm from the city," Tabatha said.

"Well, you won't find any violations here. And you can see, nothing's going on that shouldn't be going on at any gym." The man took off his glasses and stood. "So go ahead, do your walk through. Be quick about it."

"I think you have me confused with somebody else. When you asked if I was from the city, I thought you meant did I live in the city. I don't work for the city." Tabatha looked up at the man. Under other circumstances she would be intimidated, not only by the man's size, but also by the unfamiliar situation. Yet she didn't feel anything like fear. As a matter of fact, she felt more at ease than she had a right to. "The gym, I'm looking for a gym. You know, to work out in." She made a feeble attempt to feint working out by moving her arms up and down over her head. She wondered if she looked foolish in his eyes. She knew the answer—yes.

For the first time the big man smiled. "Sorry." He held out his hand, "My name is Theodore Dukes, most folks call me Teddy. This is my place. And don't take offense for me saying, but you don't look like the normal customer I get

here."

Tabatha held out her hand and watched with concern as she lost it in the huge black hand that grasped it. Neither the man, nor the situation gave her reason to fear. However, a concern of having her hand accidentally crushed by this man felt real enough. "Tabatha Lancaster, nice to meet you." She took her hand back. Luckily, no bones were broken.

"You say you're looking for a gym, that's good. Everybody should keep in shape. I'm not one to be pushing away business, but you don't look like you'd be happy here. We got mostly men here who don't have nice manners, if you get my meaning." Teddy motioned with his head toward the back of the room.

"I've seen LA Fitness, there's something about it I didn't like." Tabatha shrugged her shoulders as if to imply it was as much a mystery to her. "Anyway, I'm looking for a gym and yours doesn't seem that bad."

Teddy took a deep breath, "Don't let it be said I ever turned away a paying customer. You *do* have money, don't you?"

"Absolutely I have money." Tabatha smiled as she slid her pocketbook strap off her shoulder and went for her checkbook.

Teddy leaned across the desk and took a clipboard down from the wall. "Here, take this form and fill it out. You going to be paying by the day, week, or month? Paying by the month is the

cheapest, and the rate is good, fifteen a month."

Tabatha laughed aloud. "Oh, sorry. I don't mean to be rude. LA Fitness wanted forty bucks a month." Tabatha leaned on the desk as she filled out the one-page form. "Why did you think I worked for the city?" Tabatha asked without taking her head up from the form.

"It's a long problem I been having with the city."

"So, tell me what the problem is, maybe I can help." Tabatha didn't know why she wanted to know. At first her question felt like friendly chit chat. But then, after she asked, she felt she really wanted to know. She had to know.

Teddy snorted. "Hell, don't think nobody can help. The problem goes back longer than I been here, and I been here ten years." Although Teddy had spoken of his ongoing battles with the city many times, to many of his friends, he never put the situation into historical perspective.

"This town is no different than a thousand other small towns across the country, I know, I been there. Before I opened this gym, I was a boxer. Not a great one, but I wasn't all that bad. I traveled cross country more than once during my career. What happened here happened all over.

"Sometime in the past thirty years all the business that brought folks into town moved out to the malls. Malls are nice, I been there, too. But they are hell on small towns." Teddy walked to the door and propped it open with a weight. "So now

all the stores are out at the mall; all the ones worthwhile to anybody who has money anyway and stores like the one you standing in sat empty. The apartments above the stores sat empty. Who wants to live in a town without business? Then comes the dollar stores to fill the empty holes. The liquidators, Jesus at bargain prices, specialty shops with handmade do-dads, small shops that come and go. None of them get enough business to stay open. People move in that have no work because the apartments are dirt cheap. You know what I mean?"

Tabatha stopped writing on the form, shook her head in understanding. "Yes, I understand. Please, go on."

"Like I said, I've been here for years. Seen a lot of bad things go down in this community. Drug abuse, shoot outs. You name it, it's been here.

"And here's my gym." Teddy raised his massive arms.

"Almost all my business is young men. In a town of drug dealers, crime and nobody having money, that combination can spell problems. I tried to keep on top, couldn't do it alone. There were punks right out my door selling drugs. Wouldn't be surprised if it went on in the locker room, too. That's why I don't have no locker rooms. So, if you looking for a place to change, don't.

"My business became a hangout for troubled kids. It got so bad that when the city decided to get tough on crime, they decided to get tough on me.

Five inspectors came in, went through the building and found fifteen pages of things I had to fix. They were right, the buildings in bad shape. When I found somebody to fix the place up and bring it to code, the estimate for repairs was twenty-thousand dollars. I don't have the money. I've done some of the work myself, but I'm no carpenter. If you look close, you'd still find things that need fixing."

Tabatha signed the form, and a check for one month's membership. "The city comes down hard on you. You tried talking to them? The mayor I mean, city officials. People in position who could help."

Teddy picked up the form and began looking it over without answering Tabatha's question.

"Okay, I'll tell you what," Tabatha said as she picked up her pocketbook. "I paid for one month's membership. If I like your place, I'll get more time, what I really want is a trainer." She cleared her throat and looked at her shoes as she spoke.

Teddy continued looking over the form without answering.

"If I can help you with the city, get somebody to give you relief, anything to take the pressure off. Will you train me? I mean seriously train me."

Teddy shook his head. "Sure, you get the city to cut me a break and I'll train you. Hell, I'll make you look like one of those ladies you see on YouTube. You know, the bodybuilders."

She wanted to shout and say YESSSS! She didn't know why she felt excited to have a promise from a stranger and a bargain she had no idea how to fulfill. Whatever drove her on had its own agenda, and she didn't mind going along for the ride. Despite Teddy's reference to the bodybuilders on YouTube being in jest, the image did have appeal.

Chapter 9

For most Americans, the year 1953 had been an auspicious time.

The golden age of television painted primitive black and white images that held the country enthralled to slapstick comedy and commercials featuring dancing packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes. Ike sat in the White House, white flight hadn't been coined, and Newburgh, New York, was voted "All American City".

Broadway, Newburgh's main thoroughfare, runs west to east and conforms to a steep hill that ends at the banks of the Hudson River. The street's average width is 130 feet. People traveled from all over the county to shop and walk the clean picturesque sidewalks, or stay in one of the two modern hotels overlooking the Hudson. Business prospered and the view of the river stood spectacular. Brownstones with rich looking oak floors and ornate scroll work grew up around the district and provided homes for the most influential people of the county.

By 2023, a change had befallen the once thriving city. A change so dramatic that Newburgh's very name now brought to mind an

image of crime, decay and despair. Stores, where men and women once gathered, stand empty. Burned out shells serve to ordain physical confirmation that society had thrived, and now few people wait for the renaissance and fewer still remembered how it looked in 1953.

The new inhabitants of the hotels pay their rent through the office of Social Service. The smell of stale grease, old food and garbage wafts throughout dingy halls and serves to remind those who walk there to move along. Gangs of young men divided the city for drug sales and fight over the best corners to hawk their product. In seventy years, Newburgh went from the best society had to offer, to aged decay.

On August 27, the same day Tabatha met Theodore Dukes, William Fennerman plodded over an uneven blue slate sidewalk with the deliberate caution reserved for the very old, which he counted himself among. He could not remember how he came to Newburgh, at the moment the how didn't seem important. His priority above all else, watching the ground in front of him for hidden hazards. And what he saw, he did through alien eyes. Eyes that belonged to a new category of life, one that lived below the radar of mainstream humanity.

He carried the bag of groceries clutched tight to his bony chest. Gnarled fingers protested the simple task as he struggled to grip the heavy

food. William walked stooped and slow. It took forty minutes to traverse the three blocks from Broadway, where he did his shopping, to his rented room on the top floor of a rundown brownstone. There had been a time when he could run twenty miles then make love to his wife. Now his feet were too heavy for the simplest of tasks, even short walks quickly turned into marathons of pain endurance.

As he walked, his thoughts drifted to things not sought by conscience effort. Like a balloon floating on the whims of a freshening storm, his mind traveled to wherever it wanted and William gladly climbed aboard for the ride. Today he thought about nothing, and everything.

After eighty years William still mourned his wife and thought of her daily. But there was more to his despair than loneliness. Yoshi's death had been the catalyst to a cannonade of emotions already on fire, and it had taken the ensuing years to realize the real reason he felt ready to end his life. The world changed faster than his ability to adjust.

William held the unique perspective of witnessing history firsthand. For much of his five-hundred years he fought as a mercenary. Some causes he championed were righteous, some not. Predictability, politics would prevail as one aristocracy stepped aside for another.

When society replaced ignorance with enlightenment, William followed the sciences as

they explored the natural world and hoped one day his own existence explained through the new discipline. The down side to enlightenment was the more humanity embraced science, the more technology it developed for killing. World War I had been the last conflict William signed on for. It left a festering hole in his soul that refused to heal.

"What ya got in da bag old dude?"

William did not see the two young men approach. He considered responding, but only briefly. He walked on. The two were children, they were an annoyance. They were not worthy a response.

"Yo, my man asked you a question. Didn't ya mama tell you it's impolite not to answer when somebody be talkin' at you?" The shorter of the two teens dropped behind William, then grabbed the old man's shoulder and spun him around in one fierce movement.

Years of waiting for age to remove him naturally from existence had brought physical ruin. Every movement, every twist, yielded a new level of pain. Yet his mind felt clear. Maybe not as clear as it had been, but clear enough to remember a day when his gaze alone would send these two packing. But that day was long ago. Today his joints ached and his respiration labored for air. William cursed his choice to wait for death.

Like an ex-smoker longing for one more drag on one more cigarette, he craved to touch either of these two children and tap their seemingly

endless well of life. But he did not. He had come too far in his journey toward death to start over now. By allowing one act of weakness and thereby ridding himself of this wretched existence emerged as an all too tempting thought.

"I don't have anything you want." His retort sounded feeble to his own ears.

"What you got we might want? You got some'n, I know ya do. All old fucks got some'n," said the shorter teen. He reached over and peered into the bag. After a moment he stepped back pushing William's bag to the ground as he went. "Fuck. You right `bout that old fucker. Bag for shit, I want the bracelet you got. Now!"

The word hate had always seemed extreme for William's vocabulary. Nevertheless, the word felt woefully inadequate for the way he felt about being old. Never in his life had he been so taken advantage of. When his mind connected and told his body to move, it refused. Yes, hate took on a new meaning. He felt as though he were in a new category of living things. Now, instead of being an active member of the world around him, the best he could do was drift through life like a piece of flotsam waiting to come to rest in the graveyard of all things. He again cursed himself for allowing age to overtake him, and he cursed one last time for being fearful of the two who now threatened him.

In an instant he decided to end his slow journey toward death and take from either of the

two donors now presenting themselves—he would show the boy his gold bracelet.

The teen standing behind William reached for his pistol after his partner pushed the bag of groceries from the old man's hands. Without hesitating he brought the butt of the automatic down as hard as he could on the back of the man's head.

As his assailant followed through with the blow, William fell to the sidewalk and the gun discharged.

In less than two seconds, Francis "Spooky" Smith, had cracked the skull of an old man who meant nothing to him and put a nine-millimeter round clear through the thickest part of his cousin's neck.

At first nothing existed and the emptiness of his world rivaled the vastness of the universe.

Then, with the deliberateness of a forming fetus, William's perception of reality grew. He still lived. He had flesh, his heart beat. Yet physically he existed as a shadow of his former self. He lay close to death and could smell it in the air, the stench of old musty seat cushions lost to decay lingered on his senses, settling in his nose, the taste, real and palatable. Death waited.

William had not bargained for this.

He retreated into a new province of reality where events of his life drifted before him in vignettes of perfect clarity. In a world where time

itself has no meaning, thoughts congealed, and despite not having control of body, he had a semblance of consciousness and there sought comfort through memories.

In the years he spent wandering the earth, William never found another person with ability similar to his. Although stories of vampires and ageless warriors were an amusement, he knew those creatures did not exist and often wondered if the stories were gleaned from his own exploits. He thought maybe they were. Thus, he had no name for what he did. Although crude, for the first two-hundred years he thought of it as taking and giving.

Over time, his ability to intellectualize abstracts grew more sophisticated. Accordingly, his ability to understand his power grew. As the world matured, as civilizations gained an understanding of the physical world, so did William. But as a boy, life moved simpler, cleaner. William smiled inwardly at the thought: no matter what age a man might be, life always tasted sweetest during his youth.

In his private world, William looked down upon a peaceful scene. The landscape turned into a lush mosaic of his life; a life laid out before him in finest detail. Despite being a prisoner in a broken body, his mind traveled through five-hundred years of his own history. William felt the wind through his hair as a fine autumn sun warmed his body. He passed over water.

William called Gozo Island home. It sat small and rocky in the azure clear waters of the Mediterranean Sea, just north of Malta. Most days were hot and sunny on his island, and in the spring of 1468, William was born.

He lived with his mother, father and older brother Edward, in the town of Mgarr. Mgarr, the largest port on the island, provided his family a decent living. William's father worked as a fisherman and boat builder, thus his two sons learned to build boats and fish. They dove for sponge and octopus along the coast and fished for mackerel in deeper waters.

Like most brothers, William competed with Edward. Who could run faster? Who could hold his breath longer? Edward won these competitions by virtue of being older. Besides being stronger, William admitted that Edward was also smarter than he. Edward had all the answers. Although William found this fact a source of irritation, he loved his brother very much.

At sixteen, William saved his brother's life.

On a mid-September morning the brothers dove for sponge off the north shore of the island. The sun and calm water enhanced visibility under the surface to two-hundred feet. When William returned to the surface, he threw his bag of sponges into the boat and climbed aboard. A moment later Edward, appeared on the other side of the boat with a similar bag, he too climbed aboard.

"Edward, did you see it?" William asked in a conspirator's tone as he slid across the seat toward his brother.

The brothers fantasized about what it might be. It could be a ship, and if it were, it looked very old. Coral had covered the structure and left a hollowed-out center. They looked into the cavern from a small opening on the white sand bottom. The grotto loomed long and dark on the inside, with rays of light piercing the darkness from the top. Looking down from the surface the coral appeared no different than any other reef, but from the side, the outline of a ship became visible, at least to two teenage boys.

Over the years they had found things on the bottom, Roman jars, mostly. All sponge divers found things on the bottom. And their father reminded the boys more than once that serious men paid it no mind. The old statues and jars had no value. You could not eat stone. Sponges and fish were why they were there and they needed their minds on their work.

But William and Edward were not serious-minded men; they were two teenage brothers looking for adventure.

Edward pulled his bag close. "Come here little brother, look what I found." Edward held up a small statue of a man kneeling. The kneeling man had his right hand extended as though he were reaching for something. The man looked strong and fierce, and at the same time almost fluid in his

motion. The statue had been carved from a black stone that, despite being pulled from the sandy bottom, still looked iridescent.

William turned it over in his hand and studied it closely. "You know what father will say if he finds we've been picking things up off the bottom." He gave the statue back to his brother. "What do you think is in the cave?"

Edward did not answer at first. He put the statue back in his bag then began to set out lunch. "I think we should take a look and find out. And you don't have to tell father. Understand?" William nodded his head. He understood.

The brothers attempted to eat, but their excitement got in the way. Fantasies of gold and precious stones were on their minds, not bread and goat cheese. Edward finished his lunch, tossed a rope to William and said, "Only one of us should go in the cave, the other will wait by the opening. Whoever goes in will have the rope tied around him. And we need to make the opening larger" After further thought he added, "I'll go first."

William accepted his brother's assessment of the situation without question. As long as they were going, that's what mattered.

Each had a knife for cutting sponges from the rocky bottom and a cloth bag to hold them. Now, William added a long rope coiled over his right shoulder. Taking several deep breaths, they slipped under the water's surface. They dived for sponges from an early age and could stay under

water for more than three minutes. They covered the distance to the bottom, about thirty feet, in less than thirty seconds and found themselves at the opening of the cave with three minutes of air left.

A strong current on that side of the island forced them to hold the coral with one hand as they worked to make the opening larger. William pulled the sand away from the bottom of the opening while Edward chipped away at the coral with his knife. Then they returned to the surface.

"I think the opening is big enough now. This time I'll go in," Edward said as the two bobbed in the water alongside the boat.

William also thought the opening looked big enough. He smiled and touched his brother's hand. "Look toward the bottom in the sand. Sift it through your fingers, that's where you'll find valuable things. And remember, gold holds its color underwater no matter how long it's been on the ocean floor, so keep your eyes open." William hesitated, then added, "Be careful, Edward. I don't want to go home without you; I couldn't face our parents alone."

"You worry like a girl," Edward said. After a moment he put his hand on the back of William's neck and pulled him close. When their foreheads touched, he said, "Who wants to live forever, anyway?"

Once again, the brothers took several large breaths, and then slipped below the surface.

It took longer than expected for Edward to

work his way through the hole. The opening looked large enough. Sharp coral cut small furrows into Edward's chest and hips. William tied the rope on an outcropping of coral to his left and peered through the opening. It looked dark except for the few shafts of light coming down from the top.

William's excitement grew; it would be his turn to explore the cave next. After two minutes he became concerned for his brother's safety. Time had come; both needed to return to the surface. Edward would need time to work his way through the opening, maybe too much time. Then, only moments before real panic set in, an arm came through the opening and his brother's smiling face behind it. In his outstretched hand, Edward held a gold bracelet.

William took the bracelet from his brother then motioned for him to start through the opening they were both smiling. William backed away to give Edward room, and as he did, slid the bracelet over his right hand.

The bracelet looked as though it were made for him. William held it up toward the surface and the light glinted off the metal despite being thirty feet under water. He turned toward his brother to show how right it looked on his arm and discovered Edward stuck fast in the opening. William's lungs felt like they were going to burst, and if his lungs felt like they were about to explode, his brother's condition had to be worse. Edward had made the larger effort on this dive; he

did the work. William shot for the surface, took four deep breaths then dove back down. Edward smiled at William's return, waved and without panic, let his air go. His body convulsed then stopped.

William fought an urge to call his brother's name while he chipped at the coral with his knife. He worked feverishly at the sharp stone that held Edward in a death hug. At first there was no progress, his knife only bounced off the stone. Then, little pieces began to chip off in cloudy bursts that obscured his vision. He concentrated his efforts on a coral spike that held Edward like a fish on a hook. Finally, the stone cracked.

Holding his brother by the shoulders, William placed a foot on either side of the opening and pulled. The two were free, on their way to the surface. He wondered how long it had been since Edward drew a breath, and then pushed the thought from his mind.

He did not cry, although he wanted to. Instead, he focused. William climbed aboard while holding his brother, then grabbed Edward under his arms and pulled. Although William was big for his age, he did not have the strength of a man. Every muscle in his body strained to haul the body on board. William had no choice; he had to lift his brother or die trying. He threw his head back and screamed, not for help, but of rage and frustration. Edward's lifeless body fell into the boat between the two seats like a worthless bonito.

He forgot the fear of returning home without his brother. Compared to this grief, his previous concern now felt insignificant. He sat next to Edward in shallow water that sloshed with the boat's rocking and cradled his head. People died, he knew that, but this was different. He felt as though a part of him had ripped out. He held Edward and cried. Then he pleaded with God to send his brother back, when that didn't work, he promised everything to whatever force in the universe capable of doing such a simple task. And still his brother's body remained lifeless. William caressed his brother, then shut his own eyes and fell asleep. And during his sleep dreamed about building a boat with his father and brother.

When the dream ended William opened his eyes and saw Edward sitting across from him, breathing and awake. At the time, enlightened contemplation of the unknown rarely happened. Things unexplained were blamed on God, the weather, nature, your ancestors or even bewitchment. Whatever the reason, when something happened out of the ordinary, good or bad, it was accepted. Neither brother talked of the incident, ever.

That day, William had grown a year older. The difference between sixteen and seventeen seemed slight, the change went unnoticed. And what looked like death must have been something else. That's what William told himself, that's what he convinced himself as true. They never discussed

the incident with their father, thus, he never found out about the gold bracelet. For William, the notion of unspoken gratitude felt right, Edward wanted him to have the bracelet. William painted it black and wore it all the time.

William's memory brought him forward in time and he looked down on a merchant ship under full sail on route to the new world. His heart beat faster when he remembered this was his first crossing of the Atlantic. He came in for a closer look, and as he did, pain in his left arm diverted his attention.

The pressure, like a hand firmly holding him back made William look down. He noticed a black cloth inflating in time to the pressure. Then his eyes followed a black tube to a woman. A woman who looked as surprised at him, as he at her. She looked stunning, and for a moment, William thought she might be an angel come to escort him to wherever people went when they died. She had a smile he recognized as natural and easy and her skin looked soft and flawless, except for a small dimple high on her forehead. Understanding came slow, like stepping into a darkened theater and catching a movie in the middle. He put together her white uniform with the blood pressure machine and came up with nurse. His nurse. He smiled and thought she had returned one. Then she pushed a handful of red hair away from her face and they both locked eyes for what felt like a long time. William blinked and she vanished. Once again, he

sailed over the valleys and peaks that represented his life. He tried to decide where to go next and for a moment wished he could travel from his past and into hers. The nurse with the face of an angel, the one with the understanding eyes.

Chapter 10

It seemed a simple task, something done thousands, no, millions of times every day, all over the country. And done by people with less ability than her; one foot up, then the other. Joanne Arnet repeated in her mind a harsh cadence as each step amplified the throbbing in her lower legs. Her physical therapist said there would be pain, but he didn't say how much. On a good day, just the left leg hurt, today, both legs throbbed. It felt like an unseen hand was slowly pulling the tendons in her ankle away from the bone, and it took her breath away.

Along with her cadence, another voice whispered, all this pain for one stupid flight of stairs. For God's sake, I'm only twenty-nine, this shouldn't be happening. With her left hand she pulled herself up the cold iron railing, with her right, she clutched two bags of groceries.

At the top of the stairs, she turned and tried to catch her breath. Below her, parked directly in front of the sidewalk and blocking its entrance, sat the uber she just emerged from.

Hedges had blocked the door behind the driver, thus, Joanne emerged from the vehicle into

traffic. She considered complaining, but that didn't seem an option. Fatigue slowed her ability to put words together crisply, and if she had to verbally spar with this guy, she knew she would be skewered. Passing around the front of the car she gave the driver a sideways glance. He held a clipboard and thumbed through its pages. What could possibly be so important that he needed to do it now, she thought, and could it wait long enough to give me a hand?

She stood on the top landing and pulled hard for breath. Despite her effort air didn't go where it needed. Then Joanne placed her bags on the counter and resigned herself to the pain of two more trips. It looked obvious the driver had no intention of moving from the car.

Joanne leaned through the car door, took two more bags and left the last two. Normally she could take all four at once and not think anything of it, but these were not normal times. The tendons in her heels and the muscles in her calves burned as though on fire. Despite the day being cool, sweat erupted on her forehead.

When he noticed his fare was half way up the stairs the driver leaned out the window and yelled, "You ah... maybe want me to put those last two bags on the sidewalk there for ya lady?"

Joanne stopped and leaned forward from the waist. She put her forehead on her left arm while still griping the railing and said, "Oh hell. You look like you had a hard day. Sit, relax. I'll get it." At

that moment the whole category of male life as related to the planet in general ranked no higher in her estimation than that of a garden slug. Fuck them all she thought.

"What a gentleman you are. Helping a lady bring her heavy bags up a flight of stairs. And especially when you can see she's not feeling well. Please, don't get up. Sit. Let me get those last two bags."

Joanne straightened, the pain showed on her face and turned in time to see Sharon lean through the car door and grab the last two bags from the back seat. "Oh. Sharon, bless you." The two women trudged up the stairs together.

Once on the landing Sharon went first and held the door. "Would you believe I was in this part of town and thought I'd drop in?" Sharon sucked in to let Joanne pass.

Joanne put her two bags on the counter then dropped into a chair. "Sharon, I honestly don't care why you're here. I'm glad to see you."

Sharon peeked through the bags, and then found what she wanted. She took two Diet Cokes from a six-pack, handed one to Joanne, then dropped into the matching chair. "Okay, if it's honest talk we're doing, then I have to admit, I wasn't just driving by. I came to see how you were doing and to offer my help, if you want it."

Joanne knew her friend did not come all the way from central Massachusetts, to New York, for any other reason. It had only been four days since

she left Pine Brook, but in those four days she hadn't spoken to anybody other than her mother and the uber driver, and she didn't count her brief exchange of sarcasm with the uber guy as conversation. So, if her social worker wanted to stop by and see how things were going, great. She opened the soda and took a big swallow. Despite being warm, it hit the spot.

"Those stairs are a killer," Joanne said. "The day I moved in, mom and I went up and down so many times we lost count. Didn't know I had so much stuff. My legs are still hurting." Joanne rubbed her right calf and paused before she spoke again. She still had difficulty translating her thoughts into words, "I want to thank you for helping the way you did. I mean, the way you and the doctor talked to mom. And for everything else of course. But mostly for the way you helped with my mother. Maybe under other circumstances I could have told her why I didn't want to live with her. Please don't think we have a poor relationship, because we get along well. It's just, sometimes she can be—overbearing." Joanne smiled and threw up her hands. "I love my mother, I really do. But if I moved in with her, I know I'd never be able to get out again. After a year or two we would become dependent on each other." Joanne shook her head. "I must sound like the world's most ungrateful daughter. My mother hands me the money to set up house, and I'm saying such things.

"Sometimes I feel ashamed. Everything I

say is about me." Joanne turned toward the window as a lump swelled in her throat. Her eyes began to turn red. "All I want is something for me. Why do I always feel so guilty?"

After taking a sip of soda, Sharon leaned over and put the can on the hardwood floor between her feet. "Of course, it isn't too much to ask. People do it all the time. Don't be so hard on yourself. Do you hear me?" Joanne nodded slowly.

"There are people who take from the time they're born until the time they die and don't think anything of it. For them, it's the natural order of things. People like us have a hard time with that concept because of our work ethic. We try and live our lives according to some higher notion that people should earn what they have. Therefore, when you beat yourself up because your mom helped with your rent, or you're feeling guilty you aren't living with her; try to put the notion into perspective. I think you made the right choice. If you moved in with her, you *would* become dependent on each other. That's the way things are. You don't need to thank me, it's what I do"

The words, "It's what I do" struck Joanne as odd. Obviously, it's what she did, but Joanne also knew (or at least hoped) that if circumstances were different Sharon and her would be friends. It felt better to think of her as a friend. "You never said what happened to my husband. At least I can't remember if you said what happened to him. Do the police know where he is now?"

Sharon had no problem talking about difficult subjects, whatever they were. Nevertheless, this subject made her uncomfortable. "The police don't know where he is. After he hurt you, he walked to the bus station and bought a ticket to New York City. Once in the City, he purchased a ticket for Florida. The bus driver said he remembered a guy looking like your husband getting on his bus, but he doesn't remember him getting off. That much is confirmed, he did get on a bus. Somewhere between the City and Florida, he got off. The detective who calls said their guess is New York City. But he could be anywhere in the country." Sharon took a card out of her pocketbook. "Now that you are on your own maybe you should have this." Sharon handed the card to Joanne. "It's the detective's name and phone number. I intended to give it to you before now. In the last month of your treatment, he didn't call." She cleared her throat. "If we're still being honest, I forgot to call him and let him know you were discharged. Maybe you might want to handle this business on your own now. He seems like a nice guy and I know he would be glad to hear from you."

Joanne took the card. "I'll call him." She flipped the card with her index finger. "Okay, I'll call him tomorrow." What she said sounded like a definitive statement, but it didn't feel definitive. On the surface, she told herself she would call the detective and find out all she could regarding her

husband. Underneath, down where decisions are made, something stirred. She didn't want to call. The connection between knowing about and dealing with her husband were the same. At the moment, she was not ready to deal with anything other than the pain in her legs.

"Hello, you with me?"

"Sure, just zoned out there for a second."

Joanne smiled and now she wished her social worker had not stopped by.

"I know what you're feeling; at least I think I know. You don't want to call him. Well, you are an adult; you can make decisions for yourself. But I strongly urge you to call him. Force yourself."

Both women looked out the window.

"Would you like some good news?" Sharon asked.

Joanne snorted into her hand. "Is there such a thing? Yes, anything. I'll take any good news you have."

"About two years ago we had a woman come to Pine Brook from this area. Her name's Dory Leatherbury, and yes that's her real name." Sharon began to write on a small pad she removed from her pocketbook. "Anyway, Dory was in a car accident on her way to work, that's how she came to be with us. I swear if it weren't for car accidents, we would not have enough business to stay open. Sometimes I'm almost afraid to get on the road after the things I see." Sharon looked up from her pad and saw Joanne motioning with her hand to continue. "Dory is director of a local nursing

home. I called her the other day about you, and don't worry, I didn't mention any names. Just that I knew a good nurse who needed a job. You are a good nurse I assume?"

Joanne shrugged her shoulders. "At one time."

"She knows me, and she knows the person I'm sending was at Pine Brook. It's a small nursing home attached to the county hospital. About one-hundred beds, I think. If you wanted to give it a try, they might be willing to give you a try. Of course, you're on your own during the interview." Sharon ripped the pad's top page off and gave it to Joanne. "Okay, here it is. Call them if you want." Sharon paused, then, "For people in your circumstance the midnight shift might be a consideration. There are fewer people around and the day-to-day pressure is less. Just until you get back into the swing of things I mean."

Joanne stood up. "Stand up," she said. It wasn't a request. When Sharon stood, Joanne put her arms around her neck and hugged. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

Although Sharon stayed another twenty minutes, her visit had unofficially ended. Joanne tried her best to be attentive but couldn't stay on the conversation. The excitement of finding a job (maybe finding a job) overpowered everything else, and that felt fine by her.

There were two interviews the first with Mrs.

Kline, who ran the personnel office, the second with the director. Despite having a funny last name, Joanne found Dory Leatherbury a delightful person. She ran a clean nursing home and had a marvelous sense of humor that made the second interview much less stressful than the first. They both spoke of their respective care and treatment while at Pine Brook.

Dory did not hesitate to speak of her time there and brought the subject up first. Joanne worried the whole night before over what to say, or do, if the subject came up. Will I become emotional and run out of the room? Will I freeze up and sit there mute? As it turned out they both had a laugh over the similarities between being a resident at a nursing home, and a patient at Pine Brook.

"I really can't remember much of my first few weeks at Pine Brook," Dory said in a hushed, just between us girls, tone. "But what I do remember is a big lady shoveling lima beans in my mouth for dinner. Now, if you know me, you know there is nothing in the world I hate more than lima beans. So, she keeps shoveling and I haven't said a word up to this point. But after a while I said to myself, By God, I've had enough of these F'en beans and I'm not going to eat one more. I open my mouth to tell her those very same words and she shoves more beans in. And that's the way it went until I connect the words from my brain to my throat. I ate way too many beans while I shared

Pine Brook's hospitality. And I'll never touch another lima bean for as long as I live." Dory leaned back in her chair, picked up her pen, and used it to emphasize her last point. "To this day I insist all my staff communicate with our residents to find out what they like to eat, and while they're at it, to find what else we can do to make their life more bearable. Because, that's what it's all about— isn't it?"

Joanne tried not to laugh out loud over the bean story, but she could not help it. Here sat a lady who went through something, at least on the surface, similar to what she went through. Right down to those awful beans. The image of lima beans on everybody's treatment plan appeared in her mind and thus triggered another round of laughter when she shared it with Dory.

At the end of the meeting, Dory offered Joanne a job. Joanne promised herself there would be no more tears, no matter what happened. Whether she got the job or not, there would be no more tears. But she did get the job, and of course there were tears. Her sense of relief had been twofold, not only did she find a job, she met a lady whose life had been turned around by a tragic accident, and two years later that woman was running a nursing home. Joanne decided she'd allow herself an optimistic thought. If a person named Leatherbury could pull her life together after a serious head injury, then by God, she could too.

Before her injury, in a life that now felt more like a bad dream than reality, Joanne owned a closet full of nurse's uniforms. Although some hospitals were moving away from the traditional look, she chose to wear the uniform. White, modest, and with a hint of the old school starch, it said authority, it said respect, it gave visual comfort to those in need. She knew the advantage of looking the part, and was proud of being a nurse and wearing the uniform.

Even if she had not lost a whole dress size while in recovery at Pine Brook, Joanne would never have worn one of her old uniforms. They could have been taken in and she knew they would look fine. But the thought of wearing anything from that closet, that life, made her physically ill. She asked her mother for another loan. Sharon had been right. When put in the context of the me generation's lust for everything material, the two moderate loans from her mother were not worthy of guilt. The bottom line, she now had a nice collection of work uniforms that looked better on her than the old ones did.

Wearing one of her new uniforms, Joanne turned in front of the mirror on the bathroom door and assessed her reflection. She had a limp. When tired, her facial muscles relaxed, and if she did not wear her bangs down the red spot on her forehead was visible. Otherwise, she liked what she saw. She had mileage on the chassis, but the old girl had

been paid in full.

The nursing supervisor, Sandy Paul, gave Joanne a tour and introduction to the midnight shift staff. Joanne's new responsibility would be half the nursing home, or, in numbers, forty-seven residents and the staff who gave them care. Noreen Simmons had charge of the building's other half. Joanne did not seek a position of authority, but once given, she resolved to do the best job she could. And as they walked down the dark hall Joanne wondered; how can I give direction to others when I can barely manage my own life?

As they approached the nurse's station, Sandy greeted a petite woman with long dark hair. "Hello Martha." Sandy introduced the two women, and then added. "If you want to take a break, I'll keep an eye on things for you." Martha smiled, closed the chart and walked down the hall toward the cafeteria, a place Joanne did not think she would be seeing much of until she received her first paycheck.

"Martha is one of our best nurse's aides," Sandy said as they both settled into rolling, swivel chairs. "She's been here almost eight years. If there's anything you need to know, ask her." Sandy slid a pad and pen over to Joanne. "You might want to take notes on your duties as I explain them. It always helps me to remember things when I write it down."

For the next forty-five minutes Sandy talked and Joanne pushed the pen. She wrote with her

right hand, her left elbow rested on the counter and her chin rested in her palm. Without realizing it, Joanne supported that part of her face that felt fatigued. Soon a knot formed in the pit of her stomach and her body flushed with heat as her new responsibilities were explained. Joanne thought she would never remember all the information. An image came to her clear as reality itself. She stood at her mother's front door knocking to be let in. Begging to be let in. All her efforts to be grown up, to provide for herself, came crashing down around her. Everything she hoped for vanished simply because she could not remember the information given to her on the first night.

That morning, as Joanne put her head on the pillow, she knew sleep would not come too many things cluttered her mind. Four minutes later she was fast asleep.

Joanne tried her best not to ruminate over the past, or about her lack of resources. If she cleared her mind and dealt with the day-to-day problems as they happened, life felt manageable. Although she had never attended an AA meeting, she liked their saying, one day at a time. She would say it over and over in her mind, and sometimes as a whisper when things threatened to overwhelm her. That's the way she made it through her first two months. One day at a time. Somewhere around the first week of her third month, Joanne noticed the constant anxiety she accepted as a normality of life had, for the most

part, gone.

As Joanne became familiar with her job, she developed a routine, which proved efficient. Receive report, make rounds, do notes, and all the other paperwork required. In time the technical aspect of her job became routine. If she remembered: the world could be ending in two days, but the paperwork for tomorrow had to be done, she would be fine.

Some employees were friendly others were not. Sandy warned her that many people working the midnight shift had their reason for doing so. "We all need to work," she said. Then added, "Some folks have a natural resentment toward authority. That's why they're on the night shift. Fewer people telling them what to do. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying they're bad workers. What I am saying is some people on this shift would not make it on any other shift. This is the limit of their comfort, of their ability. Get to know them and they will do anything for you. Just don't try and come on too strong." Joanne understood the need to work on a shift with less hustle and bustle. The fewer people to work with the less who could make a comment about her limp, or her face. Yes, the night shift felt fine, for the moment.

Sandy had been right; Martha knew a lot about the residents. She also helped Joanne learn the charting system, and occasionally she threw in an additional fact or two about what the employees were up to. As in, who is sleeping with whom, and

who is now sleeping alone. Or, what family visited grandma on a regular basis and who did not. Martha turned out to be a wealth of information in more ways than one, and Joanne valued her resource as a friend and an aid to her job.

When Joanne caught up her paperwork, she spent time in the company of other staff members, as opposed to sitting alone in her office. Usually, the impromptu gatherings were at the nurse's station. Most times they shared nothing more than small talk and camaraderie. Other times Joanne read the charts of the residents in her care. Of particular interest to her, the personal histories, although brief, Joanne loved to read them. They were both informative and entertaining.

Joanne closed one chart and shook her head. "Did you know Mrs. Worden lost over five-million dollars when her accountant robbed her blind. Then, she made her fortune back, and more by being a great businesswoman. It said in her history she took an almost bankrupt clothing factory and turned it around. She secured government contracts to supply uniforms for the Navy and Air Force. You know, if it's true, she's a remarkable lady. To be an aggressive business woman and taken seriously is not an easy thing. What do you think of that? Did you know all that?"

Martha's eyes opened wide. "No, I didn't know that. It's hard to believe that little old lady who hardly moves and never says a word is rich." Martha went back to her own reading, and then

said, "If she's so rich, why isn't she in some fancy nursing home? If what you say is true, she could afford better than this."

"Well, according to the history, Mrs. Worden came to visit a longtime friend who happened to be a resident here." Joanne opened the chart again. "Ah... here it is. She had a friend, a resident here. When her friend, Mr. Confers, passed away, Mrs. Worden continued to visit the nursing home as a volunteer. It seems she liked it here, and the people."

"Isn't that something. Now look at you girl," Martha said as she put her book down. "I thought I knew about these folks and here you go telling me about things. And while we are on the subject, what I want to know is, who was Mr. Confers and what was his connection to our Mrs. Worden?" Both women looked at first bemused, and then spontaneously laughed, but quietly.

Thirty minutes later Joanne closed her last chart for the night. Her eyes hurt and her back had stiffened from leaning over. Martha, just back from her 4 a.m. bed check, smiled. "Everything's fine and quiet. You had enough reading about these folks for one night?"

"Even if I didn't, my back and legs wouldn't allow me to read one more chart." Joanne stood, stretched, and felt pain on her left side. She knew walking away from the nurse's station now would result with her falling flat on her face. With one hand on the desk for support, Joanne flexed the

muscle in her left leg until it started to feel like it could support her weight. "I noticed William Doe has no history. I can't place him in my mind. Why doesn't he have a history? Any thoughts?"

"Sure, I have some thoughts," Martha said as she wrote in the log book. "First, he's fairly new, only been here a few months, I think. Most times it takes a while for the social worker to get a history in the chart. But that's not the only problem with Mr. Doe."

"Oh... Don't keep me in suspense, what's the other problem with Mr. Doe. And what kind of a last name is that?" Joanne asked, but her attention had shifted to the report she now worked on.

"One morning about a month ago, I stayed for some overtime and went to a team meeting. Most of us on this shift don't know what's going on with the residents unless we go. It's voluntary. I'm the only aid from this floor that goes. Nobody else cares. Anyway, the social worker said Mr. Doe got mugged over in Newburgh." She said the word Newburgh in an all-knowing affirmation. As if the very word left no other words to be said.

"That does sound sad. But what am I missing here? What does being mugged have to do with not having a history?"

"Well, as it turned out he got hurt bad in the mugging, he hasn't said a word since. He doesn't respond at all. He moves his mouth when you feed him, otherwise, it's like he isn't even inside. When the police couldn't find any identification on him,

they searched his room. There were a couple of neighborhood people knew where the guy lived, but nobody knew his name. Just another old man living in a rented room. The landlord said his name is William. He had personal stuff, but nothing official. Not a social security card, driver's license, birth certificate, nothing. Can you imagine how hard it must be to go through life without any proof saying who you are? The social worker said she's doing research, whatever that means. To me, I think she's stalling on the paperwork. Maybe she thinks he might pass away and then she doesn't have to do the work. That's what I think.”

"Hard to say," Joanne said as she shook her head. "Maybe later I'll ask about him." Then she went on to other business and forgot about Mr. Doe.

After reading the histories and learning about her residents, Joanne developed a theory. Your personality at age thirty will, for the most part, be the same personality you will have at ninety. If you are a lifelong happy person, then the odds were you would be an easy going, happy older person. And if you were a mean nasty person at thirty, the odds were you would be a mean and nasty person when you were ninety. There were no absolutes regarding her theory. Unforeseen illness and family tragedy could always alter a person's personality one way or the other. But for the most part, she thought her observation a simple truism.

Mr. Imini Smith, an eighty-seven-year-old

resident under Joanne's care, looked to be a perfect example of her theory. According to his history, as a younger man he worked on a dairy farm, had a wife, four kids, and sexually abused both of his daughters. He also consumed alcohol every day.

About half the encounters between Mr. Smith and female staff ended with a problem. Sometimes he flailed his arms wildly when staff came into range. Other times he slid his hand up a skirt, or down a blouse. One way or the other, he gave everybody a hard time. Another of his peccadilloes was urinating in the hall. The popular wisdom said his actions were without malice and could not be helped. He had no control. After all, he was so very old. But for the staff and residents he let loose on as they walked by, the age excuse didn't work. He truly seemed like a miserable man.

Early one morning Mr. Smith got out of bed, walked past his bathroom door, and urinated down the center of the hall as he walked toward the nursing station. Joanne talked to Bonnie Ordine, who saw the whole thing. "He didn't look like he was sleepwalking, no he did not. When I looked up from the desk, I saw him just walking down the hall. The only thing he had on was his pajama top and he held himself as he walked."

Bonnie rocked her head as she talked, as if the head motion somehow emphasized her point. "When he looked up, he saw me, smiled and kept coming—peeing all the way." Bonnie shrugged her shoulders. "At first I was surprised. But after a

second, I got up from the desk and started in his direction. I didn't say anything to him, honest. Nothing to scare him. But when he saw me coming, he turned, and I swear to God, that old fool started to run back down the hall toward his room. He got about five steps when he slipped in his own piss. It looked like his whole body was airborne for just a second, like he was Superman. But from my direction, he didn't look like Superman to me. Then his head went down before the rest of him and it hit the floor. That's the hardest I ever seen anybody hit a floor. Thought his brains were going to be all over. It sounded horrible."

Joanne sat in her office trying to write the incident report long after her shift ended. She closed her eyes to recreate in her mind what happened next. When she arrived on the scene Mr. Smith had been sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. Urine and blood covered the floor around him.

"Did anybody call the doctor?" Joanne asked of the three staff members gathered.

"I paged him through the operator," Bonnie said. "He called back. He didn't sound too happy about coming over here."

Joanne dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. "Okay, so somebody tell me why Mr. Smith is still sitting in the hall." As she talked Joanne took two steps closer to the man sitting in the blood and urine.

This time Shirley McKinney spoke up. "Every time we try and get near him, he takes a swing at us. He got me a good one. Look here." She showed Joanne a large red spot covering the left side of her face.

Joanne turned and looked at the three women standing behind her. "I'm sorry about your face Shirley, I really am. But you all know we can't leave the guy sitting there in his own urine and blood. He's awake, active and moving all right. We can't treat his wound where he is. I need your help here. What I want to do is this; two people take him under his arms and help him back to his room. I don't want to get hit any more than any of you. But you must see we have to get him to an area where we can treat him."

Joanne paused and expected an argument or disgruntle mumbling at the very least. She heard neither. "I'll take his right arm. Bonnie, you take his left. We don't stop. Just help him up and walk him back to his bed. Shirley, can you get a mop and start cleaning the hall. I know it isn't your job, but please, just this once, okay?" Shirley shook her head yes and headed toward the utility closet.

"Martha, can you get back on the phone and call the doctor again. I know he won't be happy but he needs to be here. Oh, and one more call. Page housekeeping and see if their person can come over, we can use the help. And Martha, thanks." Martha turned and went for the phone.

Joanne looked at Bonnie. "Well, you ready?"

"Let's do it."

The two women walked to where Mr. Smith sat. Blood and urine radiated out in all directions. Without hesitating to dwell on the possibility this may not be a good idea, each woman took hold of a spindly arm and lifted. He made a halfhearted effort to struggle but soon gave up and went along with the program. They walked him the ten paces to his room and laid him on his bed, which he seemed appreciative to be in. Once there Joanne inspected the gaping wound on the man's forehead, all the while keeping one hand in a blocking posture from his blows. "Bonnie, can you get me an ice pack, and the treatment cart. Make sure the treatment cart has a suture kit. By the looks of things, I think we'll need it." Without a word Bonnie went for the ice pack and the treatment cart.

Doctor Gordon, their regular physician on call, had one week left of his vacation, Doctor Learner filled in. Because Doctor Learner had been new to the hospital, as well as the nursing home, nobody knew the man. A few moments after Bonnie left on her errand, the doctor walked through the door. He approached the bed, took a cursory glance at the man lying there then turned toward Joanne.

Joanne considered the phrase, "being left speechless" or, "being at a loss for words" as something writers used when they could not figure out what to write next. The moment Doctor

Learner walked through the door; those two phrases took on a new meaning. For a moment, Joanne did find herself speechless. He had to be the most handsome man she ever saw, as in Cosmo man of the year handsome. Joanne opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

"Nurse," the doctor leaned toward Joanne's nametag, "Arnet. Can you fill me in on what's going on here?"

His words broke her silence. Much more of the mute act and she would have run out the room like an embarrassed schoolgirl. But what helped find her voice hadn't been what he said, rather, the way he said it. He sounded angry. The tone of his voice confirmed his mood, and for the briefest of moments Joanne wondered how any person so beautiful could ever be angry. Somehow it didn't seem right. All those looks wrapped around a surly disposition. "He fell in the hall," Joanne motioned toward the hall, "we helped him back to his bed."

The doctor leaned over the bed's railing to inspect Mr. Smith's wound. "Sometimes he swings out doctor, be careful."

Bernard Learner did not look at Joanne as he talked. Instead, he leaned closer toward Mr. Smith's bed. "I don't know which staff member called the hospital for help, but I'll say this, whoever did, is in big trouble." Now he did look at the nurse as he spoke. "Nobody tells me to get my ass over here. The cost of my education alone is more than most of these attendants will make in

two years, and I am not going to be spoken to like that. There are real sick people over in that hospital and not just somebody with a bumped head."

Joanne took an involuntary step back. Again, she felt at a loss for words. Martha might have said those words to the operator, but the operator had no business passing the message along verbatim like that. People say stupid things while under stress, she thought. Those words couldn't be anything more serious than a slip of the lip. No big deal.

She considered coming back with a witty comment. Something to let this guy know there's nobody here willing to be pushed around by his education, nor his good looks. But the reality of the situation overrode her initial impulse to make a verbal parry. She still had not come up to speed regarding the connection between her mouth and brain. If she were to get into it with this man, she would, without a doubt, come out on the short end. And possibly lose her job as an added bonus. She said nothing.

Bernard Learner did not outwardly smile, but he smiled on the inside. He thought it important, no, critical, in any new situation to establish the hierarchy. By the looks of things, this gal understood her place. "Where's the treatment cart?"

"It's coming," Joanne said. Then as if on cue, Bonnie came through the door pushing the cart.

What happened next happened fast. Joanne would have missed the action entirely if her back had been turned even for a moment. But she didn't have her back turned. Bernard Learner put on a pair of rubber gloves, and then leaned over Mr. Smith to inspect the wound. Bonnie adjusted a goose neck lamp and the top of the bed became bathed in bright light. Joanne thought again about warning of Mr. Smith's potential for, well, anything. No, she thought. When she warned him before he did not sound appreciative, and she had no reason to believe he would be now.

Mr. Smith grabbed the doctor's tie, which hung in his face anyway, and pulled hard. When the two men were face to face Mr. Smith brought up a large wad of phlegm from deep where it hid in his lungs, and deposited it on his new doctor's face. As an additional, how do you do, he brought his other hand up faster than Joanne thought him capable and struck the doctor in the face with a roundhouse right. Bernard Learner shot upright with the phlegm hanging from his nose and lips. To keep the mixture fluid, a generous amount urine and blood, which a moment ago had been on Mr. Smith's right hand, mixed with the phlegm.

The doctor stormed past the two women with his head down. Joanne looked at Bonnie and rolled her eyes. "Good God," she said. Her tone, pure exasperation. "I have to go see about him. Can you please keep an eye on Mr. Smith for a minute?"

"Of course, go, go. I'll watch this mean old cuss." Bonnie waved her hand in a shooping manner.

Joanne paused outside the treatment room door. The doctor stood at the sink on the other side and by the sound of it, did some retching along with his cleaning. When the worst of it sounded over, she knocked on the door and went in.

"I want you to give that man five milligrams of Ativan, now. Make it injection, not the pill. I'll write the order." The doctor pushed a towel deep into his face. "I can't work on him while he's... uncooperative."

"We don't have that medication available on the unit," Joanne said. She started to suggest something else when the doctor removed the towel from his face.

"This is an average size nursing home attached to a good size hospital. I don't care where you go to get what I asked for. Just get it."

Joanne slowly walked down the dimly lit hall toward the double doors leading to elevators. The sound of her steps softly echoed off the walls and served as an audio reminder of her limp. The constant pain made her pace slow and the more stressed she became, the more pronounced her limp. Unfortunately for her (and anybody who looked at her, she thought), the same principle held true for her face; thus, the thought of going hospital wide looking for Ativan injectable did not appeal to her. It crossed her mind to send one of

the other staff, but she needed a break and hoped the walk would help vent her anger. As she walked the word kowtow tripped through her mind, along with futile, and asshole. Besides the obvious, something else bothered her about the whole deal. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something felt wrong.

She paused with one hand on the door leading to the darkened hall and the elevators beyond. Joanne remembered.

She could not recall where she learned what she knew. Maybe in nursing school, or from the Learning Channel, or maybe from a match book cover. It did not matter where she learned it; the fact, according to current medical practice. Any person who just received a head injury should not be given any kind of tranquilizer. None. Joanne put her head against the door. Why isn't Sandy here she thought? She should be dealing with this crap. Hell, I can hardly walk and talk, and now I have to tell this doctor he's wrong. After taking a deep breath, Joanne turned and started back down the hall.

Would she come out and refuse his order to administer the medication, or, try diplomacy and suggest another way of dealing with the problem. Joanne's dilemma of choice became no dilemma at all when she returned to the doctor's company.

Bernard Learner observed Joanne step into the charting room and surmised she wanted to address him. Whenever the opportunity presented

itself to have a subordinate wait, he took it. Thus, he wrote slowly in the chart, and then took the time to read it over, twice. When done he looked up. "So, I see you're back, and quickly too, despite your limp, very good. You are a good nurse, and I'll let your supervisor know that." The doctor looked back down at the chart and feigned interest there. He could not remember the rule's number, but he always liked it and kept it in mind. Whenever possible, always patronize the shit out of the hired help. "You can give that medication now."

Tears welled up in her eyes as a lump threatened to close her throat entirely. The audacity of the man, coupled with the unfeeling cruelty of his words robbed Joanne of her ability to hold a normal conversation. At that moment she loathed him as much for his comment on her limp as she did for his ability to steal her capability to communicate. Taking every ounce of courage, she could bring forth, Joanne cleared her throat and resolved to say what she had to say. "I will not give Mr. Smith the medication you ordered." Joanne waited for lightning to strike, or her heart to stop, neither happened. "That man had a major head injury and people with head injuries should not receive a tranquilizer. I will not be part of it." Joanne turned to leave the room.

"If you will not follow my direction, please find somebody who will. I need to return to my other duties." As Joanne passed through the door

he added. "Did you ever hear the expression; you will never work in this town again. Please keep it in mind. After tonight somebody is going to be looking for a new job."

Joanne stepped into the hall and leaned against the wall. Emotionally she felt on the edge and as drained as she ever felt. Martha walked up to her and stood by her side, waiting. Joanne cleared her throat and asked, "Where's Sandy?"

"Mary, she works on the first floor, she said Sandy had to run home real quick. She should be back any minute." Martha leaned closer and added. "She got her monthly and had to go home to change. She lives really close and should be back any second."

Joanne shook her head. "It's okay, I understand." Joanne explained what happened between her and the doctor. "I need to call Noreen Houser and ask her to fill in for me. I feel so... stupid." Joanne pulled herself together enough to go make the call. She sat at the nurse's station and raised the phone to her ear, then put it down when she noticed the woman staring at her. "Who's that person down there helping Shirley with the floor?" she asked.

Martha looked down the hall and saw a rather menacing looking woman with a blonde crew cut and large shoulders. Although it could not be seen from where they sat at the nurse's station, Martha had noticed a tattoo on the woman's forearm, one that looked like a three-pointed spear.

All in all, she considered her somewhat of a frightening presence. "I can't remember her name right now. She's the new housekeeper; I hear she's a good worker despite the way she looks. Do you know her? Have you seen her around?"

Joanne sighed, "No, I don't know her, but I've seen her before." Joanne refocused back on what she needed to do. "Okay, I have to make this call." And she did.

Noreen Houser showed up less than five minutes later with the Ativan injectable. The medication was given. After putting seven sutures in Mr. Smith's head the doctor returned to the real world of medicine in the hospital. On the way out the door he reiterated to Joanne his promise of big trouble. Joanne began to mentally prepare herself for being fired.

An hour later Mr. Smith died.

She sat alone writing her report and morning turned into late morning. When she finished her writing, Joanne looked up noticed Dory Leatherbury sitting across from her.

Joanne still felt unsure about her employment situation. Five hours ago, a man in her care lived and breathed now he was dead. She thought Bernard Learner capable of saying almost anything to save his backside. Along with that, certainty came the conclusion: she would probably carry the brunt of responsibility for Mr. Smith's death regardless of who did what. Still, Dory treated her decent from the day she started, and

Joanne thought well of the woman. To add one unpleasant emotion on another, Joanne actually felt sympathy toward Dory for the task she had to do.

"It just occurred to me. You think you're in trouble. Am I right?" Dory asked. The inflection of her voice reflected genuine surprise.

Joanne nodded her head. Her hands trembled slightly.

Dory put Joanne's report in her folder. "Let me put your mind at ease. You did nothing wrong. Nothing. I know what happened here last night and you have nothing to feel bad about. Your judgment was sound, and from one nurse to another, I'm proud of you. You're a credit to the profession."

Dory reached over the table and touched Joanne's hand. The comfort it brought was reminiscent of another day. Relief and gratitude made her feel reborn.

Dory stood up and straightened the edges of her papers on the table. "I have a meeting to attend and need to be on my way. Before I go, let me say again, you did fine and you will not be looking for another job." Joanne looked tired. "You need to get out of her before it's time to report for your shift again. Can I give you a ride home? You live just a short distance from where my meeting is being held. It's not out of my way."

At first, she thought of refusing the offer; then she thought why not. "I could use the lift, thanks"

Joanne sat quiet and looked out the window

as Dory drove across town. She wanted her bed and to sleep forever. Then, the question came to her and she had to ask. "Do you know Mr. William Doe? He's on my floor."

Dory smiled. "You mean do I know him personally? No. But if you mean, do I know who he is, sure. He's in my nursing home. I think I know something about everybody there, it's my job."

Joanne looked at her boss "Don't you think it's odd he doesn't have a history, or a last name."

"Odd, yes. Unheard-of, no. It happens from time to time. Having no means of identification makes it hard for Medicaid reimbursement. And I'm sure it's not so easy on our Mr. Doe. Regardless, we give him the best care we can."

"So, what happens now? Will we ever find out who he is?"

"I can think of a few people who came to us without identification, then passed away before we ever discovered their identity. It's sad, but there isn't a lot we can do about it." Dory thought for a moment, then added. "But now that you mention Mr. Doe. We have a storage area in the basement where we keep resident's personal belongings. I seem to remember reading somewhere that Mr. Doe had two boxes from his rented room. I don't know if anybody had a chance to go through it yet. If you have the urge, feel free. Just document what you're doing, and work with the social worker. We don't want anybody's feelings hurt."

The following week Joanne volunteered to work four hours overtime on the day shift, she needed the money. There was another reason why she stayed past her normal quitting time. She had to know if she could handle the stress and hectic pace. A test of sorts. To her surprise, to her delight, she liked the pace, and the people. After handing out medication, she took daily blood pressures. The last resident on her list: Mr. Doe. When she pumped the small rubber bulb to inflate the cuff around his left arm, he opened his eyes.

The eyes looking up at Joanne were clear and intense. They were also dark blue with a thin circle of black around each iris. They were full of life, not the eyes of an old man. She could not avert her own gaze, even if she wanted. Then he closed his eyes. The fleeting feeling of being swept up and carried along by a force of nature, his force, had passed.

Joanne never felt anything as powerful as the life in those blue eyes, and she never felt anything like the warm rush she now felt. With hands shaking she removed the cuff from Mr. William Fennerman's right arm. Before standing to leave, she paused to collect herself and take a breath. Her hands shook. And how did she know his name. William Fennerman, she knew it with the same certainty as she knew her own name. Joanne took a deep breath and decided she must be more tired than she thought.

Chapter 11

Larry came up with the idea they head down to Brooklyn and rob a drug dealer. "They got the money and the drugs we looking for," he said.

On the surface that statement made sense, nevertheless, Michael felt dubious about the idea. Images of Mafia hit men fanning out across the City in search of the person who had the balls to take from *them*, raced through his mind and fueled his already runaway paranoia. "I don't like it," Michael said, as he scrolled through Porn Hub on an ancient laptop.

Intuitive ability had never been one of Larry's stronger personality traits, but he did not need a degree in psychology to figure out his partner's objections. "You got the wrong idea if you think I'm talkin' about shoving a gun in the face of some big ass crime boss. Those guys don't sell drugs on the street, anyway. Most drug dealers are like you and me, guys looking to make fast money."

"How do you find a drug dealer in a neighborhood you don't know?" Michael asked.

"You leave that to me," Larry said as he picked through the ashtray for seeds and crumble

from previous joints. Then he carefully laid the roaches end to end along the table and rightfully figured he had enough for two more joints. "Yea, you leave that to me. Tomorrow, we going to take a trip."

Larry had no trouble finding drugs; he had been doing it all his life. After taking the train downtown, they crossed the Brooklyn Bridge on foot. Once in Brooklyn he found what he wanted one block from the bridge. He bought two hits of crack from a second-floor apartment above the vegetable market on Avenue, J. The next day they went back for more.

While standing on the stone steps of a rundown tenement, Larry explained to Michael what to do and when to do it. "You're going to come in behind me. Keep your gun in your pocket and your hand on it. I'll do the talking. When he turns his back, pull the gun. And remember, we're taking something he don't want to give up." The encounter lasted only a few seconds. Larry no sooner stepped through the door when Michael pushed him aside and shot the dealer three times. Larry said nothing as he gathered the drugs and money, and then stuffed everything into a backpack. They were out the door in less than four minutes.

Except for the first night of their new partnership, they never targeted legitimate business people. Their exclusion of the middle class came about through no moral concern; their reasoning

had been more pragmatic; the police didn't look as hard when street scum splattered the sidewalk. They, the police, put on a show for the press and public, Larry knew it, and so did everybody else in the City. With that thought in mind, Larry and Michael went about their business and averaged two murders a month; then congratulated themselves for being a step ahead of the police and possibly doing the City a civil service by eliminating drug dealers.

In early September, Larry introduced Michael to heroin; Michael took to the needle right away.

At about the same time, Larry forgot to take his medication, at least, that is what he told himself. The forgetting lasted for more than a day or two. As it turned out, he stopped taking it permanently. A voice in his head asked if he really needed it. Maybe he didn't. Things were going well. Life had become exciting again. He got high every day, had a place to sleep and food to eat. If good things were happening, how could he really be sick? If he hadn't taken his medication, and showed no signs of illness, maybe he wasn't sick to begin with?

His optimism did not last long.

In November, when the weather turned cold and the heat in the old hotel failed to come up, Larry's symptoms came home to stay. At first, he noticed an increase of night sweats, which he down played as nothing. Then he lost his appetite

as the thrush spread to his stomach. His skin began to erupt with boils and he developed a constant low-grade fever that occasionally spiked to life threatening territory. Larry's mental abilities were never much above dull normal to begin with, now, dementia started to take what little cognitive ability he had left. And if he didn't say what he wanted to say soon, he wouldn't get another chance.

Larry lit a cigarette, took two drags, and then passed the smoke to Michael. "Ever think of getting some help?" Larry asked in a tone he hoped sounded nothing more than conversational.

"What kind of help you mean?" Michael asked between inhaleds on the cigarette. "You mean like going to a hospital and staying there, that sort of help? Taking pills?"

Larry busied himself by lighting another cigarette. "That's what I mean. Just to get a break, get your head right. I been doing that for years. Now and then, I takes myself to a hospital and tells them I'm hearing voices and wanting to kill myself. It works good. I get off the streets for a while. The doctors check me over and I get healthy again. You know, good food, new clothes, see a dentist. They give you medicine that can take the voices away for a while, like we talked about." Larry hoped he hadn't gone over the line, but then again, what the fuck.

"I like the voices. Don't want to make them go away, my thinking is fine." Michael did not care

to say more on the subject, so he did not.

Larry shook his head. "Okay partner, but I need to tell you something cause..., well; maybe I might not be around someday to tell you how to get things." Larry was feeling sick to his stomach and his fever started to climb. "You got to get yourself to a hospital, you real sick. I seen sick, and I been sick like you are now. You young, things might work out. You knows where the hospitals are. They'll take care of you." Michael stared at the laptop and didn't seem to hear a word Larry had said, after some thought, Larry realized Michael hadn't. He decided not to waste what little breath he could spare on a man who couldn't hear him. He went to bed and got under the blankets and thought he'd be there for the day.

On November eighteenth, Larry did not have the strength to get out of bed.

Michael sat in a chair by the table, watched porn and smoked one cigarette after another. He took a long drag on the Newport then squeezed the filter tight between fingers-stained orange with nicotine and inhaled another long drag, then another and the hot glowing part of his smoke stretched almost as long as the original cigarette and still he drew on the wet filter with the serious intent of a watch maker exercising his craft. A cloud of white smoke hung over the room the thickest part over his head. "You want me to get you a doctor?" Michael asked without taking his eyes from the laptop.

When Larry didn't answer, Michael pulled his eyes from the laptop's screen. For six months Michael had caused considerable carnage throughout the city and did it without undue concern. People had died. Death went on here, too. But it commenced much too slowly. Each breath that Larry drew sounded to Michael like a motor that would not start. He put his chair next to the bed, leaned over and asked, "You sure you don't want me to get you a doctor? I can get you to a hospital, you want that?" No answer.

Michael thought Larry had smoked his last reefer.

As he sat by the bed, Michael had a moment of clear thought. Or, at the least, thought in linear fashion without the distraction of voices in his head. Yet he thought without emotion, that part of his life was over. The ability to feel remorse, love, guilt, anything; nothing, an empty hole existed were those things once lived. He saw clearly his actions over the past few years. From the first day he read his father's diary, to sitting next to this dying man.

The voices consumed so much of him. Most days he felt like a voyager on a ship and he was assigned to keep the ship moving. Sometimes he could see up ahead, most times he could not. He looked down at Larry and knew it would not be much longer; each breath became more of an effort than the last. He wondered if they were friends.

At 10:30 in the morning Larry inhaled

deeply, the effort took three separate tries and resulted in no return. Michael took the money from the table and a few bucks from Larry's pocket, looked around the room, then walked out the door. He had no clothes other than what he wore. He had no identification, no address to go to, and most importantly, nobody to direct and tell him how and when to do things. Michael became one of the thousands of mentally ill homeless drifting throughout New York City. A position no sane person aspires to, but Michael Arnet was not sane, and had no idea of the true precarious nature of his situation.

While in school, Michael's academic abilities were above average. His teachers liked him not only for his leadership qualities but also for his sense of humor. His athletic prowess was undeniable and girls considered him handsome. The man who walked the streets of New York City bore no resemblance to that high school kid of ten years earlier. The transformation would be considered by most, impossible. Yet here he plodded, living proof that mental illness had no awareness of social barriers. It had no color barrier. And it certainly had no age barrier. Perhaps age had been the most insidious thing about Michael's illness. Unlike other diseases that take hold after a lifetime of ignoring good health practices, schizophrenia develops in the late teens or early twenties. At a point in a person's life that held the most promise

of a happy future, when relationships develop for life.

Now, where an admired young man once stood, a shell of his former self dwelt. Dark rings cradled each eye. His hair hung long and gritty. He wore his clothes in layers and chain-smoked cigarettes (when he had them). He talked to the voices and they talked to him. He trusted nobody. Reality convoluted itself in his sick brain. Fact and fantasy became indistinguishable as they homogenized into one twisted view of the world.

Michael walked the streets of Manhattan and slept where he could. He spent one night in the doorway of a women's clothing store, another on a window ledge. He followed other homeless people, did as they did. The melting pot at its best: Italians to Little Italy, Russians to Coney Island, Jews to Williamsburg, African Americans to Harlem and homeless, schizophrenics to the doorways and window ledges. In mid-December he found a church on the Bowery that had a small attached shelter with one open bed. It felt safe. Hot meals were served twice a day as a social worker walked the floor looking for anybody who, "just wanted to talk," which of course, Michael never did. And that's where he spent most of that winter.

Chapter 12

Tabatha stopped taking her antidepressant one month after she started stocking shelves at the Food King. She did not declare, "No more pills." Rather, she forgot to take it five of seven days; an act of omission similar to Larry Struck's medication holiday. To her surprise, nothing bad happened. She didn't stay in bed for days as she had earlier in the summer. She didn't forget her address and phone number at every opportunity. And finally, she felt no irresistible urge to die as experienced in the days after Darcy's death.

Thus, Tabatha tested the waters of a drug free life and concluded, maybe she could live without it. A semblance of normalcy would prevail (on the surface, anyway), and if things started to turn a bit "funny" well, she had the prescription sitting there on the second shelf of her medicine cabinet. It waited like a life preserver waits to be thrown to a drowning person. Tabatha took comfort in knowing she possessed her personal, pill-size life preserver, in case she got in over her head.

She suspected the medication took about a month to clear her body, and if she noted the date,

would have determined the time between stopping her medication and the return of her dreams exactly one month. Of the unpleasantness associated with Darcy's death, Tabatha's vivid and persistent dreams added much to her overall distress. They were overwhelming and frightening.

Something had changed. Now, Tabatha not only tolerated the dreams but in a perverse way looked forward to them the way a driver looks eagerly at an accident on the shoulder of the road. She did not seek it, but by God, if it showed up, she would look. Although surreal and most often bizarre in form, no part ever felt cryptic. The players were clear and her role just as lucent, the pending contest inevitable.

Today the dream had the same recurrent theme, with only small variations in detail. Once again Darcy walked behind Tabatha. She could hear two sets of footfalls coming from the white tile floor and although there were no walls to bounce the sound off, the echo reverberated, anyway. The sound reminded her of an old black and white movie she once saw; in that movie, she walked as the principal player through an empty train station at midnight. As they walked Darcy talked to Tabatha, her words were muffled and unrecognizable. Ahead, the man's insanity, his infection and immunity to reason waited for her. He stood naked as she, yet his form defused as Darcy's words were muffled. To Tabatha he had to be a ghost, a caricature of what's evil in the world

and she faced him alone.

Without turning around Tabatha reached back. As a nurse hands instruments, Darcy slapped the trident firmly into Tabatha's hand. It felt warm to her touch as though it were made for her.

Today he had a weapon like hers.

Darcy screamed and Tabatha heard that clear. It sounded of anguish, hate and the rage denied at the time of her death. Tabatha charged the figure blocking her way.

They met in the center, bodies glistened with sweat and bulging with strain as they collided. The man stood twice Tabatha's size; nevertheless, he fell back as she did. Her lust to inflict pain carried her to a ferocity she never knew existed. She gained her feet in less time than he and attacked before he could protect himself. Tabatha thrust her trident at his chest; from his knees, he did the same. Too late, did she comprehend, his reach was longer, a fact rage could not compensate for. Before Tabatha could block his lunge all three of his trident's barbs found home deep in her chest. Her world rocked with the reality that his blow found its mark. The sight of blood pumping from the wounds in time to her beating heart made her sick with despair. She moaned as her knees buckled and her world began to gray out.

Then, from behind, Tabatha felt Darcy's embrace and her hands covered the holes to stem the blood. When the man moved to strike again, he encountered the strength of two. Tabatha blocked

another blow with the shank of her weapon. As he raised his hands to strike yet another time, she returned a mortal blow with a low thrust to his chest.

For two months Tabatha drove the same route home from work and never noticed the tattoo parlor. Yet there sat Wedge's Tattoos, nestled between The Clip and Bob Hair Salon, and Your Independent Nationwide Insurance Dealer. In an act of foolhardiness, or blatant stupidity, (Tabatha thought it a bit of both) she hit her breaks hard while doing about forty in the heavy flow of traffic then cut right into the mini-mall's parking lot. She heard cars skidding behind her but didn't bother to look. As long as she didn't hear the telltale "whoop" of one car slamming into another she figured things would be okay.

Like most people Tabatha held a preconceived notion on how a tattoo parlor would (or should) look. It would be seedy with dark paneling on the walls. There would be a bell over the door and when it sounded, a fat man would appear smoking a Camel cigarette. Once admitting a desire for a tattoo, the customer would be ushered into a back room. She would now be part of a privileged class of those invited to see the inner sanctum. And of course, the entrance to the back room is sectioned off by a wall of dangling beads. In the back she'll notice all the wall space is covered by photos of past works featured on the

engorged bellies of scowling bikers.

But the real tattoo parlor looked quite different from her imaginary parlor. Tabatha felt relief and disappointment. The walls were bright and clean. Reproductions of turn of the century French advertising hung on the walls. All in all, she felt very comfortable. It looked a cross between her dentist's office and the beauty parlor where she had her hair done. A tall young man with long blonde hair and sharp angular facial features greeted her. Instead of returning his good morning, Tabatha said what she thought. "This place is so clean." She looked around and admired the forest green accents against the oak trim. "It isn't what I expected."

"My wife and I work hard at that. Not looking like what you'd expect I mean. Most people expect to see something from the movie, China Town. You know, smoke filled room, mystery, filth." The young man smiled wide. "This is my business, not Hollywood. We take pride in being clean and doing a good job. My name is Jack." He held out his hand.

His smile and greeting seemed genuine; Tabatha grasped his hand and returned the handshake. She felt foolish for declaring the obvious; nevertheless, she had to say the words aloud to make it real. "I want to get a tattoo." In reality, she believed she had to get a tattoo, now, this very day.

Jack led Tabatha to a plush wicker chair then

handed her a large pink binder off the table in front of her. "Okay, here is a book of my work. Take your time and when you see something you like, let me know." As Tabatha thumbed through the glossy pages Jack explained some of the particulars of their service. "Some popular areas women chose for tattoos are, the calve, the small of the back, sometimes the abdomen or backside. And if you want it in a more exotic area but feel uncomfortable having a man, do it, well, my wife is an exceptional artist and would be glad to give you what you want, where you want it."

Roses, frogs, birds and sentiments of love were on every page and although they were all done with an eye-catching flair, Tabatha did not see what she wanted. "I know what I want, but I'm doubtful it will be in your book." She closed the book and looked at Jack. "I want a spear. A three-pointed spear."

"You mean like the one King Neptune holds in the Little Mermaid?"

Tabatha thought for a moment. "Yes, that's it. But not like a cartoon. Can you do one and make it look—dangerous?"

Jack smiled, "I can make it look so dangerous you'll get the willies every time you look at it. Where do you want it, back, leg?"

Tabatha made a fist and held her right arm out. "From my wrist to my elbow, on the top where I can see it."

As she talked, Jack did a quick sketch on a

pad. "Something like this?" He slid the pad across the table for Tabatha to see. "It's called a trident."

For just a moment Tabatha's breath caught in her chest and no air exchanged. In only a few short minutes he reproduced perfectly on paper what she saw in her mind and it scared her to see such a representation of something that, up until now, only lived in her dreams. "Yes, that's it. Can you do it today? Can you do it now?"

Jack nodded his head. "Sure, we can do it now." He motioned her toward the other side of a frosted glass panel. "Right this way. Let's do it."

Later, as she drove home, Tabatha watched the road with one eye and the bandage on her right forearm with the other. Jack told her the bandage needed to be changed daily for four days and an antibiotic cream applied to the area, "We don't want an infection," he chided, as if talking to a child. Now, she sat at an intersection waiting for the light to turn green, her total attention focused on her right arm. Tabatha reached over with her left hand, grasped the dressing at the top and pulled hard. She told herself the action nothing more than impulse, just an urge she couldn't help. But the truth was she had to see it. Nothing could have stopped her from looking. The sight of the trident sent a rush of energy through her body and she knew the bandage would never cover it again. Without saying the words or even thinking them she knew one more piece of the puzzle fell into place.

When Tabatha first joined the Steel City Gym, she tried to go every day. Her intentions were good, but her discipline waited dormant like a sleeping animal she could not rouse. After working eight hours stocking shelves she had no enthusiasm for the gym. Another hurdle to surmount seemed so inconsequential she hated to admit it. She had nobody to share the tedium with. She was lonely. Yet, she liked the place, its simple decor and unpretentious air suited her needs, despite having nobody to keep her company.

Tabatha made a point to dress down, and her effort paid off. There were guys in the gym but they left her alone. One thing she truly didn't have the will for had been deflecting unwanted attention. She always took comfort in the simple notion that she did not loathe men as some of her peers admitted to. Hating men seemed so, unbecoming. Yet, she feared the men working out around her for no good reason, and thus she did hate them for scaring her. But more so, she hated herself for being so silly and ultimately, she suffered with nobody to talk to.

On the third day of her second week working out, she pinched a nerve in her back, and in an odd way, her solitude had been to blame. If she had somebody reminding her about proper form and not to overextend, she would not have been injured.

The stupid rowing machine did her in. From

a sitting position, she leaned forward at the waist, grasped the bar, and then sat up while still holding it tight. The machine, the motion, it all seemed so innocuous, so easy. And when it happened, there was no question as to what happened. At first the pain blocked out all rational thought and she couldn't move. Without trying to grimace, Tabatha looked around the room to make sure nobody happened to be looking in her direction. Then, when the coast appeared clear, she rolled from the seat to the floor then worked her way to all fours. She looked like a baby starting to crawl, she felt like a humiliated, whipped animal. Whatever fantasy of reciprocity she harbored was, for the moment, blown away by her pain and embarrassment. She worked her way to an upright position by pulling hand over hand on the machine's vertical support bar. Tears streamed down her cheeks from the pain and it hurt to breathe. Tabatha walked out of the gym stooped and slow.

Large quantities of Advil to reduce the swelling and sleeping with the heating pad had her feeling back to normal. Nevertheless, Tabatha felt trepidation in returning to the place that caused her so much suffering. She had no delusions of invincibility. She hurt herself once, it could happen again. Four weeks after hurting her back Tabatha's determination overrode her fear.

She went slowly at first, very slow. Tabatha closed her eyes and blew hard through pursed lips

as she pushed the bar up on the bench press. On her third repetition, the bar refused to move and for a moment panic seized her as the possibility of yet another injury prevented her from completing the upward motion. She opened her eyes to see a large black man looking down at her, one massive hand easily held the bar in place despite both of hers trying to push it up.

"Haven't seen you around for a while. Didn't think you were coming back." His voice sounded thick, deep and smooth like an audio version of caramel candy.

Despite the inverted position, Tabatha immediately recognized the face and muscular body of Theodore Dukes. She focused on his facial expression and had a hard time reading it. He didn't exactly smile as he talked, and she didn't get a warm fuzzy feeling in his company. But at least the man didn't have a scowl. He looked way too big to be scowling. From flat on her back she said, "You're stopping me from doing my exercise. So don't make me come up there—because if I do—I'll have to hurt you."

Now Teddy did smile and the smile seemed to engulf his whole face from ear to ear, and not one, but two gold teeth were clearly visible. He pulled up a bench and sat next to Tabatha. "I need to ask you a question," he said.

Tabatha lifted herself to a sitting position with the help of the machine's frame and faced the immense man across from her. "Okay, so ask."

Teddy looked down at his hands. "Well, last time we spoke I told you some of the problems I've been having here."

He paused, knitted his fingers together as if to pray, then took them apart. Tabatha noticed the joints in his fingers were very large and they looked painful, arthritic maybe. If anybody else went through the same contortions she would question their sincerity. Perhaps the hand motions were a coy ruse to feign nervousness. For whatever reasons somebody would fake nervousness, she had no idea. But she didn't get that feeling here. Theodore Dukes, all three-hundred pounds of him, did seem nervous to be talking to her. "Sure, I remember. I remember very well what you said. And I also remember what you said you would do if I could help you."

"That's what I wanted to ask you. Things been happening around here the last two weeks. Good things. Last week, no, make that two weeks ago, the building inspector comes over and says I now have a good building. Just like that." Teddy snapped his fingers in the air in front of her face, the sound crisp and sharp like the report of a firecracker. "Don't worry about those violations he says. And on top of it, the man apologizes. Two days later I'm coming out of LaBell's Market with my coffee and paper and the mayor goes by in his car and he smiles and nods his head like we're old friends." Teddy shook his head as in disbelief. "Then last week I get a call at home from a guy I

don't know. He said he's on the town board and a retired business man. He went on for half an hour on how not enough is done to help small business. He wants to help me get federal money, a grant. Said its money from the government set aside for minority businesses. He showed up yesterday and had me sign some papers. He said not to worry. And you know I'm not. I can't say why, but I got a feeling things will be going my way. So, what I want to ask is, you have anything to do with what's been happening here?"

Tabatha took the hand towel and wiped her hands. "Last time I worked out here I hurt myself pretty bad. Did you know that?"

"Yea... I heard some of the guys talking. They said you hurt your back on the rowing machine and I'm really sorry `bout that. I really am. About the other question. Did you do something? Was it you?"

Tabatha looked around the gym. She knew it was empty, but took a quick glance anyway, just to make sure. "I did it after I hurt my back. I got pissed off at you, don't ask me why." She shrugged her shoulders. "While I nursed my back, the reality of needing somebody to show me how to train became painfully real. I want to do this right, I'm very serious. But I need a teacher." She sighed then went on. "In college I majored in English, guess you could say I'm pretty good with words. Well, writing them anyway, talking I'm not so great. I wrote a few letters that's all."

Teddy smiled again. "I'm not the smartest guy around, but I know it was more than just a few letters you wrote. Hell, I wrote a bunch of them and it didn't do any good."

"The idea came one night while I watched the news. It was almost scary at first, as if somebody said; this is what needs to be done." Tabatha looked away for a moment and thought of that night and how the idea came to her. Now it seemed like wishful thinking, but then, in her fantasy, she heard Darcy's voice explaining what to do and how to do it. But in the end, in the light of day where there is no room for fantasies, she reluctantly concluded the voice with the idea most certainly had been her own.

"That night I sat at the computer and wrote four letters then sent them to the mayor and town board of Pinebridge. The first letter was from the office of Derrick Johnson. I'm sure you know he's the head of the NAACP. The letter said his office is aware of this town's efforts to stifle minority businesses with unfair and overly harsh building code enforcement. It also went on to say their investigation would be ongoing and to expect further updates."

"The second letter to the mayor and board came from Deborah Archer. Know who she is? It doesn't matter." Tabatha waved her hand. "Archer is the head of the ACLU based in New York City. I sent the letter to a friend there and she dropped it in a mailbox so the postmark said New York City."

Ms. Archer wanted the mayor to know your case was being reviewed by her office for possible assistance. It looks like your constitutional right to conduct business is being trampled, along with some others basic rights to be named in future communications."

Tabatha could not read Teddy's face; nothing there gave away his emotions. He would make a hell of a poker player she thought. "The third letter went again to the mayor and the board. That one was from the President's Commission on Human Rights Violations. Specifically, from the desk of special prosecutor Mr. Charles McPhilps. It seems his office keeps in close contact with both the ACLU and the NAACP, all in an effort to snuff out bigotry and injustice nationwide. Anyway, they let the mayor know that your case was being added to a much larger one now before the Supreme Court and within a short time all involved will be fully briefed regarding the far-reaching consequences of their actions.

"And the last letter went to the same happy group. That one didn't come from any mere political action group or governmental agency. I bet the last letter struck real fear into their puny black hearts. My last letter came from NBC News program director Dave Manny. He said he would be sending a crew from Dateline and they were going to interview the participants involved in your case."

Teddy sat in awe of the woman before him.

"Did you really do all that?" he asked. He didn't need to wait for an answer. He knew what she said as true. He stood, and then sat back down. "I can't tell you how grateful I am. What you did, it made a difference. And even if those bastards don't go on believing all those people sent the letters, they know something like that could happen. Maybe now they won't be so quick to judge a man." Teddy sat quiet just thinking, then. "Made you a promise to train you if you helped me. Well, you helped me more than you know. This place don't look like much, but it's a good gym." Teddy looked around at the empty room "I'll train you if that's what you want."

"Yes, that's what I want very much."

From early fall of 2022, through the winter of 2023, Tabatha went to the gym every day. She listened to Teddy's instruction and followed them faithfully, except for one rule. He advised working out every other day. Tabatha knew he was right, but nothing could keep her from the gym. Although she never came right out and verbalized the word obsessed, the fact remained her whole focus for being, now centered on becoming strong.

In January, Tabatha asked Teddy about drugs that could help her gain results faster. As she knew he would, Teddy balked at the idea. "Drugs are for losers," he said. "They make people sick; they make them crazy." She offered to do all his business correspondence and books. He got her the drugs.

At first, the thought of taking drugs felt repulsive. How much did she want to change, anyway? What did she want to accomplish? These were questions without answers. Then, as the weeks went by, an image solidified in her mind. The more understanding of what her future held, the more acceptance she had of any advantage, including drugs and a gun if she could find it. The dream did show her things, and Darcy told her why. Tabatha would find Joanne Arnet, and when her husband came back, and he would, she knew that now, she would be there to send him Darcy's regards.

On Sunday, February 23, Tabatha lolled on her couch watching television. She did not make a habit of lying about; such inactivity would normally have her pacing like a caged tiger. But today it felt right. She stopped on channel fifty-nine and watched the last thirty minutes of the movie, *Ghost Busters*. In the movie a female ghost, or demon, Tabatha could not figure out which, strutted across a stone alter while threatening to end the world.

The next day, after stocking shelves all night and spending two hours at the gym, Tabatha made a trek to the Bon and Curl, beauty parlor. Once there she tried to explain how she wanted her hair cut and whose hair she wished to emulate. The lady doing the cutting didn't seem to understand. Tabatha preferred to think the lady slow, as

opposed to any fault in her own communication skills. After a moment the beautician's eyes lit up. "Oh, I know who you mean," she said, and felt pleased with herself for remembering. "I loved that movie. The demon had a blonde flat top."

"That's the one, Tabatha said, "make my hair look like hers."

As Tabatha rocked in her living room and wondered how things ever became so out of control, William Fennerman was beaten into unconsciousness on a dirty sidewalk in, Newburgh, New York. While Tabatha began to lose body fat and add muscle, Michael Arnet learned all about city life, ingested large amounts of illegal drugs, and hurt people. When Tabatha took her first steroids, Joanne Arnet also labored in a gym and fought a battle to regain her life.

By late February Tabatha's sleep time dropped to less than four hours a day. She didn't go without sleep by design, it just happened. There were other things more important than sleep. Work needed to be done.

She picked the cordless phone up from its cradle and pounded the number for Marcia Osborn. Standing in front of the full-length mirror Tabatha held the phone to her ear and studied her reflection as she waited. She never liked to be without clothes, hell, she never knew a time when she actually liked her own reflection, clothed or

otherwise. The nude reflection looking back at her seemed like somebody else, and she definitely liked what she saw.

Her ribs had definition, but not ribs as in emaciated, rather, they stood out because of the muscle swelling just under the skin. Her biceps were becoming defined and the arm holding the phone bulged like a strange new landscape. Tabatha took a deep breath and marveled at her chest. Her breasts were almost gone and her back and shoulders looked more like a well-developed man. Although she never wished to be a man, the new found force she felt was, without a doubt, the most intoxicating feeling she ever experienced. It felt liberating. She wondered if men felt this way all the time, and if they did what a waste. Women were definitely more suited to handle the added responsibility attached to all that physical power. Her heart raced and an overpowering urge to break something almost made her throw the phone at the mirror. In her mind she saw the explosion of glass. She didn't feel angry, but God, she could sure break something.

"Hello. Anybody there?"

Tabatha's world rocked back to business when she heard the words come over the phone. She collected herself mentally, and then answered. "Ah, hello. May I please speak to Detective Marcia Osborn?" Tabatha recognized Marcia's voice right off. After calling every other week since Darcy's murder, she knew the voice well. Nevertheless, her

gut said not to come on too strong. Maybe if she sounded unsure of herself, if she sounded like that mousy, introverted woman the Detective remembered from the first day they met; the day she came to the door and informed Tabatha of Darcy's death. That day a lifetime ago. If Marcia thought everything is the same, maybe she would let her guard down just enough.

"This *is* Marcia. Tabatha, it's nice to hear from you. I assume you are calling for your update." Marcia's heart went out to the woman on the other end of the line. To lose a loved one through a violent criminal act had to be one of the hardest things a person would ever deal with. Couple that burden with the social stigma attached to the gay life-style, well, Marcia genuinely wished she could do something for the woman.

"Yes, that is why I'm calling Ms. Osborn. Just my regular call to see if that horrible man was caught yet. And Ms. Osborn, I'm sorry to be a bother. If you have a secretary, you can give me her number and I'll call her."

"Don't be silly. You're no bother. I only wish I had some good news for you. New York State Police still believe he's in the City somewhere." Marcia paused for a moment to see if Tabatha wanted to respond, when she did not, she went on. "I have confidence he will be caught. What we know is he's a sick man, and anybody that sick will undoubtedly attract attention to himself. I'm sure it's just a matter of time."

"When they do catch him, will he be put in jail for a long time?" Tabatha thought the question lame. She wanted to ask, can somebody hold him while I run him through with a trident, like the one on my arm. She flexed her forearm and watched the tattoo move as though it had life of its own.

"You can count on it. I'm sure he'll be put away for a long time." Marcia made a point not to get personal with anybody related to business, but today she made a small exception. She suspected Tabatha had few friends to inquire about her well-being. Thus, she asked. "I hope you don't think I'm being too personal, but I need to ask. Have you been well? It must be hard for you."

Tabatha smiled and thought, got you. "I don't mind you asking. And it has been hard. Darcy's parents wouldn't talk to me at the funeral, that hurt something awful." Tabatha sniffed softly. "I had to move to a smaller place and just recently got a job in a grocery store. Oh, what else. There isn't anybody in my life now and I can't even imagine wanting to be with somebody. I go to work, and come home. And every day I wonder if this is the day, they will catch him. Other than that, there really isn't much to add. But thank you for asking. I can't tell you how much it means to me, somebody caring I mean. It's been a long time."

Marcia felt a lump start to form in her throat. "Okay then. Well, I need to get back to work. I'll expect your call in another two weeks, unless of course we catch him, then I'll call you. You be

good now and if there is anything else I can do for you, just ask."

"Well, now that you mention it maybe there is one more thing you can help with." Tabatha thought about being coy, and then decided the direct approach wiser. "The lady with Darcy when she was killed, Joanne. Is she okay now? Can I write her? Do you think you could give me her address? I don't know why, but I feel I must talk to her. Tell her it's not her fault."

Marcia considered the request and saw no hidden agenda or anything so obvious as to present a problem with those involved. "I'd tell you if I knew. But honestly, I don't know her home address. The best I could do, and you must promise you didn't hear it from me, is give you her work address. Don't ask me how I have her work address and not home, but I do. If all you wanted to do is send a letter, I'm sure she'd get it if you sent it there."

"Yes, I suppose her work address would be fine. And I promise nobody will ever know I got it from you." Tabatha wrote the address on a slip of paper and said good-by.

A quick Google search gave Tabatha the phone number for both Hillcrest Hospital and the attached Hillcrest Nursing Home. The place seemed real enough; the temptation to call was strong. Summoning her new found self-discipline, Tabatha put the idea out of her head. Calling would serve no purpose. No place of business would

reveal the names of employees over the phone, and considering the circumstances of Joanne's past, a call might draw unwanted attention. She would have to go there in person.

The next day Tabatha cut her workout short by twenty minutes. Then, instead of going home, she sat in her car across from the gym and waited. She positioned her car in the back of the parking lot and hoped she looked unobtrusive. Keeping a low profile seemed like a good idea. While she waited, the question, what are you doing, played through her mind repeatedly like a panicked prayer. Even the image of Darcy's smiling face didn't calm the fear generated by what she intended to do.

She recognized the man walking down the sidewalk. A glance at her watch confirmed, right on time. He always entered the gym fifteen minutes before she wrapped up for the day. In those few minutes, between the time he arrived and the time she left, Tabatha observed an almost constant stream of men seeking his council. Tabatha watched with her peripheral vision as men approached then withdrew. None smiled and some fawned in a sorry display of cowering. Others just called him Sir or Mister and nobody showed disrespect.

Teddy said the man's name was Jewel (just Jewel, like the singer, he offered no last name) and to stay away from him. She thought the name odd, unsuited; he wore no jewelry that she could see,

except for a modest watch. He dressed casually, yet effort went into style. She thought him a handsome man, in his mid-thirties, certainly no more. He reminded her of Idris Elba.

Tabatha forced herself to move. If she did not do it now, she suspected she never would. She approached Jewel before he crossed the street to enter the gym. "Excuse me. May I talk to you, please? Just for a minute."

"Yes, you may talk to me little sister." His voice sounded calm with no inflection of sinister intent.

Having no experience in her current endeavor, Tabatha felt at a loss. There seemed no right way to shop for what she wanted. "I need to buy a gun, and the bullets, too. And somebody needs to show me how to use it." She talked in a hushed whisper, hardly moving her lips as she talked.

Jewel put his hand to his mouth and stifled a cough disguising a laugh. "You know, maybe we should step over to your car for this conversation. Is this what you want to talk about?"

"Yes. Please," Tabatha said.

Jewel sat on the hood of Tabatha's Honda and turned his face toward the sky. "The sun feels nice today. Spring won't be long now." He cleared his throat. "You don't mind me sitting on your car, do you? This is your car, right? I saw you get out of it."

"Sure sit, I don't mind." Tabatha zipped her

jacket for something to do with her hands. "I watched you in the gym, you seem to know people. I've never done this before and feel foolish asking a stranger for something like this."

"Fair enough pretty lady. You have temerity, and it's obvious you have class, two attributes I find irresistible."

Tabatha felt shame for her preconceived notion and told herself it would be the last time she judged a person without knowing him. Jewel was not an ignorant barbarian, and it would do her well to remember that.

"Please understand that I'm not a street punk, nor drug hustler. But I know people in this town and some of my business isn't what you would call legitimate." Jewel looked toward the sun once more and closed his eyes. "Teddy is a good friend of mine; we go back a long time. I love the man. A while back he told me what you did for him, and I'm appreciative. To tell you the truth, I had a good laugh over it. Yea, you made my day when Teddy told what you did. Anyway, after that, I told the guys to leave you alone because you were of the other inclination. My sister is that way and she's the finest person I know. She has never denied me anything, no matter what I did. So, if you need what you asked for, I'm not going to ask questions. I can help." Jewel wrote on a piece of paper then gave it to Tabatha. "Be at that address today after four. Bring one-thousand dollars and we do business."

Darcy Never mentioned to Tabatha about the life insurance policy. She also failed to tell Tabatha she was the beneficiary of that life insurance policy. The check arrived via Federal Express not long after she moved into her new apartment. Although the amount small, as compared to most death benefits, fifty-thousand dollars seemed like a million to somebody who had nothing. Nevertheless, she continued to live simply and did not spend her money frivolously. Tabatha no longer felt the need to spend money for the rush, those days were over.

If Jewel had said the gun would cost every cent of her bank account, he would have gotten every cent. That afternoon Tabatha withdrew one-thousand dollars and made her purchase. Later, she carefully laid the gun in the middle of her bed, and then went about other work. She abhorred guns in her former life. As with many of her generation, Tabatha's opinion regarding personal ownership of firearms was party line. Nobody needed guns. Guns frightened her. Now, one mean looking black handgun sat in a position of reverence in the middle of her bed. The man who showed her how to use it said, "Don't worry about what kind it is. It's a good piece of hardware with plenty of stopping power. You got over one-hundred rounds of ammunition to take with you. When you run out, come back and see me." She didn't worry about the brand name, and she didn't worry about how big the bullets were. She fired it many times

in the basement range and it felt good in her hand. Tabatha knew how to chamber a round, flip the safety, fill the clip, aim and pull the trigger. Actually, she thought it a simple mechanism and knew it would do just fine.

The closet's confines were too tight for rummaging through the box. Cobwebs clung to her hair, sweat ran in her eyes and because the light didn't work, she couldn't see a thing. With a huff, Tabatha pulled the large container from the closet where it sat undisturbed since the day she moved in. She positioned the box next to the bed and began digging through the contents on top. Inside the box, Darcy's life waited to be rediscovered like the treasures of an Egyptian pharaoh. Tabatha wondered if looking through these things would be too painful. It hurt, but not as bad as she thought it would.

"Oh, fuck it. I'll be here all night at this rate. Why am I being so careful? I have to leave this stuff anyway." To say the word "fuck" out loud felt alien, bad language, like handguns, were not part of Tabatha's day to day personal choices. But they were now. And like her new found passion for physical strength, the want to talk trash felt oddly wonderful. She dumped the contents on the floor next to the bed then sifted through the sum total of Darcy's life. And every few minutes she peeked over at the black gun sitting in the middle of the bed.

Twenty minutes later, she found it pressed

tight between the pages of Darcy's High School yearbook. Although the photograph was ten years old, she thought it would do the trick. People changed in ten years, but not that much. Tabatha studied the face in the photo until she knew it well, and concluded Joanne Arnet to be, without a doubt, a very pretty woman.

She considered the saying, "Keep it simple, stupid" and thought those who actually used it in conversation were too confrontational. Tabatha put her room in order and formulated a plan as she went about the task of cleaning. The plan could easily become complicated, there were many variables to consider, and many things could go wrong. Tomorrow she would drive to New York, get a room in the local Howard Johnson or whatever chain she found convenient, and get a good night sleep. The following day she would stake out the parking lot of the hospital, or somewhere nearby and wait. Sooner or later, she would spot Joanne. Tabatha had money; she had the time. She had the will.

As with any endeavor, getting started was the hardest part. The logistics of what she planned were clear, but one more obstacle remained to be dealt with. The last impediment felt more emotional than physical. It heralded its presence as a voice in her head, and the voice asked. Is this truly what you want? Do you wish to end your life as it is now? Why leave a comfortable situation for such a crazy unknown? And to her dismay, no

rock-solid consolation came to mind. No catchy all-encompassing response to bring everything into focus. Nothing. She accepted the drive north and the simple truth, solace would not be found in logic. The following morning Tabatha packed her clothes into the Honda, gassed up, punched the address into her phone and drove to New York.

When confronting numerous problems at once, each can magnify the other until all feel insurmountable. That was how Tabatha considered the task of finding Joanne, then positioning herself in close proximity for who knew how long, an impossible task. Nevertheless, she plodded on, one step at a time, not trying to look at the big picture. Rather, she would fit one small part of the puzzle at a time.

She found a Super 8 Motel about twenty miles from the nursing home and settled in for the night. The local newspaper provided a good resource. In addition to rooms and apartments for rent, the classified section also had a large help wanted section. In one add larger than the rest, Hillcrest Nursing Home advertised for, nurses, physical therapists, recreational workers, nurse's assistants and housekeepers. Tabatha circled the housekeeper add and left it on the counter so not to forget.

The next morning, she sat in her car across from Hillcrest Nursing Home and watched the morning shift come to work then the midnight shift leave. Tabatha held a cup of flavored coffee with

both hands and appreciated the warmth. She could not see all the parking lot, but the employee entrance was clearly visible, and that's where she focused. She did not plan to sit all day watching everybody come and go. Instead, she would arrive an hour before each shift started and wait another hour after that. Considering the size of the place and the number of people coming and going, she speculated two or three days to spot Joanne.

It took less than an hour.

At twenty past seven in the morning, Joanne walked out of the building and into a waiting taxi. Tabatha spilled coffee down the front of her blouse. She had no doubt the woman was Joanne, and she probably worked the midnight shift. Over the next few days, and nights, Tabatha confirmed the shift by waiting in her spot. Joanne did work the midnight shift and if there were any way possible, she would too.

Two days later Tabatha landed a job at Hillcrest Nursing Home working in housekeeping on the midnight shift.

Rodney Post, the personnel director, did not want to hire her. He thought Tabatha looked like trouble. "And what do you think of that hair?" Rodney asked of his administrative assistant. "And I saw a tattoo on her arm. She tried to hide it with that sweater."

Marsha Timmons had little use for her boss. Some days he strutted around the office barking orders as if he were chairman of the fucking board,

other times he made comments on her outfit and how he "loved the way it fit." If there were a way to embarrass the pompous shit, she would take it. Regarding his question, her gut also said Tabatha would not work out. "Well, if you're asking my opinion," Marsha tried to sound serious and knowledgeable. "She wrote on her application she wants to work midnights, and you know we can't get anybody to work that shift. As for the tattoo, everybody has them these days. I have one myself, but you'll never see it." Marsha smiled and knew she now had his attention. "How much trouble can she be? And you know, on her, that haircut looked good. Give her a try. All she has to do is swing a mop."

Rodney sat on the edge of her desk. "You really have a tattoo?" he asked. Then, "I guess we can give her a chance. Call her up."

Marsha smiled and dialed the number from the application. After leaving a message at the Super 8 she thought, Perfect. That fool just hired a transient, butch, tattooed woman who scares the shit out of me. I hope she fucks him good.

There were two gyms in town. One promised to make her exercise experience as pleasurable as possible, and of course, no men allowed. Water music played softly and spandex reigned as the unofficial uniform. The other gym smelled of sweat and men wore heavy boots while working out. Tabatha took the gym that smelled bad. As a going away present Teddy gave her a

year's supply steroids. After working out for the first time in her new hometown gym, Tabatha increased her daily dose by half.

On her third day working out, Tabatha noticed Joanne at the front of the gym walking on the treadmill. A man of about fifty leaned against the mirror directly in front of her and talked constantly as she walked. At first Tabatha assumed the man a friend, thus his company welcome. The more she watched, the more obvious it became, Joanne was not having a good time.

Tabatha walked to the treadmill and addressed the man. "Hi. Could you give me a hand for a minute? I'm trying to do the bench press and there's nobody available to spot me. I wouldn't be bothering you if there were anybody else available."

The man looked annoyed but nodded yes, "Sure, I'll give you a hand, always willing to help a lady in need."

After turning to leave, Tabatha paused and looked back at Joanne. Joanne said thank you with her eyes, Tabatha returned you're welcome with hers.

Chapter 13

March is a deceptive time of year. Returning sunlight brings a taste of spring after winter's darkness. Most people want the harshness of winter to end, but cold air frequently overrides the small warmth generated by the sun and the winds blow in convoluted gusts through City streets.

On March eighth Michael Arnet almost died from the deception.

At five in the afternoon, an hour before the storm hit, he clambered upon a granite window ledge and nested for the night. His possessions consisted of one nylon coat, three pullover shirts worn at the same time, two pair cotton pants, sneakers and a blanket. He made a cocoon of his blanket and curled into a fetal position on the stone ledge.

For Michael, sleep was not the break from life that most people enjoyed. Nightly, uncontrollable sweating and fever rocked his body and robbed from him all possible sanctuary sleep might have brought.

Then a light rain started to fall and soon turned to ice on every surface. Slowly the City came to a halt as the ice made traveling

treacherous. Below him, black stone absorbed the cold then radiated it back. Above, his blanket dripped ice water.

That morning he watched a shaft of light pass through a hole in his blanket. Dust particles danced in the light and mingled with vapor from his raspy breath. Michael passed a finger through the shaft of light and almost pass out. Every movement brought excruciating pain. Each joint felt frozen as his blanket. What got him moving was his need for water.

Holding his breath, Michael began to rock from side to side. As he moved his jacket crept up his back exposing bare skin to stone. On the seventh rock, his body slid over the three-foot-high window ledge.

A rib cracked when he hit the sidewalk. Only Michael heard the sound of celery snapping. He had movement, but still couldn't stand. Every time he made the effort, his feet shot out from under him. His coat pushed up to just below his chin, leaving his torso fully exposed as he lay on the sidewalk panting like a dog after a long run. From his prone position he noticed the road had no shine. Michael crawled on his belly from the frozen sidewalk to the wet with slush middle of the road.

He stood and began walking toward the end of the street where the sun glistened as it filtered down from the surrounding buildings. His right sneaker fell off. Slush and salt clung to his bare

foot like glue. None if it seemed important now. Not his need for water, the pain in his ribs, the cold which made him tremble uncontrollably, not even the voices in his head mattered. All that mattered, get to the sun. Get to the light at the end of the street. Slowly he trudged up the middle of the street toward salvation in the guise of bright light.

At the end of the street Michael leaned against a building and looked toward the sun. He remained still, soaking in the warm rays. Without a destination, without a plan, he started walking.

A gust of warm air caressed his body; Michael turned and entered through the door of its origin. It was a store, just a small mom and pop place with hardly room to turn around in the aisles. The objects in the store overwhelmed his senses. Something blue caught his eye. He picked up the bottle of Aqua Velva and held it to his face. It felt comforting. As he left the store with the bottle he looked up and noticed a man in a car, the man seemed to be talking to him.

Then, something struck Michael from behind and propelled him face down onto the sidewalk.

Teek Sha started life as a trusting man. He had the belief that all people were good, down deep where it mattered most.

Those days were gone.

His parents furnished the money for the down payment on his small portion of the

American dream. And there, working with his wife, they put in sixteen-hour days in the small store they hoped would provide the income to put two sons through college.

Sometimes dreams come easy, but mostly they come hard. Teek's dream proved very hard. Twice during their first-year men came in the store carrying guns. Both times Teek gave them what they wanted. During his second year, a third man demanding money shot him for eighteen dollars.

Now, six months from that day, a man is leaving without paying for what he holds. The thief is dressed in rags and is dirty. Revenge guides his hands to the baseball bat under the counter. As the thief steps through the door to leave, Teek swings his bat and connects.

Instantly he is filled with remorse and calls 911.

“Of course, I have eyes,” Rose Balinsky said as she snapped her pocketbook shut, hard. She hoped the forceful movement would add emphasis to her statement and telegraph a message to her husband that she was *not* pleased. “I can see there’s no parking.” Rose looked at her husband. After fifty years she still loved his profile and the gentle heart beating in his chest. “Every time we come here you say, ‘Rose, there isn’t any parking.’ And every time I say the same thing. Just drive around the block a few times and watch for me to come out.” Rose made a circular motion with her hand as if

she were stirring a large pot.

“So, you want me to wait? I’ll wait. You want me to drive around the block? I’ll drive around the block. What do *I* know from parking?” Ira sighed as deep as his emphysema would allow. “Still, I don’t know why you insist on coming back to this neighborhood? It hasn’t been safe for thirty years.” Ira pulled the car to the curb.

Rose paused with her hand on the door handle. “Because this is the best bakery in town and your daughter and her husband are coming for a visit, that’s why. Now go around the block and watch for me to come out. Hear me?”

Ira said, more to himself than to his wife, “We have to get fresh baked rolls for him? Okay, so we get the rolls, I’ll just drive around the block here.” He leaned out the open window toward his wife. “Yes. Yes. I hear you Rose,” then lower, “I’ve heard you for fifty years.” He pulled away from the curb and went around the block. Only one block turned into many.

His first obstacle, Consolidated Edison. Seven men wearing hard hats peered into a hole in the middle of the intersection. Ira shook his head. “For this I pay the highest electric bill in the country, just so these guys can stand around and look into a hole. Very nice.” He needed to make a left turn at the block’s end; the work crew blocked his way. Ira made a right instead. No matter, he thought, it will just be a bigger block.

Two blocks down, where the street sign said

he could turn left, a solid wall of yellow cabs blocked his access to the street. Ira had driven in New York City all his life so he didn't get to upset at the rude cabbies. "These things happen," he told himself. Then he added, "But wouldn't it be nice if the drivers understood English. At least then they would understand why a man was angry." Two blocks farther he made a left and the first part of his box.

Up the avenue, the New York City Fire Department had the road blocked. "And on such a morning," Ira said. "All the ice. Those boys better be careful." He made a right, then two blocks, another left.

Now he waited for the light to turn green. Ira looked at his watch, he'd better find his way back to Rose, he thought. If he made her wait, well, he didn't want to think of it. As he waited for the light to turn, he noticed a man, a homeless man, in the doorway of a small store. Behind him another man held a bat high in the air. Not remembering his windows were up, Ira shouted. "Look out Mister. Behind you. Turn around." But the man didn't hear. Ira watched in disbelief as the homeless man looked at him and smiled before being struck by the man with the bat. The light turned green and Ira moved on to meet Rose.

When Stan Miller confirmed he would be doing his internship at New York's University Hospital he felt delighted. Nowhere, in his opinion, could a

man round out his medical education better than at NYU Hospital. Two years later his enthusiasm hadn't waned, but he did feel humbled. Though he absorbed medical information like a sponge, he had not been prepared for the humanity, and the various conditions that humanity came in. Although NYU Hospital is renowned for its commitment to the patient, it never occurred to Stan that some of those patients would come from the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Nevertheless, all received the best care available and he felt proud to be part of it. On Sunday's he took his turn as medical resident on a unit in Bellevue hospital. The building was old and sometimes the people who worked there looked as tired as the building. But considering the work load, Stan thought they had a right to look tired. On this Sunday he read over the chart of a man who came in that morning.

The patient had no name, a common occurrence for street people. His condition looked serious: two ribs broken, a concussion, and he appeared malnourished. Also, he suspected a melanoma on the bottom of the man's right foot. His nose looked broken; he had frostbite and a high fever. Stan also suspected the guy might be HIV positive.

He examined the patient for the second time, checked the attached monitoring hardware and made sure the medication being pumped went where it should. When done, Stan felt satisfied

modern medicine had done everything it could, the rest he left up to God. Before moving on to the next patient, he reminded the nurse to have the man's fingerprints taken for identification. She assured him it would be done. It was not.

Chapter 14

One year after Darcy's death, William opened his eyes. His awakening had help from a curious young man whose journey began years earlier, and twelve-hundred miles away.

Singlong, Florida, is a small town located fifteen miles north of Big Cypress Swamp, on route 27. It's not on the tourist map. The average family looking for Paramount Studios will not spend vacation dollars there. Citrus, cowboys and beef cattle are Singlong's main industry. On any day in season the aromatic smell of orange and grapefruit blooms emanating from the expansive orchards permeates the air like a heavy, sweet blanket. In summer, searing heat and rain forest humidity redefines the word oppressive as the atmosphere stifles the breathing process. The town is rural, and most people living there are of limited means.

Linda DeLone was born in Singlong. By the time of her twentieth birthday, she'd been to Tampa, twice.

When she returned from her second trip, Robby Beret insisted she settle down and marry him, she did. They lived in a mobile home owned

by the Dooer farm, where Robby worked as head mechanic. The position meant he worked year-round, not seasonal like most farm workers. Eight years later they had two sons, Josh and Randy.

At thirty, Linda became a widow.

Robby kept a fleet of farm trucks in good working order. The 1972, International Harvester Loadstar was the oldest truck in the fleet. Its heavy frame and long bed made it a valuable farm tool. When it came time for pistons and bearings, Robby pulled the engine for an overhaul. As the four-hundred-pound block of steel moved through the air, the chain broke. Although the block did not strike him directly, a glancing blow broke four ribs. The broken ribs tore through his lungs and compressed his heart. Robby lived for twenty minutes.

Mr. Dooer came down to Linda's trailer to express his condolences. "I feel bad about Robby," he said. Linda could feel the old man's eyes watching her backside every time she stood to pour coffee or let the dog out.

"If you want to stay in the trailer, you can." Dooer said with a wave of his gnarled, right hand. "You can have the first year free. After that, say, next March, you can start paying me rent. Guess you'll find work by then. Or, we can have an arrangement."

There was no wink, no adolescent snickering. He didn't come out and say, if you sleep with me, I can make things easier. But she

recognized the intent, and with two young boys to consider, she didn't discount the offer. Fortunately, finding employment did not prove difficult. Two weeks after the funeral, Linda got a job at the bank. It didn't pay like the waitress position, but the hours were better. She had two young boys to raise, being home in the evening felt right. When their father died, Josh was ten, Randy, nine.

Life could be tedious in Singlong and money in short supply. Yet growing up there had advantages for two young boys. Josh and Randy explored the swamps of south Florida like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer explored the Mississippi.

When Josh was seventeen, and Randy sixteen, they stole a Lincoln Town Car, with Minnesota plates. The boys took it from a gas station along Alligator Alley. When the sheriff deputy came to her door, Linda asked. "How do you know it was Josh, Billy? There's other boys in town doing things like that, and you know it."

Billy Reynolds shook his head. "I saw the video, Linda. That parking lot is big, and it has two surveillance cameras that cover the area. I know your boys, and I've known you a long time. I don't feel good about this, it's clear as daylight on the video, and Josh took the car. There were two other boys from town, we already picked them up. The DA said he thought Randy was there too, but if he gets Josh, he'll leave Randy alone."

Linda's eyes filled with tears, "He's working at the Shell station. If you want him, that's where

you'll find him."

"You know," Billy said as he started to leave, "if those boys didn't drive that car into the swamp, this might not end so bad. But those folks from up north are screaming for something to be done."

Josh Beret inherited his father's ability when it came to mechanical things. He worked at the Shell station for minimum wage, and would have worked for less. From the corner of his eye, Josh saw Billy approach.

"Your mom told me where I could find you, and I guess you know why I'm here."

For a moment, Josh remained squatting by the half-removed flat tire. "You going to arrest me, Billy?"

"Got to son. You were caught on camera. I'm sorry."

Josh stood and looked at the deputy. "Not going with you." Then, Josh threw the pneumatic wrench at Billy's head and ran for the swamp. Luckily, or unluckily, depending on your point of view, the tool struck Billy between the eyes and he fell like an anchor in deep water.

Josh did not run far. They caught him the next day camped two miles from town. Because of his prior arrests, and being known around town as wild, the judge sentenced him as an adult. Three to seven years in state prison for grand theft auto and assaulting an officer.

One month later Linda packed her clothes,

took Randy by the arm and moved to New York. Her brother said they could stay with him until they got on their feet. Linda found work at Bank Of New York, and a month later moved into a small apartment in Goshen, New York. Randy attended trade school and mother and son experienced their first northern winter. Both agreed, winter sucked.

As a reward for not getting into trouble, when Randy turned seventeen his mother helped him buy a 2000, Buick LeSabre. It had an eight-cylinder engine that rocked the car from side to side when he pushed the gas pedal to the floor. Along with his new car, the other addition in his life walked, talked and wore a miniskirt. Linda thought Dawn Parker was a sweet girl, despite her being only sixteen. She told her son not to make any girl pregnant. "...and you know exactly what I'm talking about so stop rolling your eyes, and keep it in your pants."

Dawn's parents were not so tolerant. The boy their daughter kept company with attended trade school, smoked, had a cracker accent, long hair and drove too fast.

Because of a sold-out movie, history repeated itself, and Linda could only watch when Randy was taken away in handcuffs.

Dawn received the task of watching her ten-year-old sister, Missy, the night her parents went to a movie. She, Dawn, went for a ride with Randy

instead, a choice that cost her ten dollars. "Here, take the money you little creep," Dawn said to Missy. "And remember, you took it, so you can't tell mom and dad. Got it?"

Dawn intended to be home long before her parents. Two things happened to wreck that plan. First, during some serious groping in the back seat of Randy's car, the one thing he assured his mother would not happen, happened. Dawn lost her virginity, afterward, they dozed off. Second, the movie her parents went to see was sold out. Instead of dinner and a movie, they had dinner and returned home. Upon arriving home, they found their youngest watching Playboy TV, and their oldest nowhere to be found.

Germain Parker waited on the porch for his daughter.

Randy and Dawn hardly talked on the drive home; both were lost in thought. Dawn came to the conclusion that she loved Randy, and her parents would have to accept the fact. Then she thought, is that how girls got pregnant? She didn't know for sure, but tomorrow she'd ask her friend Marie, Marie knew about things like that.

As Randy pulled into the driveway, Germain started down the sidewalk. "I don't want you around my daughter ever again!" Germain shouted. "Do you understand me?"

Resolute to defend her new place in the world, Dawn confronted her father by the car's front bumper. "Daddy, no! We're in love. You can't

tell him that. You can't keep us apart!" She glanced over to see if Randy would come to her defense, he didn't move.

Germain held up his hand, "Stop it. Don't say another word. I don't want to hear about love, as far as I'm concerned, you can't be in love. For God's sake, you're sixteen. Get in the house. Now!" Perhaps one day Dawn would stand up to her father, but not this day. Without looking back, she ran into the house crying.

With his daughter out of earshot, Germain turned his attention on the driver. "Now listen well." Small bits of spit flew from his mouth as he talked. "You are not going to see my daughter again. Do you understand?"

Randy shook his head in agreement. "Sure, I hear you." In truth, he had no intention of spending more time with the guy's daughter. "She's not my type anyway."

Germain intended his words to sting, but the kid seemed too agreeable. A notion took hold; this piece of southern trash had sex with his daughter. "Let me make this real clear. My wife and I didn't pour time and money into raising our daughter so a southern loser can come along and make everybody miserable. God Damn you. Look at you. You'll never amount to anything. You know it, and I know it. I bet you don't even know your father, and it's clear your mother can't control you. You can't look at me when I'm talking because you know it's true. Or maybe you're just gutless, like I

thought all along."

The voice that whispered in his brother's ear to throw the impact wrench at the deputy now told Randy to beat this prick into the driveway. And that's just what he did. Randy jumped from the car with the ease and fluid motion reserved for those his age.

Even if Germain had been Randy's age, there still would have been no contest. Germain talked the way he did because he liked to intimidate, not because of any superior physical prowess. One way or the other, he got what he wanted with impunity to consequences. Now, his tirade obliterated the simple truth, the kid did not know the rules. As Germain toppled face first toward the blacktop, the only thought that went through his mind was complete and absolute surprise.

At three in the morning, knocking woke Linda from a sound sleep. Two State Troopers greeted her at the front door; they were looking for her son. After a brief dialogue they took Randy away in handcuffs. Once again Linda found herself crying on account of her boys.

The public defender convinced Randy and his mother to go along with a lesser charge, they did.

"I see this is your first time in my court," the Judge said. He adjusted his glasses and moved paperwork. "This court cannot accept your actions lightly. Violence is not the way people deal with

problems. You can't beat somebody because you disagree with that person. So, what's going to happen is this. Instead of sending you to jail, you will be sentenced to community service. From now," he paused and looked at his calendar, "all the way through next summer you will carry out the sentence of this court and do community service. If you don't show up for your work assignment, you will be taken to jail. If you fail to go to school, you will be taken to jail. If you get in trouble again, you will be taken to jail. In short, if you do anything, other than school work and community service, you will go to jail. Understand?"

Randy acknowledged in a respectful manner, thus ending his first, and last, entanglement with the New York criminal justice system.

An agency associated with the Sheriff's office oversaw the community service program. While Randy stood in a line with five other men, an argument between two bureaucrats went on for ten minutes. As far as Randy could tell, a big guy from the highway department had the argument locked up; they needed the extra help, and he had the loudest voice.

"Okay," said the smaller man, "you can have four of the five. But I have to have one for another detail, and that's final." He looked up. "The one on the far right stays here, you can have the rest." Randy found himself standing alone as the others went off to join the county road crew.

"You lucked out," the man said as he drove a county car over the winding country road. "You'll be painting, that's an easier detail than the road crew."

Randy did not care, road crew, paint crew, it all felt the same to him. In a strange way he liked the structure of being told what to do. "Where we going?"

"Right there." The driver pointed to a large brick and stone building with another structure attached to the rear. "That's the Hillcrest Hospital and Nursing Home. The county runs both. There's already a paint crew working in the nursing home. That's where you'll be. Most of the guys are like you, but the foreman is a county employee. He'll be doing a report on the work you do. He gives me the report, I give it to my supervisor and he gives it to the judge. So don't be loafing off."

Randy started his community service.

Over the next few months, he spent every weekend painting halls, and resident's rooms. The more work he did, the more he liked doing it. At the end of each day, he stood and admired his accomplishment, others noticed, too. Occasionally a nurse or nurse's aide would stop and say, "Good work." Or "You do nice work." Then, something began to happen, something that never happened before. Randy took pride in himself and his work.

After he finished painting room 332-B, Randy stepped into the resident's lounge. He could hear his boss and another painter in the room down

the hall. Normally he would jump in to give a hand, but that room was too small for three men to swing paint rollers, and he needed a break.

On most Sunday's he could find at least one employee and several residents in the lounge. Today there were no aides and only one resident. Randy wondered where everybody went off to, he thought maybe a party. Cake on Sunday afternoon for the old folks, good for them, good for me. "Looks like it's just you and me old timer. What they do, forget you were here?" He thought they might have. He turned on the television; Chicago was playing the Mets. To his left the old man reclined in a chair with wheels. He slept with his mouth open and Randy wondered how a person can get in such a position.

Then, he noticed a gold bracelet on the man's right arm. Now, Randy's mouth hung open. He looked to his left and right. Not because he did anything wrong, but the act of looking at such a thing, of being alone in the room without supervision, made him feel uncomfortable. If anything happened to the bracelet, he would be the first one questioned.

Even though the man in the chair looked scarecrow thin, Randy did not think the bracelet could slide off his wrist, it looked that tight. "Fuck it," he said, and told himself he had no business considering such a thing. He turned the television off and moved toward the exit. Then, giving in to his lack of impulse control one more time, Randy

walked back to the recliner. He had no real thought of stealing the bracelet, but he had to know, could it come off that skinny wrist? He gently grasped the bracelet and pulled, it felt as though it might slide over that shriveled old hand.

The relentless afternoon sun made William Fennerman sleepy. It beat down on his bronzed skin and warmed his very soul. His only thought, to find some privacy on the pleasant ship where he could take advantage of the warm wind, the tropical sun, and maybe take a nap. To William, these latitudes felt different from others he sailed. He couldn't articulate why, yet he knew if paradise existed, the southern waters of the Caribbean would be included.

A steady breeze pushed the, Abeldade through the clear, blue waters and in doing so, gently rolled her down one trough of water, then up the next. He wasn't sure of the day, it didn't matter. They were three days from Barbados. The holds were filled with fine British furniture, furniture with ornate carvings. Furniture that looked obscene when compared to the human misery that paid for such opulence. On the return trip to London, they would carry raw sugar, rum and molasses.

His duty at the helm ended at noon. Normally, at the end of his watch, he'd go below and stretch out in the rack he shared with Samuel. The same Samuel who stunk so bad, laying in the

bunk he previously occupied made breathing arduous.

A coil of rope sat on the forecastle, behind the foremast. William rearranged the coils to make them more accommodating to his large frame, and then settled down amongst them. As the ship pitched and rolled, the lines of rigging groaned like low, angry beasts. William breathed deep the smell of hemp mixed with oil and considered there were few sweeter smells on earth, he shut his eyes.

At first, he thought another crewmember had discovered him sleeping on the coiled ropes, William opened his eyes enough to see a hand grasp his bracelet.

Although his mind felt foggy from sleep, no amount of fog could mistake what he saw. The inscrutable hand wanted his bracelet. The dilemma loomed clear. Either he let the hand complete its task and remove the bracelet or he bring its owner into his world and undo some of what he worked so hard to accomplish. In the end, there was no contest. William could not, would not, give up what he cherished for so long. With a tug he hadn't exercised in years, William grasped the hand that held his wrist and pulled. In an instant, a tall lanky young man stood before him.

Randy's surprise and fear were complete. He pedaled back from the large figure loitering in the coiled ropes as though an infectious disease radiated from close proximity. The resulting action made him trip over another pile of coiled rope. For

a guy who had a snappy comeback in any situation, Randy was speechless.

William stood and stretched a kink out of his back, then, walked over to where the kid laid sprawled on the coiled line. "You know, I could kill you for that." He shook his head in disgust. "But the sad truth is you wouldn't even know why you were dying, would you?"

Randy shook his head no. "Who are you?" he asked in a whisper. "And where am I?"

"In a word, you're with me. As to where that is, well, maybe we'll get to that, maybe we won't." William reached down and helped the young man to his feet, directed him to sit on a low hatch cover, then squatted in front of him. "First things first, what were you doing with my bracelet? Just trying to get a closer look? Or, were you going to steel it from an old man's spindly arm. Because if you were, I'll snap your neck like a chicken's right here and now. And don't think I can't do it, because I can. You're in my world now, don't lie, I can spot one a mile away."

Randy's mind raced over the events of the past few minutes. He did not know what to say or even if he wanted to talk. Who knew what rules existed in this dream world? After a deep breath, he blurted out the last few things he remembered. "I finished painting the room and went for a break. Nobody was in the room but an old guy; Chicago was playing the Mets on television, so I stopped to watch, that's all, honest."

William smiled on the inside, but refused to giveaway his poker face. He saw fear in the kid's face, yet knew he told the truth, at least part of it, anyway. "So, how did you end up with your hand wrapped around my gold?"

Randy swallowed and tasted a coppery flavor in his mouth. "Well, I saw it on your wrist." At this point Randy considered a lie, and then thought better of it. The man before him didn't look like the type you made up stories to. "I saw it there, at first I walked away, but then I came back and touched it. It felt warm. I didn't intend to steel the thing, I swear. But after I looked at it, I couldn't look away, that's the truth. You can believe me or not."

Oddly enough, William believed every word. Happenstance came together at just the right time to force the issue. When he truly didn't want to go on with life, when he stood knocking at death's door and the fear gone, he's pulled back.

Considering how hard he pulled the kid into his world, William thought he might have taken two years from him. Disgust summed up the word he felt most. In another time, he could have killed the kid for his intrusiveness. "So, what's your name, and do you have any idea where you are?"

Randy did his best to pull himself together. If this were a dream, it didn't feel like it. He could feel the ocean spray as the ship rocked through a trough. The man standing in front of him wore tattered clothes that covered a body more like

tanned granite than flesh, and the sun on Randy's back burned like he remembered the Florida sun before moving to the land of ice and snow. "My name's Randy Beret. I mean no disrespect mister, but I have no idea where I am, or when, or how I got here."

William liked Randy, despite his culpability in bringing him back from the inevitable trip toward death that seemed, for the moment at least, on hold. "Don't worry; I'm not going to hurt you."

Standing straight and facing the sun, William removed a long leather strap from his back pocket, then proceeded to tie his hair into a ponytail that reached his shoulder blades. "I'll try and keep this simple. What I'm about to tell you is the truth, on that you'll have to trust me. And there's a reason why I'm telling you this, so listen up, your life depends on it."

"Columbus hadn't discovered the new world the year I was born, but I sailed on his fourth voyage. As a commander, there were none better than Columbus; history doesn't treat him with the respect he deserves." William looked toward the port horizon as if he were looking for something. "I loved every minute of the adventure, the life and most of all, the sea. I love her as a man loves a woman. So, here we sit over two-hundred years later on a ship headed in the same direction, just you, me and our shipmates."

"When I was about your age, my big brother and I were sponge diving off an island in the

Mediterranean. While exploring a cave he found this bracelet in the sand." William thrust his thick right arm in the direction of Randy's face. "From that day to this, it has been off my arm only once." William chuckled more to himself than to anyone else. "I painted it black so my father didn't know its value; he would have made me give it over if he knew. My brother knew its worth, but he never let on.

"There's something different about me from other men. And I'll be honest, I don't know if that difference is because of that piece of gold I wear on my arm, or maybe it's something in me. I can take the essence of a man's life and give it to myself. Or do just the opposite." Again, William looked to the port horizon and noticed what he knew came next. He looked back at Randy. "I saved my brother's life the day he found this bracelet. He drowned and I couldn't stop it from happening." William held his arm up and looked at the gold around his wrist. "I cradled him in my arms on the bottom of our fishing boat the way a mother cradles her child and I wanted to die. Then, he woke up. At the time I had no idea I brought him back.

"Is it something I have in me, like an extra chromosome gives a man Down Syndrome, one less and I can suck the life from a man the way you suck soda through a straw? Or, is it the bracelet I wore from the day my brother drowned? To tell the truth, I don't know. I take from men and remain

young. I've given to others and they gain youth." William walked to the bow of the ship and pulled two flintlock pistols from a rose wood box. Then he pushed a cutlass into the blue sash that held up his britches. Randy stood and took a step backward. "This isn't for you kid, William hefted the pistols, but you're right to be afraid."

Once again, William looked to port. "We don't have much time so I'll finish this up. Think of me as a vampire without evil intent. Or just a normal man who can take life and impose it upon himself. Whatever way you look at it, I've lived a long time. But don't get the notion that I take indiscriminately, because I don't. Most often, my profession puts me in harm's way and there are always men with wounds who welcome my touch and in doing so, I take away their pain.

"Now along comes you. You see an old man in a nursing home with one foot in the grave, you put a move on the most important thing in my life and wind up here in my memory, and about two years older I suspect. Which, of course, makes me two years younger. A situation I did not want. And there's one more minor bit of information for you. As I wasted away in that fine establishment where you found me, I passed the time by reliving my life through memory. And it's been a long life. Consider this as a dream with a bite. It is like a dream, but the reality I lived is here and now, as you can see. At the moment, I can't send you back.

"Look behind you kid."

Randy's eyes opened wide as he noticed the approaching ship.

"Okay, so here's the story. You came at the wrong time and I can't send you back to your safe world of painting rooms and watching the Mets. In a few seconds, that seemingly innocent looking ship is going to give us a broadside, and what is coming next will not be pretty. If you want to live, stick by my side. Do you understand?"

Randy shook his head and stood next to William.

"Not so close, the first volley is going to be messy. There," William pointed to his right, "get down below that railing." Randy did as he was told.

A moment later seven cannons from the pirate ship let loose at once. The two ships were so close that planks of decking and pieces of oak from the freeboard flew back at the pirate ship and ripped through her sails. To Randy, it felt like the Abeldade had lifted out of the water, then thrown back down by a giant's hand. Three men on deck were killed by the opening shot.

The pirate ship had no name and its profile sat low in the water. The ship with no name would have gone about its business for many years if it were not for their choice that day. Unknown to the buccaneers, below decks on the Abeldade, next to all that fine furniture destined for the plantation owners, were fifty replacement army regulars on their way to bolster the British garrison in

Barbados.

Besides the three men killed on deck, three of the army regulars below deck died. In less than two minutes the remaining forty-seven regulars were on deck like a swarm of angry yellow jackets, mad as hell, and looking for pay back, a development that took the ship with no name totally by surprise. The battle intensified.

Thick white, then black smoke billowing and moving as a living thing drifted over Randy. It stung his eyes and made them tear. It filled his lungs and made every breath an effort. Looking up from his safe niche, he watched as William jumped on a high hatch cover in plain view of ten men from the other ship. Smoke drifted past the big man as a stiff breeze billowed his shirt. And through it all, Randy could see the man smiling. The image burned in his memory like a branding iron sears its mark on a piece of meat.

William raised the pistol in his right hand and fired. Randy peered through an opening in the railing toward the other ship and saw a bright red spot bloom in the center of one man's chest. William raised the second pistol and another pirate fell dead. At the same time, the regulars took position and opened up in unison, after that salvo, the main fighting force that made up the ship with no name ceased to exist.

"Come on boy!" William held out his right hand. "Get up now and take my hand. Move fast and do as I do." Without hesitating Randy

scrambled from his safe position behind the cover of the thick railing. Strangely, the danger of the situation made him feel more alive than he ever felt in his life. He took William's hand and they jumped from the hatch cover to the top of the railing. "Have faith boy. Jump when I jump."

The two leapt from the railing and sailed through the air in the general direction of the pirate ship, a distance Randy saw as too far, even for one as big as his new friend. As they soared through the air, the battle, the two ships, the water, and all things real faded from view. Quiet replaced the sound of battle. Randy felt the man let go of his hand and saw his face for the last time as they drifted from one reality to another.

The background noise proved too much for William to disregard. He knew it came from the real world and he also knew no matter how hard he tried; he could not ignore it. With resolute submission to a world, he thought never to be a part of again, he opened his eyes.

Chapter 15

Tragedy, real tragedy, happens every day. Just ask any employee of New York City's, Hudson Hospital.

Whatever misfortune brings a person through the emergency room doors of Hudson, all manner of human suffering travels with them. And every day hospital staff goes about their business. A business that looks like a frenzied dance of total disorganized chaos, yet suffering is eased.

In time, most staff can tell after the initial assessment, who will live and who will not. It's not a talent most professionals brag about, after all, giving one-hundred percent would be impossible if one out of two health care professionals expressed the hopelessness of their efforts. Thus, everybody assumes all have a fighting chance, and whatever certainty of outcome realized, is kept private.

When Michael Arnet came through the doors of Hudson, most were certain the man had only hours to live. The real optimists thought no more than a few days. But just as tragedy stalks the hospital like a second story thief, so does another phenomenon. The other occurrence is rarer. Some people call it a miracle, an act of God. Others say

it's nothing more than a life and death roll of the dice, and this time the one who rolled got lucky. However, a person looks at it, Michael's recovery seemed nothing less than miraculous. Six months later, at the hospital's statistical meeting of morbidity and mortality, a more rational explanation for his recovery would be considered. The medication he received happened to be the latest HIV fighter, and for Michael, it worked.

In three weeks, Michael was able to walk with assistance. One week before that, his mental illness became obvious, thus his transfer to the medical surgical unit on the mental health wing. Michael Arnet went relatively unnoticed. When he became able to talk, he said his name was Peter Smith, and the hospital accepted it, for a while anyway.

During a case review, Michael's new doctor, James Thompson, could not find form 17B2. The form stating that the fingerprinting had been done. "I can't find the confirmation that his prints were taken," he said to the nurse. "Do you think we can call security and have them do it in the next day or two? Better late than never, right?" All sitting at the table agreed, and the nurse called security after the meeting. The next day Michael had his fingerprints taken, he did not object.

The report came back quickly. The man's name turned out to be Michael Arnet from upstate, New York, and he had an active warrant for murder and attempted murder. The team sat in

collective surprise, bordering shock. Not shock that they had a murderer among the many they had listed as patients, because sometimes they did have murderers. But because this one had gone undetected for so long. At last check, Michael had been a guest of Hudson for almost three months. It was the type of embarrassing situation the hospital's administration lost sleep over and the Daily News loved.

"What do we do with him now?" Judy, the head nurse, asked.

Izzy Libner considered for a minute. "Monday morning the State Police will pick him up and take him back to Orange County. He'll probably wind up in Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center for a while. After that, who knows. For the moment he's secure on our locked unit. Make sure all staff know his history and to keep an eye on him." Izzy looked around at his staff. "I know it's not the best of ideas, but the man is sick, physically and mentally. He's been here for a while now and there's no reason to believe he'll make any trouble over the weekend. Judy, please instruct all staff not to mention to Michael that the police will be here to pick him up on Monday. If somebody does, well, that's when we might have a problem. Everybody clear on that?" Most nodded their heads in understanding.

Socializing always seemed more important to Skippy Pezz than other obligations. Obligations

like arriving to work on time. Whether he paused to talk with one of the hospital's security guards, or lingered on Third Avenue to buy reefer, the fact remained, Skippy hated his job, and any excuse to delay going there had to be taken seriously. Somehow, he knew there were bigger and better things waiting for him somewhere in this city. He just knew it. One day soon he would find something more suited for a man of his talents. But for the moment he'd continue to work at Hudson on the psychiatric unit.

Today made the third time in seven days he reported to work late. Most days he flounced through the locked front door only five minutes or so late. In his mind, five minutes was not late at all. This day Skippy saw by the wall clock his normal five minutes had turned into twenty, he decided to keep a low profile for a while. He missed the shift report, and noticed the nurse counting medication. Congratulating himself for his diligence, Skippy paused to read the shift-to-shift report which sat open on the conference table. Most of it was the normal bull-shit. Who fucked who on the midnight shift, and who could he give a talking to. Skippy liked giving his man-to-man talk. In fact, he loved it.

He couldn't understand why nobody else thought of it. If you talked straight to these guys, just lay it on the line, results were more obvious than all that therapy shit. Hours and hours of talking and nobody gets anywhere. But take his

method, talk straight, "If you don't do what I tell you, I'll break your fucking ass." At the start of the month, when social security money flowed and patients received their spending money, it sounded more like, "Give me what you got and I'll keep that fagot away from you." Or, "Give me the money and I'll keep you in smokes." He charged for Marlboro's, but gave no name brand. Whatever the need, Skippy knew straight talk worked best on the scum he had to watch, while his true vocation waited for another day.

Then he saw it.

Quiet, Peter Smith, had a problem.

Once in the day-room Skippy did a quick visual survey, found who he wanted, then threw his massive three-hundred-pound bulk down hard on a wooden chair next to Peter Smith. "What's up my man?"

Michael didn't know what to say. For him, nothing had been up in a long time, and at the moment he wished it to stay that way. "Nothing's up. I was sleeping. That's all."

"Sure, sleeping. That's all right, that's good. But you and me got to have a talk and what we say is between you and me, know what I mean?" Skippy scowled and tried to look menacing. As if a look from his dour face would scare anybody into silence.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. He felt indifference to the fat man's threat and attempt at intimidation. "What do you want to talk about?"

Skippy took another quick survey around the room; it wouldn't do to have the nurse poking her face in where it didn't belong. "You remember those fingerprints that was taken the other day? Well, we got the results back from the police and we know you been up to some shit. And your name's Michael Arnet, not even Smith. And it said in the paper that you killed some lady and tried to kill your wife. Is all that shit true?"

Michael stared at the fat man and tried to comprehend the words he heard. He hadn't a clue.

He had limited memory of the time before coming into the hospital. Nothing solid and fixed in his mind. He lived on the streets, he remembered that, but not much more. Medication had made him numb to almost every emotion a person could have and fogged his thoughts. If indifference could be a lifestyle, it would be his. The protective shelter of the locked unit and the steady three meals a day made him complacent, he had no desires other than those being filled at the time. Yet when he heard what the fat man had said, something sounded familiar, a bell went off somewhere in the back of his head. At the moment the bell held no significance, but it was ringing nonetheless and Michael took notice. "I can't remember anything before I came into the hospital."

Becoming impatient, Skippy shifted his bulk, the chair groaned and sounded a loud crack. Under other circumstances he would assume the

patient lied. People on the street always told lies. Shit, he considered himself a master of the lie. But with this guy, he thought he might be telling the truth. If the guy couldn't remember, maybe he could shake a memory lose with the truth. "Okay my man, I hear what you're saying. Maybe you can't remember right now. You to think on it for a while. I want to know what it felt like when you killed that bitch. The report said you shot her four times in the heart, right in your own bedroom." Skippy smiled and shifted in his seat again, and the chair moaned and took a precarious slant to the left. "Bet that was a rush." Now he lowered his voice even more. "I want you to tell me everything. What it felt like. Were you excited? After you shot one bitch you shot your wife. Were you trying to kill her, too? Cause if you were, you fucked up. Report says she's doing fine. Anyway, you think on it for a while and I'll talk to you tomorrow. But don't put off thinking about it for too long, your ass is out of here on Monday. The cops are hauling you away. You think about those things I told you and I want a report tomorrow. Okay bro?" Skippy threw himself out of the chair and bounded across to the other side of the room where two other attendants were playing a game of pool.

His mind could not come up with the word "dumbfounded" nevertheless, he felt something odd gnawing away at the curtain of medication

induced fog that had lulled him for so many weeks. He decided then and there, he would take no more medication. That night he checked his evening meds, then went into the bathroom and spit them into the bowl. He watched the pills quickly disappear after he flushed, and as the water swirled into a fast whirlpool, his foggy brain came up with a plan. It might have been rudimentary, but it was a place to start, and it felt right.

On Saturday, Earley Henry stood by the day-room door, as he did every day he worked, and said for all to hear, "Okay guys, anybody wanting to go to AA, get in line here. We'll be going in a minute" AA meetings were daily and always drew a big group of eager men. Earley had to make sure everybody in line actually had a substance abuse problem. More often than not guys who never picked up anything more threatening than silverware got in line. Earley would ask those people to sit down, and if they didn't go, he told them to sit down. The meetings were always a relaxed event, but that wasn't why so many wanted to go. Coffee drew the crowd; all you could put away coffee. And smoking; if you were lucky enough to have a pack of smokes, a man could drag and puff his way through a pack. All restrictions were relaxed. That's the way AA meetings have always been.

Michael got up and stood at the back of the line when he heard the call for AA. Earley noticed his new addition and felt pleased. He had been

trying to persuade Peter Smith to join the group for weeks without success. Earley knew the guy had a substance abuse history and although the meetings in the hospital were probably not as beneficial as one in the community, he thought Peter might benefit from going.

As the group filed out of the day-room, Earley clapped Michael on the back, Michael smiled and followed the group down a stairwell, through a dimly lit hall, then into an area that looked like an old theater. The overall smell of rotting dampness permeated throughout, like the smell of an antique trunk opened after years in the basement. Michael wondered what kind of hospital had an attached theater, then dismissed the thought as not worthy of consideration. He had other things to think about. In the pit area, where the orchestra once played, sat a long table with a coffee maker and a stack of ashtrays. Everybody poured coffee, a few stood at the pot and downed a cup, then poured another before moving on. Some men sat on the edge of the stage, others in the first row, all seemed to know the routine of introducing themselves.

When it came Michael's turn to talk, he surprised himself with his own tale of illness, drugs and alcohol. Most of what he said he made up as he went along, and some of what he said came back as he talked. Michael made it a point not to mention how he came to abuse drugs and alcohol. When he finished, he could tell most of

his peers were impressed. Afterward, Michael jumped down from the stage, approached Earley and asked if he could use the bathroom?

Earley felt genuine satisfaction with Michael's ability to talk about his past. "Not bad," he said as he stood up, "you did good. The bathroom is in the back of the theater, I'll take you." Earley motioned to the other attendant he intended to take a patient to the bathroom. An okay single came back. The two men walked up the long aisle toward the back. Dark stains and poor lighting made it all but impossible to tell what color the carpet once was. Michael thought maybe red.

He didn't dwell on what needed to be done, nor did he have a conscience to question his actions. Michael needed to get out of this place however he could, and if somebody got hurt, well shit happened. The need to flee felt imperative. To be out of the hospital and free to do whatever business needed to be done, that's what mattered. Although, at the moment, that business remained outside his mental reach. After he had shed this place, whatever needed to be done would become clear, that much he knew.

Michael walked into the bathroom first, Earley followed. Normally Earley didn't trail a patient into the bathroom unless he thought he needed to. The bathroom had no exit and the two windows were too small for a man to climb through. But today he wanted to tell Peter once

again how good he did during the meeting. As Earley stepped through the door, Michael fell on him with his full body weight. Michael drove the larger man into the wall with bone jarring force. Before Earley had time to react to the initial blow and defend himself, Michael clutched both fists together into a tight ball, then caught Earley square on the chin with a blow he brought all the way up from between his legs. Under normal circumstances Earley could have easily taken Michael in a one-on-one confrontation, a fact Michael saw and understood. Thus, the need for surprise and to inflict a quick victory. If he allowed the larger man to gain an advantage, his escape plan would be over before it got under way. As it turned out, the blow to the chin took the fight out of Earley and Michael watched with satisfaction as the larger man's legs buckled. Two more vicious blows to the head and Earley laid face down on the old, white tile floor.

Working fast Michael exchanged shirts with Earley, the size was wrong, but it looked better than the hospital issue. Going through Earley's pockets, Michael took two sets of keys, his wallet and his identification badge. Without looking back, Michael walked out of the bathroom and turned left down the opposite hall the group originally came from. To Michael, the building looked older than dirt. The halls were large, poorly lit and in need of a good cleaning. Every now and then he passed an employee or a group of them, nobody

seemed to pay attention. That suited Michael fine.

After what felt like hours, and dozens of turns, he came to a large foyer with doors leading to the outside. Bright sunlight streamed through the double glass doors and beckoned for him to come this way and walk among the living again. Thirty feet, three steps down, and one security desk with a guard, were all that stood between him and freedom. The security guard faced the doors coming into the building. Michael paused to consider his options, but knew he couldn't linger long. At any moment somebody could come up from behind, or through the door. Either way, the security guard would undoubtedly shift his position and notice some guy just standing behind him.

If he sprinted past the guard Michael thought he could out run the guy. But if he did that, the alarm would go up and the hospital would be alerted to his escape. With much reluctance, Michael decided to keep moving and try to find another way out. To his left were four elevators, Michael hit the button for the last one on the left and got in when the door opened. His luck still held as the door opened to an empty box.

All the options on the elevator were up, a direction he did not want to go. Remembering the keys, he took from Earley; Michael fished them out of his pocket and found the one he thought would do. The barrel key. He slid it into the circular receptor and turned. At first nothing

happened, then the elevator bounced, jerked, and started down.

The elevator opened onto the kitchen. Bright lights bathed the kitchen area in such a way that not a shadow could be seen. People went about their work of cleaning the area and preparing food for the noon meal. After a moment two women got into the elevator and pressed for the third floor, Michael stepped out, the decision made for him.

Once in motion he knew he could not stop. Michael held his head up and walked as if he had a purpose, a place to go and he knew how to get there. Halfway through the kitchen he noticed a tired looking man making sandwiches. On impulse he approached the man. "Ah... my supervisor wanted me to get three of those." Without looking up to acknowledge who wanted the sandwiches, the man reached under the counter and pulled out a brown paper bag, gave it a practiced shake to open it, then dropped three wrapped meat loaf sandwiches in. "Thanks man." Michael walked toward the back of the kitchen where it looked brightest. Once in the back he walked past two employees having a smoke on the loading dock then walked down to the stairs to the parking lot and up toward the road. He was free.

Two blocks from the hospital Michael noticed a familiar figure moving in his direction. Michael looked to his left, then right. He found what he wanted in a litter strewn alley. He picked up a red brick, and waited. Again, he moved

without dwelling on the plan. Stepping quickly from the alley he swung the brick with all the force he could produce and struck the pedestrian in the head. The blow broke the brick in half as it dented the skull in the shape of the brick. Michael kneeled next to the dying man and said, "Over you go fat boy." Michael quickly took Skippy's wallet, then moved on.

Walking in the warm June sun made Michael smile and he knew everything would be fine.

Chapter 16

It seemed perverse, somehow twisted from the normal. To finish working her shift, step into a bright June, morning, then go home and climb into bed. Joanne loved the morning. She loved the light of day, and all the things that went along with living and working while the sun shone. The decision came to her smoothly and naturally as she walked across the parking lot toward her car, she would request a transfer to the day shift. Months before, when life felt uncertain and her place in the world tenuous, the thought of working in the main stream with its hectic pace, loomed large and impossible. Now, the certainty felt undeniable. She needed to be around people, she needed a challenge. Working the night shift served its purpose. It gave her the confidence that she could do the job. And as all things evolve, Joanne too evolved.

She didn't see him waiting two cars away, but he was waiting. Waiting for her. When Joanne stopped to fish her keys out of her bag, Harry Falter approached from behind. "Morning," he said.

She didn't scream too loud, but she did

scream. It sounded like a muffled blue jay cawing out a short, shrill warning to anybody who might be listening that danger's afoot. Her mind had been on other matters and not her surroundings, something she constantly reminded herself not to do. Joanne wheeled around quickly and almost fell over as all her weight ended up on her left leg. She knew the face of the man who now stood three feet away. Much too close for comfort. Harry something, that's who just scared her so bad she now had to pee. She didn't know what he did, or where he did it, just that she had seen him coming and going throughout the building a few times. "God. I'm sorry. You scared me." As soon as she made her apology, Joanne mentally chastised herself. She had no reason to apologize. He crept up on her, he should be saying "I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Harry said as he took a step closer, "you were probably thinking of something else and I startled you. It happens." Harry ran his right hand through his hair, his fingers splayed out to emulate a combing action. "I've been thinking about you. And I know you're not seeing anybody. I asked around." He smiled, revealing a set of teeth thick with yellow scum. "So, you want to get a cup of coffee with me. We should get to know each other."

A come-on in the parking lot. And a come-on by this guy. Besides giving her the creeps, he smelled bad. His pungent odor offended her senses. He smelled of old sweat, oil and vinegar,

and maybe curry. It all came together in a foul-smelling mixture that made her want to wretch. Joanne took a step backward; her backside bumped her car. She tried to think, but the guy took her totally by surprise. "Um... well... I don't think today is a good day."

Harry closed the distance between them, then put his left arm on the roof of Joanne's car, his armpit only inches from her face. "Maybe you would want to another time." Harry kept his voice low and, in his mind, he sounded sexy.

A quick glance to her left then right brought no comfort, she was alone. Joanne put her hand to her mouth and made an effort to talk without looking at the guy who now seemed only inches away. "I do have somebody I see." The lie came naturally and without guilt. "He doesn't work here. But we have a good relationship. And just last week we talked about getting engaged. If he saw me here with you, like this, there would be trouble, big trouble."

Now Harry put his right hand on the car roof and effectively blocked his prey from escape. That's how he thought of her. He hunted pussy, and this one, despite the limp and little facial sag, looked to have all the other parts required for a successful hunt. And besides, he knew for sure she wanted it. Hell, she wanted him, she just didn't know it yet. But she'd get the message soon enough, on that he felt sure.

Most mornings the day shift supervisor gave a cursory smile and hello, and that was fine. Tabatha didn't like to linger. Nor did she care for polite chitchat for its own sake. She knew Joanne went home promptly at eight and most mornings Tabatha worked it so she could watch her charge safely through the parking lot. Today the small talk seemed interminable, she knew she couldn't be rude. It would serve no good purpose to disrespect her supervisor's, supervisor. Tabatha smiled and played nice. And when she finally got away, she told herself not to be such a worrier, such an old lady worrier. Nevertheless, Tabatha picked up her pace as she put the strap of her gym bag over her head and let the tan canvas bag drop to her right hip.

As she walked, Tabatha thought of Joanne's new car, if it could be called a car. It sat bright red and looked something like a Jeep, but smaller, with a convertible top. From almost any angle Tabatha could instantly pick out the bright red and black canvas top among all the other dull lifeless cars in the parking lot. The car seemed, sexy. In Tabatha's mind's she saw it in a more natural setting. Perhaps parked next to a long white beach in Florida. And of course, she would be there to keep Joanne company on whatever beach they found to share. They would laugh, pack a lunch, lay about in the sun and do nothing more than enjoy the moment and each other's company. She finished the thought with a rebuke for a momentary fantasy that could

do her no good, other than distract her from the business at hand. She forced the image from her mind and looked for Joanne's car.

As the parking lot came into view her heart literally skipped a beat and her body froze where she stood. The happy red car still sat in the parking lot. And there, a man stood and loomed over Joanne in a menacing way. Tabatha's sense of the situation told her something bad was going on. She reached both hands into her gym bag and chambered a round into the gun. She didn't know what he would look like, this might be him, or maybe not. She would know soon enough.

The man didn't see her approach. Tabatha stopped at the end of Joanne's Jeep. She planted her feet firmly on the pavement, her right hand deep in the gym bag. Despite not seeing her, he sensed a presence and looked to his right. "You can move along dyke; my business isn't your business. Beat it!"

Tabatha immediately relaxed when she heard the man speak. The one that haunted her nights like a ghost, the thing she watched and waited for, never utters a word. When it happens, it will come quickly and no amount of small talk or juvenile bravado would be heard. Only death for one of them. "I think you should step back from the lady now. I'm holding a can of mace in my bag and if that doesn't discourage you, I also have a phone and can easily dial 911. And I'm sure if we took a survey of the female employees working

here, we could find more than a few who would consider your behavior at best harassment. So, it's up to you sport. What will it be? A face full of mace, then the police, and all those women coming forward when they see your name in the police blotter section of the paper. Whatever you decide, make it quick. I'm sick of looking at you. And right now, I'd just as soon shoot this mace in that ugly face of yours."

Women didn't talk to Harry Falter like that, and especially not dykes with crew cuts. He took one hesitant step in her direction to see if the bitch would take a step back. If she did, he'd press forward and control the scene. But she didn't step back, and to make matters worse, she took a step toward him as he took one toward her. "Fuck you, cunt." Harry's curse sounded more like a snake's hiss than a challenge for more. "I'll remember you, don't think I won't."

Harry turned and walked away, his strides were long and hulking. To Tabatha he looked like a sulking, petulant child who was sent to his room. She wanted to laugh but controlled her urge. Instead, she smiled wide. Her eyes sparkled and her face flushed with the rush of victory.

"How is it that when I need help, you pop up? Not that I'm complaining. That's the second time you were there for me. And I get the feeling that you... Oh, never mind."

Tabatha's focus had been on the man, on the confrontation that might be. She had no thought of

actually having a conversation with Joanne. That didn't happen in the dreams. After handling the situation as well as she had, and finding her words so easily, no words came to mind. Nothing witty or endearing. Tabatha said the first thing that popped into her head. "The second time?"

"Sure, you were at the gym and this guy wouldn't leave me alone. You asked him to give you a hand. He left me alone and I'd guess your request for help was more for my benefit. You could have asked any number of guys for a spot without walking clear across the room for his help. Don't get me wrong though, I'm appreciative. Honest." Joanne relaxed. "That guy had me rattled. He caught me by surprise and just wouldn't go away."

"Don't mention it, I've always hated bullies. That one looked like a world class bully. A real shithead." Both women laughed nervously.

"Ah... would you like to get some breakfast?" Joanne felt funny asking, yet the words sounded natural and right. "Normally I just go home and go to bed. I don't think I'd be able to sleep right now. If you like, we can go in my car."

"Breakfast? Sure, okay." Tabatha wondered if Joanne could sense her excitement, her racing heart. Her rational mind said, don't be silly how could somebody know that. And yet all her actions from the time of Darcy's death, and even before, seemed to go beyond the rational. Tabatha walked around to the passenger side of Joanne's car and

waited for her new friend to unlock the door. As Tabatha stepped into the vehicle, she marveled at disbelief. This did not happen in her dreams.

Becoming friends did not fit the equation.

After they buckled up, Joanne leaned toward Tabatha and said, "My name is Joanne Arnet." She held her hand out to complete the introduction.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Tabatha." They shook hands and were off in search of coffee. As the small red vehicle deftly dove in and out of early morning traffic it occurred to Tabatha that Darcy might have mentioned her name to Joanne during the course of conversation. For some reason, a reason Tabatha couldn't say, she didn't think so. Tabatha saw no spark of recognition in Joanne's eyes at the mention of her name.

The two women talked of small things as they sat in the bright diner. Polished chrome and mirrors covered the far wall. People came and went in dizzying regularity as the host spoke in an unfamiliar accent. It all felt surreal for Joanne. Since starting back to work she hadn't made a friend. Not a real friend. Not somebody she could call on the phone when she needed to just talk. Under other circumstances Joanne would not consider Tabatha as somebody she would seek a friendship with. But her life hadn't been normal in a long time. Despite the almost menacing physical appearance, something else came through that tough exterior, and Joanne picked up on it. After a bite of her pastry Joanne took a deep breath and

leaned over. She spoke softly. "Please don't be offended, can I ask, are you gay?"

The coffee tasted good and Tabatha was on the first sip of her second cup when Joanne asked the question. She almost choked on the hot liquid. After cleaning up what she spilled with two napkins she smiled and looked Joanne in the eyes. "Yes I am. My preference is those of my own sex. But you don't have to worry, it's not something you can catch from being too close to me. Other than my sexual preference, I'm more or less normal. Underneath where it counts. I mean, I could use a friend, too. Just a friend." Tabatha paused and waited for her new friend to get up and leave. To leave her sitting there alone because her inner beliefs would not tolerate having a lesbian for a friend.

"My best friend was a lesbian." Joanne said without looking up.

Tabatha's whole body shuddered. She tried to sound casual "Oh? What do you mean was? Is she cured now? Or maybe you don't have her as a best friend anymore because she is a lesbian?"

"My husband...." Tears welled up in Joanne's eyes. She cleared her throat. "My husband killed my best friend. Then he tried to kill me. In case you hadn't noticed I have some hard miles on this body, thanks to my husband. I think of Darcy often. She was a lesbian while she lived and I loved her as a sister. You see, I don't have any problem with your sexuality. It's what's on the

inside that counts. I think you are more than what I see on the outside. I don't know how I know, but I do. Now that you're convinced, I have a screw loose, I suppose I'll not see you again."

"You'll see me as much as you want, I'm not going away." Tabatha reached across the table and touched Joanne's hand and Joanne remembered the power of a friend's touch.

The friendship solidified over coffee and apple-turnover. Joanne cleared her throat for the second time. "So, you work in housekeeping. Can I change the subject for a minute?" Tabatha motioned okay with her head as she finished her second cup of coffee. "Do you know where the patient's personal belongings are stored. I have a patient on my unit and we don't know anything about him. It's almost like he never existed, yet there he sits day after day. Thought I could find a clue to his identity if I went through his things."

"Sure, I know where the room is. It's in the basement area not far from my office. It's really not just my office. All the housekeeping staff use it, but I'm the only housekeeper on the first shift so I think of it as my office. If you ever need me and can't find me, I'll more than likely be there reading a Colleen Hoover novel."

"I love Colleen Hoover. I started reading her last year. Tomorrow, can you show me where that room is. I take my break around three-thirty. What do you think?"

"Tomorrow's fine. But I should warn you,

that room's a disaster. I'll give you a hand if you want. It's such a mess you might want to consider leaving a trail of bread crumbs at the door to find your way out." Tabatha smiled and for the first time since Darcy's death she felt a glimmer of true happiness. It felt alien, and to her surprise she felt guilt. Guilt that she could feel anything other than sadness. And still, Tabatha recognized the spark of distinctiveness that Darcy saw in Joanne. Like a baton being handed from one runner to the other, Tabatha grasped the honor firmly from Darcy and promised not to falter. She would be there for Joanne for friendships sake. "Sure, tomorrow is fine. Meet me in the basement at three-thirty. Take elevator E, I'll be the one at the bottom with two cups of coffee."

Joanne also had guilt. A therapist would have called it survivor's guilt. Whatever label it had; Joanne reminded herself that she paid her dues. She had every right to take whatever happiness came her way. Whether that happiness came in the form of a sunny June morning and the way the it warmed her to the bone. Or, the friendship of a woman who would otherwise draw scorn from society for the way she looked and the lifestyle she embraced. Sometimes life did suck, and other times, well, maybe it wasn't all that bad.

She reported to work a few minutes early. Joanne needed to talk with her supervisor and officially request the day shift, or the evening shift if a day position were not possible. Either shift

would let her sleep nights and enjoy the daylight hours. And almost without her even being aware of it, Joanne slowly took control of her life and started to move on from yesterday.

Dolly Peterson's smile was large and genuine. Most nurses took their jobs so serious they never left room for a smile. Dolly thought those sour folks had missed something in life. Nursing is a serious business, but by God, if a person couldn't lighten up what good did any of it serve? Flipping through her notes she came to William Doe. "Joanne, you'll never believe it. William woke up today. That's the best way I can explain it, he just opened his eyes and started talking to the day staff. He didn't say much, but he's awake." Joanne wanted to know more about the man. She had to know more about him.

Starting at one in the morning Joanne quietly visited every resident in her care and observed respirations. Sometimes she took a pulse, it all depended on what she noticed. Then she'd chart on her observations. She performed this ritual each day and on more than one occasion spotted a problem before it had a chance to get out of control.

At one-twenty-five in the morning she stood at William's bedside and watched the man breathe. His respiration was almost indiscernible. Although a big man, his body looked like a caricature of what once was, and she felt sadness. Instead of

strong and vigorous, his limbs now laid still and withered. Joanne took William by his right hand and searched for his pulse. She felt the thick band of gold around his wrist. With a knowing hand she quickly slid it back enough to find the pulse that beat strong and steady.

"What does my pulse tell you?"

Joanne dropped William's hand and did a small hop backward from the bed. The darkened room did not let her see the man's face. Regardless, the voice sounded soft and strong. It did not belong to a man who looked as he did. The voice belonged to those dark blue eyes with the black ring.

Gathering her resolve as a professional, Joanne cleared her throat. "It tells me you have a strong heart." She waited, and when no response came, she spoke again. "I heard you were awake, but I didn't believe it."

"You believed it. That's why you remained by my bed and took my pulse." Now William paused. "I'm glad you lingered. I saw you one day and thought you were my patron, or perhaps just another figment of my active memory. Either way, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is William. And you are?"

To Joanne, the voice sounded thick and warm as a southern night, and strong as masculinity itself. "My name is Joanne. I'm your nurse." Then as an afterthought. "Do you know where you are, or how you came to be here?"

William laughed. "How I came to be here?"

He laughed again. "Yes, I know how I came to be here, and at the moment I'm thinking it's a mistake on my part and that I should have accepted my situation for what it was. The important thing is that I have you as a friend in this cold place while I think over my course of action."

To make two friends in one day, for Joanne it felt almost too much to bear. But could she truly call a patient in her care anything more than a patient in her care? She didn't know. For the moment it felt fine to call him friend. "Okay William, I'd be honored to call you friend. And while you consider your 'course of action' may I suggest that you take advantage of our physical therapy program. You've been in bed for a long time. If you ever want to feed yourself again, you'll need to do some hard work. Trust me, I know about the hard work part."

"You might be right about the work; I feel weak as a kitten. Okay, I'll work to improve my strength, but only with your help. You'll show me what I need to do."

"Well, I guess I could." Joanne ran her right hand through her hair. With the lights out she could imagine how he looked years before. Tall, strong, those eyes blazing in the sun. "Yes, I come by every night." She took a breath. "If you want me to help you, I'll do it. But it's not going to be a secret. I don't work that way. Everything we do will be charted and talked over with the team. There will be no secrets here."

"Yes, that sounds fine. No secrets here. And you will stop by every night and we'll work on my physical health. You'll chart everything except what you feel in your heart and who you think I am. Because to do so would only confuse the issue. You're a special person Joanne. I knew that the first time I saw you. Help me, and maybe someday I can return what I have taken. Continue your rounds, we'll talk more tomorrow. Meeting you is my pleasure nurse Joanne."

At precisely three-thirty in the morning the E elevator door silently slid open on the basement level. Tabatha waited with two cups of coffee. Joanne stepped off the elevator and accepted the cup offered as though it were a lifesaving elixir. The two women smiled, both pleased that the other didn't forget their meeting. Tabatha said she would be there with coffee, and Joanne said she would spend her break in Tabatha's company.

"So, where is this storage room you were warning me about?" Joanne asked as they started down the hall.

Tabatha motioned to her left. "Not far, down the hall and on the left. But like I said yesterday, it's really a mess. I've been in it a few times and there's things that look turn of the century old. Actually, I think the hospital might use the area for storage too." Tabatha laughed and shook her head. "I kid you not. The place reminds me of a museum's storage area as opposed to a patient's

storage area. Everybody knows how bad it is, but nobody wants to deal with it." Tabatha paused in front of a large steel door. "Well, here we are." She inserted a key from the ring that hung on the clip attached to her belt, then opened the door.

The size of the room took Joanne back. Its length stretched a full fifty feet and the width twenty, much larger than she anticipated. It had a high ceiling with boxes and bags piled from the floor, to the hanging light fixtures. A small path ran down the center of the room, it looked to be the only open floor space. Joanne's heart sank. "My God. How are we ever going to find what we're looking for in all this?"

"It won't be easy. The stuff closest the door is the oldest. As you go to the rear, the belongings become newer. And if you look at the boxes, you'll notice that each one has a name and date on it. In some cases, one group of belongings, like this pile," Tabatha pointed to one box and three bags, "can be easily identified as belonging to one person. See, here's the name on the box and the bags behind it go with the box." Tabatha smiled and patted Joanne on the back. "Come-on girl, have some faith and follow me." Slowly, the two women worked their way through a mountain of antiques and musty smelling clothes at three-thirty in the morning.

When they came within ten feet of the far wall they stopped. "Okay." Tabatha said. "Let's start here. You look on the left side and I'll take the

right. Be careful. We don't want an avalanche. They wouldn't find us for days."

Despite the enormity of their task, it didn't take long to find the box they sought. It sat alone, wedged against the far wall. Joanne found it. As she pushed it out of her way to gain access to another section, she noticed the name "William Doe" written on the masking tape that sealed the box "Over here partner."

"Partner" Tabatha liked the sound of that. She had cobwebs and dust on her shirt and the smell of old things clung to her clothes like smoke from a campfire. She carefully worked her way over to where Joanne knelt in front of the large box she had worked to the middle of the path. "It's okay, you can open it. That's what we came here for."

Without hesitating, Joanne set a determined look on her face, made a tight fist of her right hand, then brought her fist down on the tape sealing the top of the box. The tape split the entire length of the box. They both smiled, then Joanne opened the box.

Old man clothes made up the bulk of the box's content. Numerous ancient looking flannel shirts with elbows worn so thin light passed through the material as if it were cheap gauze. Joanne lifted out a stack of gray and green Dickey's. Black shoes, worn boxer shorts, just clothes. Nothing to give a hint to the man's identity. She had her heart set on a photo album,

maybe a box of letters. She found none of that. Instead, lined across the bottom of the box were seven bound journals. Joanne grunted as she hauled all seven of them from the bottom of the box. She didn't hold much hope for finding any insight in these worn looking volumes. Nevertheless, they were something. Joanne took two of William's pants from the box, folded them twice to make a cushion, then settled on the floor with the journals on her lap. "Here you go," Joanne handed Tabatha three of the seven volumes, "just take a peek in those and see what's there. I'll look through these."

"I think he might have been a writer," Tabatha said as she thumbed through the last book. Her search had been only cursory, but what she did glean from the books was a sense of adventure. An adventure that made her smile. "Damn. Joanne, did you see the time? You had a fifteen-minute break and I just noticed we've been here almost a half hour. If you don't want to be looking for a new job, I suggest we move on. Take the books. I have a bag in my office to put them in. You can take them home and read them when you have the time." Joanne looked dubious. "Trust me," Tabatha chided, "nobody will ever know."

The two women stuffed the clothes back in the box and put the box against the wall where it originally sat. Then, moving quickly, they retraced their path through the storage room and walked down the hall toward Tabatha's office. Neither said

anything on the walk.

"This should do you fine," Tabatha said as she held up a brown shopping bag from Bloomingdale's. "I'll hold the bag open, you put the books in, okay?"

"Sounds good to me." Joanne did think the bag perfect. As Tabatha held the bag open, Joanne leaned over and gently laid all seven journals in the bottom.

It crossed Tabatha's mind that if she leaned over two inches, she could kiss Joanne. And she didn't think her new friend would protest. But if she did mind, that would be the end of their friendship.

After a hasty good-bye and promise to see each other the next night at break time, the two women parted company. Joanne clutched the bag close to her now dusty uniform. She didn't think so at first, but now, she was sure. The volumes were what she sought.

Chapter 17

New York City is celebrated for its December holiday spirit. Whatever a person's faith, the holiday creeps into the collective psyche with an urge to shop for gifts, express goodwill and celebrate with champagne.

For those living in the City, there's another month that inspires the spirit as well as the body.

The month is June.

In June, daylight seems to stretch long into the night and the weather lingers warm and inviting. Men and women by the thousands venture from towering office buildings. Then, to raise their winter pale faces skyward, the way flowers turn to face the early morning sun. They flock to the parks, or loiter on stoops to watch the show.

Everybody is watching the show.

Men in fine Italian suits with suspenders and gold chains loosen their ties and watch women walk from here to there. They watch long legs in black stockings and tight skirts. And of course, the women watch the men. It's a show that everybody plays a role. The weather's fair and the living is truly easy.

Although he did not know June eighth as the

actual date he left the hospital, Michael Arnet sensed summer. Living on the streets would be a lot more hospitable than his previous effort.

The vulgarity of homelessness and the sad reality of living on the streets is something the average American would rather not consider. Yet in New York City, there had been a time when living on the streets seemed to be more a lifestyle choice than the aftermath of a cataclysmic life altering situation that deposited an individual in such a precarious situation.

Eventually, the public's inclination toward forbearance regarding the homeless waned. Under new policies, the homeless were moved on from their shanty towns and given a choice. Accept the city's help in finding permanent housing, or face jail. Most accepted the help. However, there were some who still chose to live on the street despite the city's efforts to discourage such practices. Michael Arnet counted himself among those still defying public pressure, and chose to play dodgeball with the police. And because of the city's efforts, Michael found himself in constant motion.

He drifted down Second Avenue, then over to the Bowery and finally down to the South Street Seaport. Once there, the steady flow of tourists provided him with just enough cash from panhandling to get by. Sadly, for him, and to the delight of the local merchants, after only a short time the police moved him on from that location. He then moved on up toward Times Square and

again, the tourists helped out when he appeared in their path and asked for money. Most gave what change they had just to see him go back to whatever alley he came from. His habit of unexpectedly stepping into a person's space and asking for money proved profitable.

Considering the time of year and the ease of living on the streets, moving on every few days didn't seem that big a deal. And if the police were not moving him on, Michael knew he would be moving on anyway. As the days waned into summer, whatever medication he had in his body to fight the effects of his mental illness slowly filtered out. And with the disappearance of his medication came a resurgence of his symptoms.

During the last week in June Michael crossed the Manhattan bridge and traveled to the land of Brooklyn. His reasoning, he had no good reason for his wandering, it just felt right. And all the while, the voices that had been quiet for so many months now started to reemerge. His father talked to him, and the voice of his gun talked to him despite not physically possessing the gun, a fact he never considered odd. And there were all the other voices that haunted his every waking hour. Most he could tolerate. Some were almost friendly, but the others. The others were from a side of his brain that he cared not to know. They were dark voices that compelled him to do unimaginable things, and he knew those voices were the ones he would eventually embrace, as he

had always done.

Once in Brooklyn he took up residence in an abandoned building just two blocks off of Atlantic Avenue, and on the edge of the East New York section of that borough. It also sat just one block from a soup kitchen run by the Church of the Sacred Tabernacle. Michael could give a rat's ass who ran the soup kitchen. If they served free food, he would listen to the religious pitch. The Sacred Tabernacle seemed a bit more, in your face, regarding the Praise The Lord price tag for dinner, at least more in your face than the Salvation Army. And it was true enough, if he didn't want to listen, there were always other voices he could tune in on. Voices not so pious.

The building Michael took up residence in sat toward the middle of several others, all were abandoned. Each structure stood four stories high and were separate, yet connected. They were faced with a brown stone that had turned black with age. All the buildings wore the same coat of black soot. To Michael, the soot looked as though it were representative of all the bad things the entire city had borne over the past hundred years, and those bad things chose this one small block to be deposited on. An all-encompassing ash of sorrow to coat this city block like a death shroud. And in the covering it snuffed out whatever real life could flourish there. Now, the only life that lingered dwelt as weeds in a litter strewn empty lot. They produced nothing, they had no industry and slowly

suffocated under the thick black blanket.

The first two buildings in the line had fresh cement blocks over their first-floor openings. It was an obvious attempt to keep people out, and it worked. Michael took the fourth building in the row. Garbage littered the gutter and nobody strolled the sidewalk. If someone had to walk there, he or she moved along quickly with head down and shoulders hunched to ward off the black thing trying to drag a person down to the lowest point of that very same sad reality that covered that section of Brooklyn.

The street looked like death.

Maybe that's why Michael paused when he saw it and listened to the voice suggest that this would be a good place to lay low for a while and figure what the fuck was really going on.

At first Michael thought he had the building to himself. Quickly he discovered otherwise. He was not alone. There were other people in the building, lots of them. A majority of the residence seemed to be in a similar circumstance as himself, displaced street people who could not live on the street without being hassled by the police. Michael noticed one drug dealer living and doing business on the first floor. He thought the dealer could bring trouble to the place in the form of a police raid or a rival gang. Either way, he decided to keep a close eye on him.

Michael took over an apartment on the top floor of the building, one with a street view. There

were remnants of previous squatters, a fact that did not surprise him. An old brown mattress sat in one corner of the living room, and across from it, piled almost three feet high, sat a mound of empty beer bottles and spent food cans. The image seemed clear enough in his mind's eye: the previous resident would sit on the mattress and eat from the can or drink his beer, then, when done, toss the waste across the room onto the pile. "Bet the landlord would shit if he saw that." Michael laughed at his own sophomoric humor, then cringed at the hollow sound his voice made in the dirty and lifeless room. Standing at the foot of the mattress he could see stains of almost everything that had ever been eaten while lounging there, and a few stains that were suspect. Without further thought, he threw himself face first onto the mattress and promptly fell asleep.

When he woke the room was in almost total darkness. And because of the darkness, the line between reality and the dysfunctional workings of his weary, broken mind were blurred. Things were moving around him, he heard their soft scurrying, whatever they were. Laying on the mattress in the dark he could imagine what might be making the whisper like scraping sounds that, despite being just barely audible, also sounded as loud as a train bearing down on him.

His future dwelt somewhere in that sound. He didn't know how he knew that, but he knew. Michael remembered the fat man, and some of the

things he said. Were you trying to kill her too? That's what he asked. He also wanted to know if it got me off. Then, ...report says she's doing fine.

A can fell of the top of the pile. As it worked its way to the floor it dislodged several others and soon a mini avalanche of brown cans and bottles spread out across the faded green linoleum. One can made it as far as the mattress Michael laid on. It struck the side by his left arm then slowly rebounded. The sudden noise served to heighten Michael's awareness of the room around him and the steady background sound of scraping. He thought, whatever made that sound started the avalanche to get his attention. He listened, if that's what he needed to do. With all his concentration he listened to the sounds in the room and after a while those sounds were not just sounds of movement, they were whispers of hundreds, maybe of thousands of people, and they were all talking to him.

Joanne. The voices whispered her name over and over in unison until they sounded like a chorus with laryngitis. Michael turned his head slowly to his left and looked toward the sound's origin. The room now seemed just a bit brighter than it did when he first woke, and what he saw with that additional light made his skin crawl. There, between the pile of cans and his mattress were thousands of roaches. They all looked as if they were sitting on their back legs like a well-trained dog will sit upon that command. Each roach faced

the mattress, faced him. The room smelled foul with their collective presence. Like each one went through a pipe of raw sewage to get there and a tiny bit of that sewage still clung to their collective backs.

Whatever made these things come together like this could also make them all go scurrying forward, and if they all moved at once with the speed, he knew they had, he would be covered in roaches before he had time to scream. Running wasn't an option. But looking at the horde hurt his eyes and made his breath come in short hitches. Michael closed his eyes and listened. And after a short time, they began to talk as one. And they knew things. The tiny fuckers knew all about him and who he once was. They told him of his wife, the bitch. The one who planned to leave him. The one who conspired against him. And after a while they filled in all the missing parts of his life that up until now, he had no interest in.

After listening to the roaches whisper his life story, a story of before this time. Michael concluded the information to be accurate. It felt like the information came into his mind and turned on a long row of light switches to his past. As each switch went on, it brought with it all the other related memories that went along with that switch. The roaches whispered, Daddy's gun. Then everything related to the pistol came back to him. All the nights sitting on the floor behind the water heater and rolling the smooth, cold metal across

his cheek and listening to the click, click of the chamber as it turned. The roaches whispered the name Darcy Bordu and the switch to that individual came on. The lesbian bitch who tried to take his wife away. But he showed her. He let the cunt know who made the decisions in his house. The memory of shooting her in the chest came back as vivid as though it were yesterday. And yes, Flippy, Nippy, or whatever the fuck your name was, he did have a woody as he pulled the trigger and it felt like the best sex ever.

Sometime during the night, he fell into a deep sleep.

Michael woke the next morning with a sore throat and his body felt stiff all over. The roaches were gone, his friends were gone, but the memory they planted, like seeds in fertile soil, remained and grew in detail as time passed. He remembered it all. And with that memory came the same urgency that once existed. He had cause at one time to shoot his wife in the head, now he knew she lived and that cause still remained.

In Michael's twisted logic, every bad thing that ever happened to him, was a result of his wife.

His life would not be safe as long as she lived. If she would only die, all his problems would be over. He would somehow fulfill his destiny and like the commercial says, he would then, and only then, be all that he can be.

But first the bitch had to die.

Now, looking back, it all made perfect sense.

All the bad luck he had over the past year. All the bad luck he ever had in his entire life. Getting sick. Living on the streets. Living in shit-hole rented rooms. Working at go nowhere jobs. It all fit. All these things were happening because she wasn't dead, as he thought she had been. Somehow, she survived and that's why his life fell apart. But he knew how to make the situation right. He would find her. There were no choices, it would be done right this time. In the end, he knew that his pain would be over. In the end he would somehow have the peace he deserved.

The only question in his mind was how to successfully pull this off without being caught by the police. He knew the truth, the police were looking for him and despite his illness, he hadn't been caught. It had to be a sign from whatever power ruled the universe. Good or bad, he had been saved for this one purpose. It had to be so. Joanne survived by an act of fate, and now that same fate saved him to finish the job.

Later that day Michael stopped by a local bodega and bought a Tracfone under a made-up name. After an easy search he had the number, he sought. A moment later a recording confirmed he had indeed connected to Saint Joseph's Hospital. After listening to numerous prompts and directions to call other numbers he heard the code for the department he sought and punched it in. After three rings a serious sounding woman picked up on

the other end.

"Good morning. Saint Joseph's Hospital, billing department."

The smallest hint of a smile came over Michael's face. He needed information on his wife's current location and that information would not be easy to come by. As a matter of fact, the chances of the direct care staff remembering his wife and possibly his role in her hospitalization seemed good, too good. One call to the wrong nurse or doctor and they were sure to contact the police and report his inquiry. And with cellular GPS the possibility existed that a police car could come by while he talked on and on with an overly chatty doctor or nurse. Then, busted, end of plan.

Michael knew his illness would never let him lead a normal life; but if he didn't have the bitch-kitty of all fucked up brains, he suspected he would be a smart guy and have an otherwise normal life. Sometimes, when he needed to reason things out, the thinking department came through like a washed-up ball player would sometimes get lucky and slam one out of the park, as long as the voices stayed out of the picture Michael knew he could hit one out of the park.

The one hospital department that would be willing to share information without knowing too much of the specific circumstances of Joanne's situation would be billing. "Ah... hello. My name is Michael, Michael Arnet. Last year my wife Joanne was in your hospital and the insurance

company is still sending me notices that we owe some money on her medical bills. We called them up and... well... this is kind of embarrassing. I can't figure out what we owe. No matter how many times I talk to them. I was hoping that maybe you could check out the bill and tell me what you have. Do we owe you money? Do we owe the insurance company money? And if we owe them money, how is that possible?"

"Yes of course Mr. Arnet, just give me a moment to bring your account up on the computer." After a moment she came back. "Well, according to our records you and your wife do not owe any money to us. She was here only one day before we sent her to Westchester Medical. Her insurance took care of that day with us. Maybe you should give Westchester a call. If I had to guess, that's where your problem is. Would you like me to give you the number?"

"Yes. Thank you." Michael took the number and went through the whole process again; except this time the call was local. As with Saint Joseph, the person he talked to in the billing department at Westchester County Medical Center seemed eager to investigate. If the chance existed that somebody out there owed the hospital additional money and they had the temerity to call, well then, there would be some information shared. And as before no outstanding balance could be found. The nice lady hoped his wife felt well and all concerned were satisfied with the care she received while at

Westchester. Michael assured her the care and treatment, exceptional.

Just before hanging up Mary Nash noticed that Mrs. Arnet went from Westchester to Pine Brook Head Trauma. "You know," she added almost as an afterthought, "the problem might be with Pine Brook. Have you considered giving them a call?" Michael said he surely had not, but if she had their number, he would truly be appreciative. He wrote the number on his left hand. Three minutes later he had the billing department of Pine Brook on the line.

"I understand how frustrating working with insurance companies can be. After all, that is what I do for a living. Between you and me, there isn't a day goes by that I don't shake my head in amusement at some of the things they try and pull." Sandy Olsen knew perfectly well how insurance companies were, and when the opportunity came for her to share her opinion, she took it. How often did people call with questions just like Mr. Arnet's. Twice a day? Three times a day? It seemed bad enough that those family members calling had to deal with the emotional burden of a loved one in Pine Brook, but to add on the additional annoyance of dealing with the unfeeling, mercenary insurance companies, well, that was too much.

"According to our records, you wife's insurance paid for most of the first ninety days with us. Then... let's see here. Okay, here we go.

Medicaid kicked in. That's New York Medicaid. Medicaid is still helping pay the follow up bill, that won't be for too much longer. Your wife now has insurance from her new employer."

"That's where I get confused," Michael said. "Between her old insurance, Medicaid and her new insurance, I just can't figure out where the problem is."

"You need to contact her current carrier," Marry Wilson said. She knew it was her job to help families with their billing questions but she needed to get back to her paperwork Her tone took a sharp edge, "Anyway, Hillcrest Hospital has Blue Cross Blue Shield of New York for its provider. Not a bad company. Actually, the policy went into effect only recently. And... I can't see that there is any problem with our bill. That is, there is nothing outstanding. Between her old insurance, Medicaid and her new health care provider, things are good on this end. I hope that I helped. Wherever the problem is, it isn't here with us."

"Yes, you were a help. Thank you very much." Michael ended the call and thought for minute. He knew Hillcrest Hospital. The bitch worked either at the hospital or the nursing home. It wouldn't be hard to figure out which one. The parking lot serviced both and all he had to do was find a shady spot and wait. Sooner or later, he would see her. But right now, he could use some money. Some real money and maybe a gun. And while he made a wish list, he might as well throw

some reefer on top of the list. *Well*, piped up the voice in his head, *you know where to go shopping don't you?*

Indeed, he did know where to go shopping.

Chapter 18

For the most part, June is a warm month in southeast New York. More often than not, it's hot. Still, there can be cool days. June twelfth proved to be just one of those cool days. Actually, the word cold came to Joanne's mind more than once that week. On the tenth of June a large low-pressure system from Canada stalled over the Hudson Valley. The resulting cold air made her joints ache something awful and her limp more pronounced. The dank bore relentlessly into every pivot point on her body and forced her to move as though she were sixty-nine and arthritic, as opposed to her actual age of twenty-nine.

On the same day, a mere seventy miles south, Michael Arnet wandered in warm, bright, sunshine from the South Street Seaport to Times Square in Manhattan. As he slowly worked his way up Seventh avenue, Joanne made a pot of cinnamon and spice flavored coffee then climbed into an old sweater that looked three sizes too big. Despite the cold air, steady drizzle, and pain, she felt sublimely satisfied as if the day were made special just for her.

Steam rose furiously from the large mug of

coffee as she stepped onto her porch. The activity from the mug made her smile as she wafted the rising vapor back into her face and breathed deep the heady aroma. The pleasure seemed simple, unassuming. Yet, the hot coffee and cold, wet day, combined to make her feel, comfortable. That particular state of mind had eluded her all her adult life. Joanne set the mug on a small stand next to her Bentwood rocker then fetched the other things needed. First, she put the cell phone next to the mug. Then she put an old Barbra Streisand LP record on the player, lit an incense, and three wide, squat candles that sat on the coffee table in the living room. When everything looked cozy, she retrieved the Bloomingdale's bag from the closet. As Barbara tried to convince Barry she had nothing to be guilty about, Joanne placed a small foot stool in front of the rocker, sat and covered her legs with a good size tri-colored afghan her mother gave her. Now her nesting seemed complete, except for one thing. Joanne picked up the phone and dialed a number she just recently memorized.

"I know you're there Tabatha, pick up, please." Joanne spoke to the answering machine, knowing full well that Tabatha screened her calls by listening to people leave messages. The practice irritated Joanne, but just a little.

A moment later the phone on the other end of the line picked up. The owner of the voice tried her best to sound annoyed but Joanne knew

otherwise. "I was sleeping. Don't you know cold, rainy days were made special just to read trashy novels and sleep? God did it on purpose, she really did, it's divine. Hello...?"

"I just made a fresh pot of coffee. Why don't you drag your butt out of bed and come on over to my place. We can read some more of those stories, journals, or whatever you want to call them. You can sleep another time."

"Drag my butt out of bed? I love it when you talk dirty. Okay. Give me a half hour." Then, "Do you have anything to eat? Cinnamon buns, chocolate things, anything good like that?"

"No dear, if you want food, you'll have to bring it. I'll supply the coffee and reading material, you bring the munchies."

"Okay, I'll bring something good. Maybe a dozen Dunkin Donuts. Something to really stick to your ribs."

Joanne put the phone back on the stand then reached for the first journal from the bag at her feet. Like all the others, it had no dates or any markings on the outer cover. A fact she considered curious. Inside, the pages were filled with hand written entries. The volumes were written in several languages and were translated with the help of Google Translate. Most entries were a paragraph or two. Occasionally one took up a full page, but full-page entries were clearly the exception. Although the paper had yellowed over the years, the penmanship looked neat, the writing

style concise and easy to understand. She thumbed through the book letting the pages drop in an avalanche of words. In the left-hand margin of each page and preceding each entry was a date. At random she stopped by one of the few full-page entries, and as she investigated further, found this entry covered a full two pages.

Joanne noted the date in the left-hand margin, then started to read the entry after the date:

December 1918.

Every day I say to myself, man cannot become more corrupt—he has no more room to grow in that evil medium. Yet, every day it becomes clearer that there is room to grow and I wonder how much more I will be forced to witness such goings-on.

I found myself, because of war, on the move.

Similarly, once again I have witnessed the lowest ebbing of all humanity. And with each new occurrence in this low tide of mankind, I pray: No more. Please, dear God, if you are there—no more.

Death is not an unfamiliar commodity. It's not something, I fear. Like any other occurrence in nature, it has a reason for being and I accept that, as do most reasonable men I suspect. But the carnage I have recently witnessed, and to my shame participated in, stretches even my ability to comprehend. To dwell on the events of the past five years for anything more than the briefest of moments, while not going mad, is beyond any

man's ability. And if he says otherwise, call him a liar and be content in knowing you are right.

This World War. This slaughter of a whole generation; where numbers dead in one day's action is not measured in the hundreds, nor the thousands. Rather, the number dead in one day's fighting can be measured in the tens of thousands. Can anybody grasp those numbers? I witnessed it first hand, through my own sorry eyes, and even I tell myself it cannot be so—but it is.

A beast is loose on an unsuspecting world and cannot be yoked.

With the new century there has also come a new vigor, a new lust to kill and I ask myself, how much longer can this go on?

Now, as frosting on some sweet pastry of sorrow comes an additional misery for all humanity to burden. As if that which we just delivered unto ourselves was not enough, a more potent killer is unburdened. With that other low tide finally behind us comes something delivered by God or nature, you will have to decide. I'm sure the writers of history will put what has happened in some neat and orderly fashion, but I cannot.

There came an illness to Vichy, the town we call home, much illness.

At first, most thought it just a simple cold. No more, no less. The type of thing a person catches many times in a lifetime. But then people began to expire from this not so simple cold. And all across France (I hear other countries now

suffer this malady), those who survived the great war were now being felled by the thousands from this tiniest of killers. Despite our villa being somewhat isolated, we are not immune to the illness that now decimates our friends and neighbors. It seems the life not harvested by war, is now being felled by plague.

Sadly, the move I mentioned prior, necessitated the disruption of not only my life, but the life of my wife and her six-year-old daughter. They have both assured me that the move would be more of a holiday than what it truly is. I have said nothing to dampen that spirit and if truth be known, have done some to foster that very mood.

My wife's family is from Marseille on the Mediterranean coast. It is a fine town with clean air from the sea to help cleanse the stench of death that seems to be everywhere and the water is fine for bathing away what the air does not carry away. With that in mind, we decided to visit there for the duration of fall and winter, and perhaps even into next spring. Our thought was to hopefully outrun the death that has been our constant companion for so long. I, of all people, should have known such effort to be futile.

My wife and the child became sick while on the journey to Marseille. Last night my Jilly passed away. To my regret, I was not in her company at her hour of most need. Therefore, I could not help her.

When will it end?

Joanne closed the book with a firm whomp!

The air forced out from between the pages blew across her face and the smell of old came with it. She held the cloth bound volume close to her chest, considering what she just read. The vignette touched her heart. The man's anguish felt genuine enough. She read of the flu epidemic in nursing school. It swept worldwide in 1918 like a forest fire out of control and killed twenty-million people worldwide. Still, she could not say with certainty what she just read was fiction, or fact. Logic said fiction. These books were all in the same handwriting, and yet they spanned over three-hundred years of one man's life. Nobody lives three-hundred years. Therefore, everything in the collection of books sitting at her feet had to be fiction. Fiction as written by her Mr. Fennerman.

And when did she start thinking of him as her Mr. Fennerman; and just how did she know his name?

From the first day he opened his eyes and looked at her she knew his name. Despite logic telling her that the journals were fiction, she knew otherwise, and that frightened her. That simple acknowledgment challenged every notion she accepted about the world.

She couldn't stop thinking about him.

If it were just an obsession of curiosity Joanne would not have feared for her sanity. She shook her head. "Obsession." She said the word

softly to herself. But the obsession centered around the man for sake of the man, not any silly point of history. How could it be? It baffled her, and made her wonder if she were experiencing some residual side effect of her head injury.

She grimaced, then held her face in her hands as she whispered through her splayed fingers. "My God, am I falling in love with the man?" As the last word left her mouth, and on cue to punctuate her thought, the phone rang.

Joanne jumped then looked at the phone, and for a second, she did not know the proper response to the ringing thing on the stand next to her chair. The momentary disorientation passed after she shook her head to clear the fog. Undoubtedly, Tabatha could not decide between glazed doughnuts or powdered sugar and was calling for a second opinion. Joanne picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Am I speaking to Joanne Arnet?" The male voice asked.

Despite being somewhat taken back by the phone call, the fact remained: Joanne hated when a caller did not start the conversation with an introduction. To her, that foible, simple as it seemed, made her want to scream.

"You called me friend, how about you telling me who you are. Then, I'll decide if I want to talk to you. That's the way it works." Her hostility felt so much unlike her. Still, some internal warning device gonged loud and told her

that she didn't always have to be polite, particularly when some strange voice wanted to take the advantage. Enough people had taken advantage of her over the years, thank you very much. She would be Damned if a voice on the phone were going to do it again.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Of course, my name is Peter Johnson. Detective Peter Johnson. I've been team leader on your case from the start. That is, if I'm speaking to Mrs. Arnet. And if I am, I'm very sorry we haven't talked until now. It's just that you were... well, never mind my excuses. Do you have a moment to talk?"

For the second time in the space of only two minutes Joanne felt totally disconnected from reality. A panicky feeling raced through her body like an electric shock. Of course, she knew the name Peter Johnson. Didn't Sharon give her a business card with that very same name on it? And after all this time, hadn't she intended to give him a call for an update on, things. Of course, she intended to call. He just called first. "Yes, I have a moment to talk."

Peter felt Joanne might be a bit reluctant to talk. He didn't take it personal. Many victims of crimes suffered from the same affliction. They want to know what's going on with their case, and yet, because of the pain associated with the crime, they don't want to know. Through years of experience, he learned to go slow and be perceptive to the victims wants, their feelings.

After a momentary pause, Peter continued, "I have some information regarding Michael Arnet. Are you up to discussing the subject?"

"No. But tell me what you know anyway." Joanne closed her eyes and gripped the arm of the Bentwood rocker with her one free hand. Later, if she had looked, she would have noticed several small half-moons of indentations where her nails dug into the dark wood.

"Okay, I won't beat around the bush. Your husband was, up until last week, locked up on a secure ward in a hospital in New York City. He escaped.

"We're not sure how it all went down, but we think he found out we were on to his real identity. While in Hudson he denied memory from before his hospitalization. The doctors said that could be true, considering his shape when he came to them. Anyway, the day before he was to be arrested for murder, he got away. He beat an attendant pretty bad, almost killed the guy. At this time, we don't know his whereabouts. We suspect he's still in the city though. He seems to have fallen in with the homeless element there."

"Is that all?" Joanne hated to sound so curt, but she couldn't help it.

"That's pretty much the information I called to tell you. And to once again say I'm sorry for not talking with you personally before this." Peter paused to give Joanne an opportunity to speak, when she didn't take it, he went on. "Oh, there is

something else. He's very sick. I mean, sick besides his mental illness. The report says he's HIV positive and without his medication his prognosis is not good. At this time, he is not taking medication. Let's see, according to the paperwork I have in front of me: in March, your husband was as near death as a man can get. The doctors feel without his treatment he's on borrowed time. Probably showing signs of the illness already. At least that's what his doctor at the hospital says." Peter felt a momentary loss for words. "Listen, because of the confidentiality laws, you didn't get that information regarding his HIV status from me, right?"

"No detective, I didn't hear it from you. Do you think he might come after me?" The words were her own, but they didn't sound like they came from her. A pounding in her ears kept cadence with the one in her chest and she felt like she wanted to throw up.

"He might. He's a sick man, a very sick man. Who knows what he has on his mind. But I'll say this: he was locked up for three months, and in all that time he never once mentioned your name or what happened. He might have decided to keep his mouth shut, but I'm not so sure. One would think if he had any memory, he would have mentioned something to somebody. But he didn't. As an experienced detective, that leads me to believe, he may not remember what happened, or who you are.

"Either way, we will be stepping up surveillance on your apartment. If anything were to happen, we're pretty sure it would occur there. I think there's too many people at your place of employment. Besides, the hospital and nursing home has their own security, right?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I know the security there isn't great. But it's enough to discourage somebody from walking in through the front door at midnight and starting trouble. At the very least the security guard will call us."

The conversation could have gone on longer if she let it. Joanne thought the detective felt guilty for not contacting her earlier and now he seemed more than willing to make up for lost time on this one phone call. But she needed to end it, and end it now. She thanked him for the information and promised to call back in a day or so, then hung up.

As soon as the connection ended Joanne started to cry. Although she did not articulate the why, she knew her tears were a culmination of many things. She had waited patiently for this phone call like a sentinel on guard duty waiting for some transgressor to cross the line. One way or the other, she had this cry waiting in her for a long time. Now, she found herself letting go for all the pain. Crying over her miserable luck, her broken body, her loneliness.

Joanne's shoulders rocked and her sobs came in long wails of misery. She stomped her feet like a small child and slapped the arms of her

rocker and still her sorrow came in waves of overpowering anguish. She heard it said that crying is a good thing, a cleansing that left a person somehow lifted of their burden. At that moment one certainty solidified in Joanne's mind like a freshly formed piece of steel, all the well-wishers who uttered those mindless words of comfort had absolutely no fucking idea what they were talking about.

"I knocked on the door but you didn't hear. I let myself in."

Joanne's crying jag had almost subsided when she heard the voice from behind her. Through half hitches of breath and tears Joanne asked, "Can you get me a towel please?" Tabatha went into the bathroom and returned with a warm wet washcloth and a towel. Joanne took both and started to clean herself up. "Thank you. How long have you been there?"

"Long enough. I thought I was the only one that let it tear like that." Tabatha sat in the chair next to Joanne. "Care to share what brought it on, or are you one of those who prefers to suffer in silence?"

"It's nothing." Joanne looked away from her friend. "It's hard. So hard to talk about."

"Have you taken a good look at me?" Tabatha asked. "Do you presume to think you're the only one who knows pain? Because you aren't." Tabatha leaned forward in her chair and took Joanne's wet shaking hands in hers. "What I

mean is, you don't have to be alone in this. I'm not here to play therapist. But what I can be is your friend. As a friend I'll listen quietly while you tell me what's made you upset. That's what friends do. And if I can help, I'll help. But this journey has to start with you. Wherever we go, you have to take the lead, and I'll be there for you. Now start from the beginning, tell me everything. I have all the time in the world."

Joanne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay. You want to hear it all. I'll tell you about myself, and when I'm done, you may not want to sit so close to me. My friends have a nasty habit of getting hurt." She paused, then closed her eyes. "God, he was so good looking. As far as I know he still is, but his illness has a way of making him look, well, there, but not there. We started going together in our senior year in high school and all my friends were jealous. All of them except for my best friend, her name was Darcy..."

For the next hour Joanne talked while Tabatha listened. After a while the rendition of facts became more than the sum of mere words. It became the cleansing her crying had not been able to produce. And Joanne talked of things she hadn't spoken of, ever. She kept nothing back, she told all she could remember and what memory could not serve, Joanne quoted from the newspapers that covered Darcy's murder. Between her previous emotional outburst, the rainy day, and the effort to tell her story, total exhaustion took hold.

Tabatha saw the weariness in her friend. Without saying a word, she helped Joanne from the chair then led her to the bedroom. "See, I told you days like today were made for naps," Tabatha said as she pulled the comforter up. Joanne smiled and closed her eyes. Sleep came almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. Tabatha gently stroked her friend's hair. "I'm here for you now. Sleep, and I'll be here when you wake up." Then Tabatha wept.

Chapter 19

The risers and treads were made of a black stone Michael did not recognize. Despite being old and caked with grit, a glint of their original opulent luster and ornate iron framework endured. They whispered of an earlier time, a more polished time. A time when upper middle-class men donned stiffly starched shirts with high collars and fedora hats, then trundled down these same stairs on their way to a young and vibrant downtown Brooklyn. Or, perhaps to cross the newly opened Brooklyn bridge to work in the burgeoning financial center of lower Manhattan.

That impression of an earlier time came to Michael very clear. The images looked sharp and defined as though he were looking at sepia toned pictures in a dusty old book, not deducing events based on subtle visual cues, as he frequently did. He noticed things, things other people missed. Sadly, his awareness of an above average perceptive ability only mocked him. Another reality reminded him that, because of the illness, he would never be in a position to utilize that perceptiveness. Life, his life, will not be more than it is now, ever. And that reality served to deflate

whatever hope he might have secretly harbored for a normal existence. The emotion that emerged to fill the void of hope's loss fueled a rage that defied words. A rage that lent itself perfectly to the voices now directing his other self.

Watch where you're stepping you stupid fuck, a familiar character chided.

The voice came from the riser just above him and sounded perfectly clear, and reasonable. "I see it, I see it. You shut the fuck up," Michael mumbled. The voice from behind him sounded annoyingly like his father. Michael liked telling his father to shut up.

A slick, worn section had formed on each tread as wide as a man's foot. Michael tried to imagine how many thousands of footfalls it took to erode such a spot in the hard, black stone. He made it a point not to step in those worn places as he crept down the stairs toward the first floor. That small smooth worn valley proved to be just a bit too slippery. A slip, or worse yet, an outright fall would not serve his needs.

Michael paused ten risers above, and just out of sight of the drug dealer's apartment. He had no reason to pause, nevertheless, he did. Something rational and calm, a tiny vestige of an earlier time, like an emotional oasis of sanity, told him to stop and consider his actions. As if considering long and deep on the subject might dissuade him from the course altogether. And, if given time to dwell in that oasis he truly would have stayed his action.

Then, as an answer to rational and calm, another voice came to him. This other voice arose from a deep, dark pit of his mind that had not made its presence known in a long time. A fact Michael did not mind in the least

The voice sounded reptilian, like a thick venomous snake. Michael's respiration began to come in short, shallow pants as a fine sheen of sweat formed on his face. He watched in dread as it appeared from the stairs below him, then slithered up his right leg. Thick coils wrapped around his mid-section and neck and made breathing even more difficult. Then the large triangular head with its darting tongue stopped an inch from his right ear. From under the beast's skin a constant undulating movement suggested even more life inside, a life in constant motion and wanting to burst through the thick hide. It spit small droplets of poison as it talked and the poison burned like battery acid wherever it landed. Michael wanted to draw away, but to do so would only provoke a strike to his face and the long fangs would bury themselves deep in his eye. The sound of its voice brought a contemptuous revulsion. Yet the compulsion to listen was, as always, irresistible. The snake talked softly at first. As it warmed to its audience of one, the words it spoke became the dominant thing in Michael's brain. In a private way, it shared secret things. Things needing to be taken seriously, and it reminded Michael why those things had to be done just so.

Michael did his best to seem appreciative for the insider information.

CW Hamilton, the resident pusher, knew Michael would be stopping by. Earlier that day the two men met in front of the building and shared a quick exchange of words. Michael had waited almost two hours behind the building's thick oak front door until he saw CW walking down the sidewalk on his way back from wherever nickel and dime street pushers spent their days. Then, as if by chance, they were on the stairs at the same time. "I seen you around," Michael said from two risers above the pusher, "and I heard some friends talk. They said you got some stuff I can buy. That right? My name's Michael." Michael smiled and extended his right hand.

"I seen you around too. You be upstairs in that shit-hole on the top floor I hear."

Michael laughed. "Yea, that's me."

The pusher looked Michael up and down for a long moment. "Okay. I go by CW. My last name is Hamilton. I'm related to the famous Hamilton's somewhere way back in my family." CW shook Michael's hand. "I got no time to be talking to yourself. Got other business to do. Come on by later and we can do our business." CW moved up to the top landing then turned. "And one more thing. Don't fuck with me. I got friends and I got heat, more heat than you be needin."

Now, hours later and on the verge of sunset,

Michael found himself knocking on CW's door, just a regular social visit he thought and smiled. After a moment the door opened about six inches. A face, barely visible, appeared in the opening. "Ah... hello Mr. CW. It's me. The guy from the shit-hole on the top floor. Can I come in?" Then, sounding like an eager school child. "I got some money. Here, right here in my pocket."

The face from behind the door ventured just a bit further out and looked down one side of the hall, then down the other. When he felt sure that the fool didn't have a friend hiding out of sight, CW opened the door just wide enough to let his buyer in. "Okay, get your nasty ass in here and show me what you got."

One window provided the only light in the apartment. From where he stood, Michael noticed two other windows covered with dark, ratty looking blankets. Between the dull twilight outside and a thick coating of yellow filth on the window not covered, CW's apartment felt even more uninviting than his own, a condition Michael did not think possible. Since landing in the city and learning how to survive from the ever capable, if not always stoned, Larry Struck, Michael became very much aware of his instincts. And along with that awareness, he developed a trust of them. Now, every nerve fiber screamed to go along with the bumpkin persona. He couldn't say why, but it felt right. "I got thirty-seven dollars and I wanted to buy some..." Michael blushed and motioned with

his right hand as though he were smoking. "You know, marihuana. How much can I get for that? My friend Eddy always bought it for me before." Michael paused and looked down at his feet. "That was before he got kilt over there by the big building with the clock on it."

CW also prided himself on trusting his instincts, and right now his were singing, blow-job time. "Shit. Thirty-seven dollars don't get you dick these days. Maybe two or three joints. That's bout all. Fuck, what's the sense in buying any smoke at all if you only got enough for one night, that's what I always say. Know what I mean?" Michael remained mute and shook his head in the affirmative. "I know how you can get more for your money," CW continued. "You can get enough smoke for a week with that money you got. All you need to do, is do something for me, like a favor. You want to do something for me?"

"Guess so," Michael said, while still looking down at his feet. "So long as I can get something to smoke cause I like the way it makes me feel."

"Course you do chump! Christ `amighty boy, we all likes the way it makes us feel. And just to show you what a nice guy I am, I'm going to light up some reefer right here, right now. You and me going to get us a buzz together. Like a freebee to test the merchandise." CW took a joint off the kitchen table and lit up. He took four long hits and passed the roach to Michael. "Here, you take this now and tell me how you like it. When you done,

you going to do me a favor."

"Okay, I'll do you a favor." Michael took a long hit and smiled his best winning smile.

Encouraged, CW slid his baggy, genuine, NBA shorts down to his knees and began to slowly stroke his quickly firming erection. "You come over here now. You going to go down on CW and you going to suck this hunk of meat real nice until I tell you to stop." Michael took another hit, continued to smile, then slowly walked toward CW. "Yea. I think you done this before. You done this before? Maybe with that other friend? Well, if you want to get more stuff, you going to get on your knees just as nice as that. Now do what I tell you."

Michael kept his eyes cast down as he shuffled toward CW. "I done it before. Eddy was good to me and we done lots of stuff together. Maybe you and me can be friends?" Michael put the roach in his right hand then reached toward the ashtray sitting on a low stand to CW's left.

"No. Here you go boy. Give me that shit. No need putting it down now. I'll finish that and one more too before this shit's done." CW took the roach from his new friend and with one hand he slowly masturbated while leaning up against the kitchen table, with his other he drew deep on the roach.

Michael improvised. Without any internal deliberation, he picked up the same ashtray he almost put the roach in and brought it around in a

hard, sweeping, arc that connected with the left side of CW's face. Despite accomplishing total surprise, the blow came far short of fatal. Still, CW reeled to the right and fell to his knees. In an instant Michael threw himself on the stunned man.

Experience said that he had the advantage, but it would be short lived if he didn't act very fast. Now Michael beat furiously at the back of CW's head with the same heavy ashtray. Each blow felt harder than the last. At first, he counted as each blow contacted with the target. Panting. "One! Two! Three! Four...!" After a while he stopped counting, and after more time the glass ashtray broke apart. Michael quickly looked about and grabbed a jar of Taster's Choice instant coffee off the counter and hit him with that. Then he used the chair. Then he used a full can of something else. After some time, the can burst open. Whatever it held was now all over the floor in a warm, thick, runny mess, and still he struck in a blind fury at the pulpy mess all around him.

He awoke the next morning laying on the hardwood floor covered in sticky sweat. With the window closed and the early summer light beating in, the room had become hot, almost to the point of being unbearable. Michael's right arm felt sore, like he pitched extra innings at the Stadium. Still, his mind felt clear, calm. He knew what needed to be done and had no concern for the mess now drawing flies on the kitchen floor.

A gallon jug of water sat far back on the

kitchen counter. Michael felt relief he hadn't spotted it in his search for bludgeoning tools. If he had, the water would surely be gone now. He whipped his blood-stained shirt off and threw it in the corner with a sharp snap of his arm. In doing so, the pain from the familiar movement made him moan. He used the water to rinse the considerable blood from his hands, as suspected, the water fell short of the job. Rationalizing, he talked to himself. "At least my hands and arms are clean, the shirt will cover the rest." CW's clothes fit good enough. They looked about a size too big, but everybody looked to be wearing clothes too big nowadays. Now he had a new wardrobe, although the style left something to be desired. But what the fuck, he thought, beggars can't be choosers. Looking around further, he found a ratty looking black gym bag that smelled like dirty sneakers, he filled it with clothes that also smelled like dirty sneakers.

It didn't take long to find CW's stash of drugs. They were hidden under the kitchen sink behind some rusted out plumbing. Michael thought the hiding place not very original and much too easy to find, at least too easy for a man like himself who had conducted many searches.

The total take of drugs consisted of thirty-one Oxy pills, and six ounces of grass. Not a large number of drugs, but enough to see him through the end of his current endeavor. As expected, he found a large caliber pistol with the drugs. As an

extra bonus, he found another smaller caliber pistol in the drawer under the kitchen table. Michael tried hard not to consider how close he came to being shot, nevertheless, the thought lingered in the back of his mind like the smell of yesterday's fried fish lingers in the kitchen.

He also found three-hundred and twenty-one dollars in CW's wallet. He put the money back in the wallet, then shoved it in his own back pocket. The feel of a billfold, even if it wasn't his, gave him a sense of respectability.

Michael spent the next two days living in a subway tunnel between Brooklyn and Queens. He needed time to think, he needed time to formulate a plan. He needed someplace quiet to listen for somebody to tell him which way to go. To give him the fine details of just how to accomplish what he needed to accomplish, but no voice came. What did come were night sweats that stole his vitality, an aching in his joints that made spontaneous movement almost impossible and a loss of appetite that turned his already thin frame into an emaciated shadow of his former self. Michael emerged in the heart of Williamsburg. From there he took the train into Manhattan. For lack of a more imaginative scheme, he settled on reversing his original track to the city.

At one time Michael not only knew the definition of irony, but he could spot it when it occurred. Now, his continued mental deterioration precluded

any capacity for such contemplative and abstract thought as the caustic nature of life's spiraling path. If his illness hadn't robbed him of this ability, surely, he could have appreciated that the bus he currently traveled just happened to be the same one that carried him to the city over a year before. And if he really had it together, he would have noticed that the bus driver who brought him to the city, was now taking him back home.

It seemed Michael's physical and mental abilities were deteriorating at an expeditious manner. The shakes and sweats came nightly. As he became sicker from the opportunistic infections that assaulted his body from every direction, his mind began to short circuit in a whole new way.

Prior to this new development, his thoughts came in sequential order and were appropriate for the circumstance. At least as appropriate as his ongoing mental illness would let him be. When the voices talked to him, they spoke in relative terms to the sensory input he received at the time. The thoughts might have been twisted to fit his version of reality, but they were, at the least, intelligible. Now, there were whole blocks of time that were gone. And the feeling that proceeded these mental blank spots were not a comfort.

Something new stole what small cognitive ability he had left and this knowledge frightened him more than any voice ever did. His very essence, his very soul, was slipping away like water in a leaky bucket, and Michael knew it. He

could feel it. Still, overriding his fears, the certainty that all would once again be right if he could just put an end to the bitch. It came down to a race. To complete his work before his body and mind totally gave out, and at the moment, Michael would not bet on himself winning this race.

He got off the bus in the small town of Chester, New York. He recognized the town from before. Looking around at the burg and the hustle and bustle of people getting on with their lives, a sense of nostalgia washed over him and the accompanying sadness surprised him.

Chester had long been a favored community for New York City civil servants. Particularly fireman and police officers, there were lots of cops. With that in mind, Michael moved on from his conspicuous position; at the moment he felt like a naked man at a Christmas ball, then rented a room in a small welfare motel on the edge of town called The Good Times Inn. Most people living at the Good Times Inn looked to be no better off than he, and that seemed like a good thing. He showered, slept and forced himself to eat all he could (which didn't amount to much).

On his second day in town Michael walked about a mile down the road to Walmart and bought enough clothes to see him through. He asked the sales kid if he could pay cash for the clothes then put one outfit on right away. The kid looked to be no more than sixteen and not sure if he could approve such a request. After some stammering

about company policy, he accepted a ten from the persistent customer and relented. Although the ten dollars went a long way to help make up his mind, the thought of being rid of the gaunt, sick looking guy was enough to prompt almost any agreement, as long as the guy moved on from his department. Michael changed in the dressing room, doubled bagged his old clothes and the kid dumped the bag in the large green trash container at the back of the store.

Michael also bought a large bottle of ibuprofen, some super duty vitamins, a new gym bag and a case of liquid dietary supplement. The supplement supplied all he needed in the way of nourishment and would hopefully keep him alive until the job's completion. Its inoffensive consistency seemed to be the only thing he could now keep down.

Although he never received services from Hillcrest Hospital, Michael knew its location. From where he sat in the Good Times Inn to the hospital in Warwick, the distance was about fifteen miles. A distance much too far to walk, but a safe distance for planning and implementing his scheme. The Short Line company provided bus service in the morning from Chester to Warwick. He could take it and attract no undue attention. But in the afternoon, the buses return scheduling conflicted with the change of shift at the hospital. The bus would not be available for a ride back to Chester. Option two for the return trip would be to

take an uber back to Chester, not a very good move. Uber drivers kept records of who went where, and when.

With a sigh of resignation, Michael capitulated to the fact that somebody, somewhere could possibly end up with a record of his ride back from Warwick to Chester. But then, if all went well, and he counted on all going well, this whole business would be done in a matter of days. Not enough time to draw much attention to himself. And after, things would be different. None of this would matter because his life would be, better.

He needed to watch the hospital's parking lot while the employees arrived for work and then returned home. If he wanted to find his wife and keep a low profile while doing it, that seemed like the only way. The weather suited the task. All he needed to do was find a big shade tree and camp under it, he felt sure he would spot her.

And once again, if he were of sounder mind and privy to the information, he would have appreciated the irony of the situation. The irony of how several months before another person sat in that same parking lot looking for his wife, and although their immediate goals appeared to be the same, the ultimate goal of each person would be just the opposite. Tabatha's objective, to protect Joanne, Michael's objective, to end her life as quickly as possible.

As it turned out, Michael didn't have long to

wait before he spotted his wife.

He arrived at the parking lot an hour before the day shift began and went about the task of nesting under a large Oak tree on the north side of the parking lot. The position provided an adequate view of the lot and his presence at the bottom of the tree seemed unobtrusive, so he waited. After watching all of the day shift file into the building and not spotting her, he thought he might drift on over to the library and spending the day in air-conditioning then drift back at three-thirty and wait for the evening shift to show up. Just before he stood to move on, his mind blanked out again. He didn't know how long the blank spot lasted, nor did he care. What did matter: when he came back, the first thing he saw was a group of three women walking from the rear entrance of the building, the nursing home entrance. He didn't know the two women on the ends, but he couldn't mistake the one in the middle. She had lost weight, she walked with a limp, she changed her hair, it was Joanne. Michael stood, brushed the dirt from his hands and pants, then called uber to take him back to the motel. His stomach twisted in knots and he could barely keep the smile off his face. His excitement boiled over as his whole body gave off tiny convulsive shakes. He would do it tonight and afterward he would be normal, healthy and the world would be right.

Chapter 20

Her instructions were simple, mop one side of the hall at a time.

She asked for, and received, full discretionary power as to which side got mopped first. Tabatha put the back of her hand to her forehead and feigned the complexity of it all. "Dear Lord, what's a girl to do?" Would it be the right side or the left? For whatever reason, she usually started on the right side and the theatrics were solely for her own amusement. At two in the morning there were not many people around to entertain. Still, the logic to keep one side dry seemed obvious enough. If somebody happened to be walking the halls in the early morning that person would simply stay to the dry side, no big deal.

Her instructions were to place a small, yellow, sandwich type sign on the floor at each end of the hallway. Affixed to the sign was the shadow figure of a genderless gnome in the act of falling on its backside. The image looked both ridiculous and compelling. Every time she saw it, she had an urge to strike the same pose as the slipping figure.

Mopping certainly required physical effort.

Tabatha did a hybrid isometric exercise with the mop's heavy hickory handle. As a result, her already firm biceps began to take on a more defined chiseled look, a look not usually found on the average female. Acknowledging she liked the feeling of her ever-growing strength would be a gross understatement. At times Tabatha wanted to inflict bodily harm. She wanted to hurt a bully. To pound the snot out of somebody who picked on a weaker person, and she wanted to do these things because she knew she could. The emotion frightened her, and at the same time she indulged the notion of physically overpowering an opponent.

She liked the drudgery of her tasks. It not only satisfied her body's need for exercise; the pain vented her still seething rage. The work also lent itself to thinking. While she moved through the prosaic chore of repetitious back and forth motion, her mind drifted to many things. Tabatha thought of Darcy, and she thought of herself. She had time to think about Joanne. All these things were pondered and dissected many times as the lonely hours of early morning plodded on toward dawn.

Tabatha found no prestige associated with her job. If there were an unseen ladder of social ascension, she definitely occupied the lowest rung. Yet for the moment, whatever position she held, held no consequence. She had purpose. She had a reason for being and unexpectedly had discovered something she never thought she would find again.

A friend. A confidant. She found somebody to share intimate as well as inane things with.

She found Joanne.

As Tabatha's feelings for her new friend grew a subtle change came about. Her dreams of an apocalyptic confrontation with the relentless killing machine didn't go away as if somebody pulled an electrical plug, but they faded from her sleep as a harsh light is muted by a dimmer switch. Soon the sense of urgency that once gripped her so completely felt defused and the things that occupied her thoughts were replaced by sweet fantasies of a brighter future in Joanne's company. That's not to say she totally disregarded her original intention, because she didn't. Tabatha still carried a pistol in the small of her back. She still believed in the danger. But like any soldier on furlough, she allowed herself to enjoy the moment and to push aside the grim reality that peril was near.

Then, as Tabatha finished mopping the hall, her furlough came to an abrupt end. That same precognitive arm that guided her actions since before Darcy's murder now suddenly cranked the dimmer switch back on high. Along with the harshness of an unbridled fear that grabbed her whole body and shook it with impunity.

Fact. She could lose everything a second time.

Whatever wickedness taunted her dreams, whatever fear drove her now came back in crystal

clarity. The reckoning she once ran toward with a killing lust had abated in lieu of a new future. A future never revealed in her stupid dreams, and Joanne was the wild card. If a way existed through the mine field, she would find it, and take Joanne with her. If it were to be done, it had to be soon.

At two-twenty in the morning Tabatha put her mop away and wandered down to E wing, room 7, as she did every morning at that time. After two weeks, Tabatha had ceased being a spectator and with Joanne's encouragement became an active member of William's impromptu physical therapy team.

Pausing at his door, Tabatha watched the goings-on.

Each room on this side of the building had two beds, two patients. A beige drape hanging from a track mounted on the ceiling separated the two beds. Joanne's William, had the bed on the right. Mr. Auckman occupied the bed on the left.

Tabatha saw her friend down on one knee in front of William. William sat on the edge of his bed, both hands gripping the mattresses edge for support. She wondered if anybody, other than herself, knew how painful being in that position was for Joanne, she didn't think so. Tabatha took a step into the room to hear the conversation.

"You know, if you allowed the physical therapy staff to do their jobs, you'd see faster progress." Joanne finished fastening the five-pound sandbag to William's left leg. "Not that I'm

complaining, because I'm not. It's just that," Joanne too, grasped the side of the mattress then pushed herself to a standing position, "doing this in the daytime would be so much easier."

William carefully inspected Joanne's handiwork. One five-pound sandbag now clung tight to each ankle. "Would you rather not be assisting me? I'd understand if you said your duties precluded our efforts here. Please, be honest."

Joanne gave the question some thought. "No. It's not a matter of scheduling, nor available time. This is a slow part of my night and I don't mind the effort." She wanted to add that she thought he was the most fascinating man she had ever met. And the sound of his deep, rich, voice comforted her as the radiant heat of a roaring fireplace comforts on a cold January night. But she said none of that, because none of it made any sense. Instead, she kept the conversation all business. "My concern is for your progress. We've been at this for, let's see, over two weeks now. You should be further along. As I mentioned before, I went through something similar to what you're experiencing and I know the value of a pro here. I'm a nurse and a good one, but I'm not an expert on everything.

Taking one step back, Joanne raised her hand to waist high, palm down. "Okay, you know the routine. Give me ten, slow, good, leg raisers. Start with the right leg and bring it high enough to touch my hand. Got it friend?"

His laugh was deep and rich sounding. "Yes. I've got it friend. And I promise to put more effort in." William started his leg raisers, and as he worked, he talked. "It's hard for me to explain, but I feel like I'm slowly coming back from a trip that took me away for a long time."

"What you said is closer to the truth than you realize. In a way you were gone, mentally anyway. There's talk; they say coming back the way you did is a miracle. That's eight, two more."

"Miracle? Why's that?" William puffed out the words as he gave his last two leg raisers.

"Give me two more on this leg, make it twelve.

"Why do some people think what you did a miracle? Well, let's see. Maybe it's because you went against the grain of normal progression." Joanne saw the question in William's eyes. "Okay, now the other leg, give me twelve again." She considered her words. "Since we're talking honestly, we might as well go for the whole ball of wax. I'm going to talk blunt, and for some reason, I think you can handle blunt. Look around you William. You're living in a nursing home. A majority of the people here are very old, as you are. Which, by the way, is a subject I'd like to broach sometime when you're feeling up to it.

"You... feeling up to it?" Joanne took the awkward silence that followed as a no.

She continued, "Anyway, as a society we work hard to make the last few years for these

people as tolerable as possible. But the sad truth is; the disease these people are suffering is the most miserable, insidious, condition any person can endure. That's twelve, take a breath."

William rubbed his burning thigh muscle as he talked. "Disease? When I think of the word, I think of a viral or bacterial infection. Maybe cancer, maybe TB. I still haven't gotten used to thinking of alcoholism as a disease. It seems like there's a million bugs and busted genes out there waiting to take a life. Are you lumping advanced age into that group?"

"If that's the only way you can reference it in your mind, sure, that's just what I'm saying. Advanced age can be debilitating as any of those things you mentioned, and even more so. As a person ages the systems that support the body start to run down. Like an old car with too many miles on it, it gets tired. It's not just one thing that breaks down. For instance, if you break a leg. We cast it, and in a few weeks you're on the road to recovery. With age, there's no way to treat it. Nothing to put a cast on. Every part of a person's body is breaking down."

Although he had lived a very long time, William rarely gave the specific dynamics of aging much thought. After his most recent brush with the subject, his interests were aroused. "Despite being old, I haven't lived my life in a vacuum. I've watched the progression of science and medicine very closely and always thought the subjects

fascinating. It seems that every passing year has brought even more research than the last. All this effort to make the human condition more tolerable. Replacement parts for the heart, new drugs to fight almost every illness. Technology getting together with prosthetics, new tools to see inside the body and replicate the image in 3-D on a computer. Just keeping up would require a full-time dedication.

"With all these things going on in science, are you telling me that nothing can be done to ease the suffering of the old?"

"Pick your leg up please, it's hard for me to get down on the floor." William lifted both legs in turn as Joanne removed the sandbags. "No. I didn't say that, but your words are aptly put, and I think you already know the answer to your question. When you really get down to it, there doesn't seem to be much we medical types can do for people in the last stages of advanced age. We treat individual illnesses as they happen and for the most part, that approach works well. Consider this: a man with diabetes will take insulin for twenty years. And for twenty years he survives with a condition that would otherwise kill him. Now take that same man. For twenty years all his internal body parts are overtaxed due to his diabetes. At a point, somewhere in advanced age, his body shuts down. Heart, eyes, kidneys, they all wear out just that much quicker because of his other condition. And as things slow down, so does the brain. You see, the brain is as much a part of the living system as

the heart and lungs. They're all connected.

"Most of us, for the sake of our own comfort, would rather believe when we die, it will be fast and dramatic. Something fitting our over inflated image of our own importance. A pain in the chest and just enough time to say a dramatic good-bye to loved ones. In reality, a good percent of us don't go that way. As I said, the body slowly shuts down and the brain goes along with everything else. And there a person lingers in a physical state so sad, most folks outside the business won't even admit it exists. As far as I know, there is no coming back from the grip of the condition I just mentioned.

"But you did it. Thus, the miracle. Any thoughts on the matter?"

After another protracted silence Joanne reached for William's arm. "Here, put your arm out so I can put these weights on." Joanne tried to read his eyes, but William looked down at his wrists. "Give me twenty slow arm rotations, and make them good."

William moved his arm in a slow arc. "Is that where my neighbor is? In the last stages I mean?"

"I'm not allowed to discuss anybody's condition other than your own, so I won't. But you have eyes and you can see what's obvious. Here, give me your other arm." Joanne switched the weight to his other arm. "Give me another twenty." She looked around the edge of the curtain at the

man in the next bed. "His name is Mr. Auckman. His wife calls every day. She gets lonely at night and is looking for somebody to talk to. So, I talk. He had a family, and he treated them well. He's a father, husband and the very glue that holds society together. After eighty-six years of being an exemplary citizen, he's reduced to that. That, Mr. William Fennerman, is the disease of advanced age. That poor man, after so many years of well, just being a decent person, is..." Joanne held the curtain open so William could get a good look. "He doesn't even know his own name, or the name of his wife and children. I ask you. You were there. Where is he right now? Where is the man that once was?"

Instead of trying to answer her question, William reached out with his hand and touched Joanne on her cheek. There, he wiped away a single tear. "I think you are a very compassionate woman and for that you are special. And despite the negative image you hold of yourself, I'm saying otherwise. You are a beautiful woman. Shall we get on with our work?" Tabatha made her presence known then took up position on the opposite side to Joanne, the two women assisted William in walking up and down the same empty, long corridor Tabatha most recently mopped.

Twenty minutes later Tabatha and Joanne sat together in an almost empty cafeteria sipping strong coffee. Just one other person shared their

space. A bald, heavyset nurse's aide sat to their left.

"Hello. You there?" Joanne waved a hand in front of Tabatha's face. "I asked you a question and it's like you aren't even there."

Just a hint of blush high on her cheeks made Tabatha look as though she just returned from a brisk walk on a fall day. "I'm sorry. I was somewhere else. What's your question?"

"I'm not sure if I want to ask you now." Joanne leaned forward as she talked. "How can I have a serious conversation with somebody who doesn't even listen when I talk. Damn, it's a good thing you're cute."

"Oh? You really think so?" Tabatha did her best to sound innocent and hopefully charming. Despite her initial response of spurious flightiness, in truth, her heart rate increased at the suggestion her friend considered her attractive. "You better watch it lady, people will talk. First, you spend way too much time in my company, and you know what that means to the tiny brains. Then you blatantly admit that you think I'm cute. If you're not careful, I'll seduce you to the dark side."

"A seduction. Very nice. Sadly, I've gotten to the point where the mere sound of the word excites me. But never mind that." Joanne waved her hand in a shooing manner. As if the motion could somehow brush away all her frustrations in one definitive act. Both women recognized the exertion as useless. "I asked you what you thought of William?"

"It's hard to say." Tabatha didn't miss Joanne's posture. She folded her arms under her breasts, leaned back in her chair and gave her head a slight cock to the right. "Okay," Tabatha offered, "if you're pushing for the truth, I'd have to say I like him because you do. If it weren't for you, I'd never have contact with the man, I'm a housekeeper, remember? He's interesting though. And I think you're convinced there's something special about him. There might be, but I can't see it." Tabatha peered over Joanne's shoulder just to make sure the bald guy's eyes were on his book and not them. Not that it really mattered. It wasn't the guy with the horror book making her nervous, that much she knew. She didn't have a clue where to start, and she had to start somewhere.

Tabatha took a deep breath and dove into the deep end.

"We need to talk Joanne. I don't want to botch this by saying the wrong thing. But I need to spit this out. So please don't say anything until I get it out. Okay?" Tabatha slowly shook her head up and down, her eyes filled with moisture. "'Spit this out'. You'd never know I have the credentials to be an English teacher. You don't need to answer that. That was in another life, and a world away. Maybe I'll fill you in on that part of my life if we need to go there. For now, though, I want you to forget that I'm a, you know, that I prefer women. And at the same time, I'm asking you to keep your mind open and don't be rash.

"I want you to come away with me, now, today." Joanne stiffened in her chair. Tabatha noticed the movement but didn't think somebody standing fifteen feet away would have seen it. Regardless, she had to finish.

"I realize how this must sound, but I assure you, I'm not crazy. At least not in the classic sense of the word." Tabatha began to perspire. Making herself understood never presented a problem. Then again, she never felt the need for such urgency. The more she struggled to find the right words, the larger the blank spot in her head grew. Soon, the first seedlings of panic began to sprout as she envisioned Joanne walking away in total annoyance, and most likely putting an end to the burgeoning friendship.

"I have some money." Tabatha didn't think money the most appropriate issue to discuss at the moment, but the words popped into her head so she jumped on it. "It's not a fortune, but it's enough to get us a new start somewhere. I thought maybe Hawaii." Tabatha looked down at her hands which were busy fidgeting with the salt shaker. "I read somewhere that the state, and people, are very tolerant. You're a nurse, you can take your license anywhere you chose. So, if you can go anywhere, why not paradise? And I really can be a teacher."

The words were coming a bit easier now, not flowing nicely, but that panicked feeling felt in retreat. "I know you think there's something special about William and maybe there is. That's

not what's important here. What's important is that you believe something out of the ordinary is going on. If your capable of believing that, then maybe you will be willing to believe me when I say that something bad is going to happen here. Something that has to do with your husband. Something bad as in somebody getting seriously hurt, and for the life of me, I can't think of the words to convince you that what I've said is true."

She set the salt shaker down and took another deep breath. Looking into Joanne's eyes, Tabatha admitted to herself, she loved Joanne. "I can't say how I know what I do. If I tried to explain it, you'd really think I'm not playing with a full deck. But I believe from the bottom of my heart what I'm saying is true and the only way around whatever is going to happen is to get out of here. We need to get as far away from here, as fast as we can."

Leaving New York and starting life over elsewhere wasn't an alien concept for Joanne. In fact, she had considered moving many times. At first, confidence, or lack of it, kept her at the nursing home. Admittedly, when she took her current job, Joanne had serious doubts she could ever be a responsible nurse again. Then, slowly, like a rosebush awakening after a bitter winter to produce a heady populous of fragrant, crimson flowers, the realization that she could do the job became clear. And without the stress of her husband, her job performance actually improved.

Despite her new found confidence, the dream of moving on had been regulated to a lonely corner of her mind and only occasionally brought out to be dusted off. The dream still existed, it had substance and merit, but its priority had taken a nose dive. As the days turned into months, other things loomed in importance. New friendships, her growing sense of loyalty to the nursing home. Her interest in William, and Tabatha. For every reason she had to move on, two arose for staying. Joanne ran her hand through her hair. "Tabatha, I don't know what to say. You surprised me."

"All this sounds so ridiculous when I say it out loud." Tabatha forced herself to keep eye contact. "But if you ever took anything on faith alone, please take this. I believe what I've said is true. I don't wish to frighten you, then again, I'd be happy to frighten you to where you go home, pack your bags and get on a plane with me." Tabatha felt she hadn't made her point and Joanne would soon dismiss the conversation with nothing more committal than a polite "I'll think about it".

The problem. How to convey the somewhat scary reality that every action she had taken for the past year had been done on Joanne's behalf? Would admitting something so intimate as bad dreams help matters? Tabatha didn't think so. When she put herself in Joanne's place, she too, would have a hard time ending a now productive life for a questionable future. A future proposed by a relatively new friend, on the basis of one panicky

conversation brought on by dreams. Tabatha needed something concrete to help make her point. Something to grab Joanne by the shoulders and shake her.

Something with bite.

"Listen, it's getting late," Joanne looked at her watch. "It sounds like something's really bothering you. Whatever it is, can't it wait until tomorrow? Give me a call after we both had some time to sleep. Hopefully things will seem more manageable in the daylight. What do you say?"

"Okay," Tabatha relented. "Maybe tomorrow is good enough. But before we leave give me just one more minute. You can do that can't you? Please!"

Joanne shook her head in resignation.

"Good. Just hold there one second while I get something from my vault." Tabatha reached down in her gym bag, fetched her wallet, and from a tucked away pocket deep in the furthest reaches therein, removed a photo of her and Darcy.

In the photo Darcy stood behind a sitting Tabatha. The pose looked old fashioned, but it worked. Tabatha studied the professionally done photo and a lump began to build in her throat. A month before Darcy's murder the two, on impulse, walked into the shop. The studio sat at the farthest end of the mall, tucked between a noisy arcade and a hobby store. All three establishments attracted a younger crowd and an overall carnival like atmosphere permeated the entire area.

They were both laughing like schoolgirls as Darcy pushed Tabatha through the door. The sign in the window advertised glamour shots a specialty and the whole place had a sleazy feel. Yet the pictures came out more than nice. In one moment, and probably by accident, the photographer caught both women perfectly. And most importantly, he captured their love for each other; a trick not easily accomplished in a photo. Tabatha's heart broke as the memory came flooding back like a black wave on an incoming tide. "I need to show you something. After you look at this you might have a question or two. God knows I would. So, I'm just going to freshen our coffees while you have a look-see. Here."

She handed the photo to Joanne then walked to the counter where the coffee urn stood. She paused for a moment, then began to pour two fresh coffees. Her heart pounded, hands shook and coffee spilled onto the stainless-steel counter. Tabatha felt as though things were starting to spiral out of control. Originally, she had no intention of telling Joanne her real identity. Even now, after the fact, doubts lingered. Still, if revealing her true identity helped Joanne comprehend the seriousness of the situation, then so be it. Complicated or not, Joanne needed to see things as Tabatha did or both women were doomed.

She did not want to face Joanne, not yet anyway. To see the hurt reflected in her eyes. And most of all, Tabatha did not want to acknowledge

that she had been deceitful, even if the deception was justified.

Finally, with measured deliberation, and a coffee cup in each hand, she did start to turn.

Halfway through her turn, and from her peripheral view, a man pushing a waist high metal cart came into focus. He stopped at the opposite end of the same long lunch counter Tabatha now lingered at. He wore white and looked purposeful as he pushed his cart with authority. She couldn't say why she gave the man a second look, nothing about him appeared remarkable. Just another kitchen worker delivering a tray of what looked like juice cans. His lunch pail looked a bit odd the way it sat on top of the cans, but not so odd as to deserve a second look.

Notwithstanding the seemingly benign picture of an employee on his rounds, Tabatha did give the man a second look.

Deliveries were not made at this time of the morning. And although she did not know everybody's name who worked in the kitchen, she certainly recognized the faces. Here stood a man she had never laid eyes on. He remained still at the end of the counter staring into the empty cafeteria as if he were trying to decide what to do next. But that didn't feel right either. Tabatha followed his gaze from the end of the counter across the room to where Joanne sat.

It did not come upon her like a thunderclap. Rather, a calm rendition of her own voice

whispered with ironclad certainty.

This is it. Move fast if you want to save your friend.

The voice sounded cold as steel, and its tone served to harden Tabatha's heart. As she watched, the man from the kitchen reached inside his lunch pail and retrieved a large caliber revolver.

"God no!" Tabatha moaned. At the same time, she dropped both coffees then reached around for the gun tucked snugly away in the small of her back. For the briefest of moments, Tabatha glanced at Joanne. Joanne, still clutching the picture of Darcy, met Tabatha's stare. Joanne's eyes seemed to reflect her own confusion, and possibly sorrow, or hurt, or both. Then Tabatha returned focus to the business at hand. Her body moved on auto pilot as her mind raced to catch up. "Not now. Dear God, not now!" But it was now.

She pulled her gun and fired without taking aim.

About halfway back to Chester, Michael formulated a plan.

Even under the best of circumstances, his ability to think and follow through on complicated tasks had its limitations. Considering his increasingly confused mental state, constant low-grade fever and ongoing mental illness; Michael felt appreciative for whatever plan his ailing mind and diminishing body could come up with. He leaned forward to address the uber driver. "Instead

of taking me to the motel, can you drop me off at Walmart?"

"Sure friend. You paying for the ride. I'll take you anywhere you want to go. That is, of course, long as you got the cash." The driver addressed the rear-view mirror as he talked. "Say, you're not looking too good. You want rather I bring you to the emergency room?"

"No. Just Walmart." Michael looked at the rolling pastures and occasional Holstein munching on timothy as the car wound its way back to Chester, but he didn't really see anything. If circumstances were anything other than what they were, he would take the nosy driver up on the hospital offer. Whatever he had, whatever ravaged his body with the ferocity of a tornado, it was quickly getting worse. Even if he acted tonight, he had serious doubts about being there to see the finish.

He didn't remember too much of his father, other than the war journal. He thought the memory loss purposeful as he never much liked the man in the first place. Regardless, one thing he did remember his father saying, "the less moving parts a machine had, the less likely it's going to bust." The logic had a purity that always appealed to Michael. Now, without conscience consideration, he applied that same principle to his plan for Joanne. Like a machine with only a few moving parts, his plan also had few details. Thus, less things to go wrong.

From Walmart he bought a black metal lunch pail, a pair of white pants, white shirt, black belt and black shoes. Then, he took another uber the last mile back to the motel.

At two the next morning he took his last uber ride directly to the loading dock entrance of the nursing home. Dressed in his new whites and carrying one pistol in the lunch pail and the other in his right pocket, Michael walked through the loading dock doors as though he had worked there for decades. In all of the kitchen area, he noticed only one employee. A young man, probably in his early twenties, toiled away washing vegetables. He wore earbuds which were attached to his phone. The young man gyrated to the music and sang off-key as Michael withdrew the gun from his pocket and came up behind the oblivious virtuoso.

He did not wish to shoot the kid; his reasoning had nothing to do with altruism. It had to do with noise. With the business end of his pistol, Michael directed the young man toward the walk-in cooler. Once inside, he locked the kid in the large compartment. The door looked to be about twelve inches thick, Michael figured it would hold nicely.

With that done, he did a quick search, then improvised a simple ruse. He put two cases of apple juice cans on a small, rolling, stainless steel cart then placed his lunch pail on that. Maybe, with just a bit of luck, he could move through the building without being noticed. Michael pushed

the cart through the first double doors he found and entered the cafeteria. At first, he couldn't believe his eyes, it couldn't be this easy, Joanne sat at a small table thirty feet in front of him and she was alone. Michael smiled, opened his lunch pail and drew his gun.

When taken out of context the most familiar things can appear strange and disjointed. Joanne looked hard at the photo, something looked familiar, and at the same time she hadn't a clue who the two women were.

But she did know who they were.

The acceptance and accompanying rush, charged her already overtaxed system with a surge of adrenaline. In the picture, which she now held tight in both hands, Darcy stood behind a seated woman.

Questions without answers raced through her head in rapid succession. Questions that served only to generate more questions. How is it that Tabatha has a picture of Darcy? Did she know Darcy? If so, why didn't she say so before now? Is it truly Darcy in the photo? Of course, it's her. And the seated woman, she too looked familiar. Then again, Joanne knew full well the identity of the woman sitting in front of Darcy.

Among the jumble of thoughts all clamoring for top billing in her mind, one stepped forward and demanded to be heard. Did Darcy ever mention the name of her partner? Joanne couldn't

be certain, but she didn't think so. Over the years it had been herself who limited contact with Darcy. For what communication they did have, Joanne went out of her way not to talk about personal relationships. To the best of her memory, she had no name to connect with Darcy's other half. Now, looking at the picture, there could be no mistake. The seated woman had long auburn hair, looked as intimidating as the Avon lady, and tipped the scales about thirty pounds heavier than her present weight.

Nonetheless, there could be no mistake. The woman seated in front of Darcy, Darcy's other half was Tabatha

What had happened seemed self-evident. Yet her mind resisted acknowledging the simple truth that Tabatha had positioned herself for her own reasons. Furthermore, the friendship she assumed as genuine and natural, now felt somehow tainted, somehow diminished. Joanne closed her eyes in an effort to regain control of her emotions. Maybe, just maybe, Tabatha had a good reason for whatever she was up to. If so, she would hear her out. Yes, she could do at least that.

Shouting brought Joanne back from her thoughts. She looked up.

From across the room Joanne met Tabatha's eyes. Then, the world slowed to a surreal mocking caricature of reality as Tabatha pulled a gun from nowhere and without ceremony pulled the trigger. Too many things happened at once and it

challenged Joanne's perception of normal.

Her mind responded in a stupefied detached mode that placed the current goings-on as almost mundane. However, her instinct for survival had no such lackadaisical qualms.

Joanne threw herself to the floor.

From her prone position she noticed three things almost at the same instant.

First. Tabatha looked like she knew what to do with the gun she now wielded.

Second. Her intended target just happened to be Michael. The same man who killed Darcy and haunted every moment of her own existence. As she watched, Tabatha's first shot seemed to go nowhere, but the second found the ring finger on Michael's right hand. Without realizing she verbalized the sentiment, Joanne shouted, "Yessss!" Then pulled her right arm down as an umpire calling the third strike. This emotion came about after witnessing Michael's pistol sailing across the room in a high, wide, arc and his pulverized finger following closely behind.

Third. She noticed, while laying with her face at floor level, a collection of dirty coffee stirrers gathered next to the leg of the table she currently cowered under.

Despite the wound to his hand and the fire he drew from Tabatha, Michael never took his eyes from Joanne. With mounting dread Joanne watched as her husband groped at his pocket. The four fingered hand splashed bright red down his

white pants and actually made a stunning mix of contrasts. Joanne thought it needed more red, much more red. Michael gingerly slid his four digits into his pocket then withdrew yet another handgun. Joanne moaned as if a great weight were placed on her already slumping shoulders and wondered if this nightmare would ever be over. By the look on Michael's face, she thought the end might be near.

A thought pushed through her mind as brief and clear as a shooting star on a summer night. If she were to get up on her knees, close her eyes, and spread her arms wide. If she could just expose the fullest target, then all this business would finally be over. The pain of living, over. The thought was suicidal. Nevertheless, it had its appeal. Without her mind giving her body the final go-ahead for such a maneuver, Joanne began to rise to her knees. Her eyes were locked with Michael's and she knew what he wanted. At that moment, the price for living seemed much too high.

From her right came the gut-wrenching howl of an animal in a killing mode. A deep throaty sound reverberated off the walls and struck such terror into Joanne that she froze dead still like a grouse moments before it is flushed. The howl seemed to go on forever. The very ferocity and prolonged inhuman broadcast made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She wanted to cover her eyes in an effort to make the world go away, but

her arms were too heavy to raise.

She saw it all from her knees.

To Joanne, Tabatha's pose looked classic, as though she were the figurine on top of a marksmanship trophy. Tabatha's feet were planted firmly on the ground, her posture straight, almost rigid. She held her right arm high, the gun at arm's reach. She stood at a slight angle to offer the least target. But more important than the pose, what really drew Joanne's attention was the look on Tabatha's face. Because of the ferocity, she ceased to look human. It looked as though the muscles in her body had received a jolt of powerful electricity that served to swell every sinewy fiber to the breaking point. Tendons in her neck stood out and her facial muscles bulged and jumped. Joanne grimaced with sympathetic response to Tabatha's musculature contortions.

Tabatha continued her cry of rage as her sweat and tears combined together and gave the whole tortured apparition a sickening sheen. After she fired a round, Tabatha screamed even louder and took a step closer to Michael. Joanne never dreamed such courage existed in the world.

As Tabatha bore down on Michael's position, Joanne noticed her husband take cover behind the cart he had been pushing. He snaked his arm between two shelves and returned fire from that awkward attitude. Despite the weird angle, the stainless-steel shelves acted like crude armor plating. The noise became deafening and the scene

inconceivable. The hunter just became the hunted, and Michael's attention seemed, for the moment, diverted. Again, that detached feeling washed over her as the scene played out and Joanne wondered just how many bullets these two guns held.

Whenever she had watched movies on television there were six shots per gun. But these two seemed to go on and on, and if the noise and smoke and horror didn't stop soon, she would go out of her mind.

Finally, after Tabatha had more than halved the distance between the two, Michael broke from his cover and retreated back through the double doors he had come.

As Joanne stood, Tabatha slumped to her knees and in a disgusted gesture, threw the spent weapon behind her.

What she witnessed felt like an abomination to sanity that would never end. As Joanne approached her friend, several holes in Tabatha's torso became visible. Each unnatural opening pulsed blood; their thick streams kept rhythmic time to the ebbing beat of her heart. A deep sorrow made Joanne cry out. Then Joanne went to her knees and held her hands up with palms out. She wanted to cover the hurts and make the blood stop flowing. To make all that red go back to where it belonged. She wanted to make this beautiful woman whole and not suffer anymore. To make the hurt go away.

But nothing could do that.

Slowly, as though she were placing her head on a pillow, Tabatha rocked forward and leaned her forehead on Joanne's left shoulder. After a moment, without a word, she died in her friend's arms.

And Tabatha's last thought: the price was high, but oh God, it's so nice to be here in her arms.

Joanne wailed long mournful cries as she caressed Tabatha's body. After a time, she lowered her to the floor, stood up and began to stagger toward the front entrance of the cafeteria. It came to her while she rocked Tabatha, Michael may be dead. Then again, maybe he's not. Maybe he's still back there lurking in the kitchen just waiting for there to be no more noise. If that were the case, and if he found her like this Tabatha would have died for nothing. As Joanne went through the front door, Michael once again appeared at the kitchen entrance door. Despite the pain in her legs, Joanne ran down the hall the best she could.

Three employees and four residents gathered at the far side of the foyer away from the cafeteria. All wondered about the noise and talked softly as though to do otherwise would somehow cause the commotion to start again.

Mrs. Janet Stanley had been a nurse's aide since the Bush administration, she would stoutly tell anyone who would listen, and woe to the individual not willing to listen.

Most of those long, arduous years were spent right here on the midnight shift. Besides carrying her considerable weight of two-hundred and sixty pounds with the grace of a dancer, there didn't seem to be much left in life that could throw her a curve ball, thus she exuded confidence. When one of the new employees (Nancy Evans, she had been working at the nursing home a mere eight years) suggested that somebody cross the foyer to check on the commotion, Janet came into her own. "No. We'll stay right here for now." She held up her hands as though she were talking to a group of rowdy children on the school playground. Her demeanor had a no-nonsense quality that demanded respect, and people did listen when she talked.

"I'm sure it's nothing. It's always nothing. Everybody always gets worked up over stuff they don't have any business getting worked up over." Janet said her piece and there better damned well be no more discussing whether anybody's marching down the hall to check out the noise. Not unless she were the one doing the suggesting. All heard the double door of the cafeteria swing open and the sound of heavy breathing as somebody came down the hall. Everybody in the small group took one step backward, except for Janet, another small victory.

The thought of turning left in the foyer and bolting out the front door crossed her mind, and Joanne almost did it. But if she did, there would be

no place to hide, she'd be out in the open parking lot with him on her heels. And one more thing, as she came into the foyer, she noticed a group of curious onlookers milling about on the other side. If Michael came through the area, which he was bound to do, he might take a shot at one of these people just for the meanness of it. She headed their way.

From ten feet away Joanne barked a harsh command. "There's a man right behind me with a gun and he's looking to use it. Somebody call the police, and for God's sake, get out of the hall. Unless, you want to be his next target!"

Janet Stanley thought she had heard and seen it all, but she hadn't. When she got a good look at the person running toward the group, and how she was covered in blood from face to feet, Janet lost her resolve to be top dog. And when it registered what the woman in the blood red jumper had said, her knees went weak and her bladder loosened. Back peddling as fast as her legs could carry her, Janet ploughed into the group like a bowling ball striking six static pins.

"Move! Now! Get out of the hall! Are you people deaf?" Joanne knew she didn't have time to stop, but she couldn't just leave these fools standing here bumping into each other like so many confused cows waiting for the slaughter. Without any finesse, she physically ushered the group behind an office door and ordered them to lock it, and of course, to call the police. As she

pushed the last person through the door, Joanne heard the labored breathing of her husband coming down the hall. She took off running as best she could. Her side had a stitch in it, her heart felt as though it were about to come out of her chest and her limp became more pronounced with each step.

The hallway reminded her of a long, narrow funnel. Joanne paused just long enough for one deep breath, then she started down it at a fast walk. She wanted to run but the pain in her legs and the burning in her lungs said no. Her side of the funnel had light, and the far end, which seemed small in the distance, had light. But in between, the main section of the hall, held only elongated tendrils of shadows that blended together in defused patterns. They combined to bathe the floor and walls in a gray darkness that left too many places to hide. If she didn't know her husband's position to be only seconds behind her, Joanne would have never ventured down the dark hall. As it was, she had no choice.

The first three doors she passed were open just enough to see frightened eyes peering back at hers. And as she passed each one, she said, as gently as she could, "Please Dear, go back in your room now." Or. "Shut your door sweetheart. It may not be safe where you are." And as expected, each resident would pull back into their rooms like a box turtle pulling back into its shell. She considered that she might have mistaken by not going out into the parking lot after all. It would

have been riskier for her, but then, she would not have put all these people at risk.

She moved down the hall. A quick glance to her left, then to her right. Either the people on this end of the hallway heard her warning or they never heard the original commotion. There were no cold fearful eyes on her from darkened doorways. Nobody watching her sweat and struggle to keep one foot in front of the other. Nobody with that look that asks: what's going on? Am I truly safe so far from home? Can I please go on about my business of dying without all this noise?

About two thirds down the hall Joanne's feet tangled. As her body pitched forward, total disbelief at her own stupidity dominated her thoughts. She tripped. Her fall had no grace. It was a hard thump to her left shoulder and arm. The pain made her ears ring and stole what small breath she had left. Joanne laid sprawled in the middle of the hall pulling in deep, rasping chunks of air. Once again, she thought about the futility of her efforts. If she just stayed put for a few seconds more, all this could be over. Joanne rocked to her side and gingerly pulled her left arm out from under her. A large angry lump between her wrist and elbow smarted as though it were swatted sharply with a Louisville Slugger. It felt broken.

After an initial effort to gain her feet, Joanne slumped back to the floor. She told herself she didn't want to die, then again, she truly didn't have the will to gain her feet and keep moving.

Gasping for air and sprawled in the center of the dark hall, Joanne spied an object on the floor to her right. She reached for the mystery item. "It's the GD sign!" she hissed. The pain made her words sound curt. "Damn that girl," Joanne laughed out loud. Tabatha had left her wet floor sigh in the middle of the hall and Joanne tripped over it. Laughing, she fought to stand. "Okay dear. I'll move, but only because it's you. And you know, you broke my arm. There's going to be hell to pay for this." Joanne had time only to stand when she heard Michael approach the far end of the hall. She stepped into the nearest room as her husband stepped onto the long dark hallway.

From the inside of the room Joanne placed her ear to the heavy ash door and to listened for sound on the other side. Maybe she heard him going by, maybe not. She made an effort to take shallow breaths and in doing so not sound like a freight train laboring up a steep hill. She closed her eyes and started to say a prayer for help when a hand touched her shoulder. Despite her best effort not to make a sound, she made a short barking noise and turned to see William at her side. At that moment, rational dialogue seemed out of the question. As she collected herself, the fact that she just stumbled into this particular room by happenstance never struck her as odd. Odd now seemed normal. She accepted the fact that of all the rooms she could have entered, chance alone brought her to this door. Joanne leaned her

forehead against the door and waited for her heart to slow from a full gallop to a canter. Somewhere between the gallop and the canter, William's door opened once more. More aptly put, the door exploded inward.

Unfortunately for Joanne, her face received the lion's share of the door's inward momentum. In an instant her nose broke, a large fissure opened in the area just below the nose, and her two upper front teeth were broken off at the gum line. A loud ringing sound blocked out the world for the instant before everything went dark. Joanne laid flat on her back and didn't move.

He never saw or suspected the bitch's presence, the one with the gun and the wolverine complex. Accordingly, she had succeeded in totally unnerving him. Michael had seen some frightening things in his life, and this woman fit right up there with the best of his night creepers. He got her though. Put a few holes in that ugly hide of hers. What goes around, comes around. Seems she put a hole or two in my hide as well, he mused. Michael didn't look down to survey the damage. It didn't matter. Whatever broke, would soon be put to rights when he shared the wealth with his wife. If he could get her before he bled out.

"She looked to be running real good. Matter of fact, her ass looked to be moving just great, looked like a Damn good ass too." Michael smiled at the image as he played it back in his mind.

"Don't matter, she can run and still I'll find her."
He blew a short puff of air from pursed lips an effort to divert some of the blood that dripped into his mouth from a mystery source somewhere on his scalp. He lowered his head and plodded on at a normal walk. Every part of his body hung and sagged. His mouth opened wide as he struggled to pull in enough air.

No matter how things turned out, only minutes remained and despite his mind fogging over like a New England fishing village in March, he sensed something coming to fruition. As he walked from one patient care area to another, Michael whipped his arm vigorously in an effort to splatter his own blood on the walls as he passed. He thought of it as marking his territory. Papa dog home for good, marking a little here, a bit there. Just looking for my she-bitch.

Twice his vision faded as he teetered precariously on the brink of sleep, a sleep that did not have awakening as an option. Twice Michael shook off the urge to sit and close his eyes. Things were not unpleasant though, oh no. As a matter of fact, things were down right fine. Fine for the first time in memory. For whatever reason there were no voices to contend with. Nobody telling him what to do. Nothing to scare him so bad that he wet himself. As he walked through the hall, he accepted this small sample of what life will be like after the bitch is gone. And it felt just fine. He felt no pain, heard no voices and sleep felt right around

the corner. Yes, things were looking good.

And there, another gift from God. Despite the hall being dark, Michael knew the black substance on the floor and black stuff the door to his right would be bright red if the lights were on. He felt pretty sure she ran into the room, and if not mistaken, that startled bird chirp from the other side of the door came from his wife. In one smooth move he turned the doorknob and threw his shoulder into the door. What he got for his efforts was the very gratifying sound of Joanne's face being smashed by the heavy door and the sight of her hitting the floor ass first.

He started to laugh. The realization that his lifelong nightmare might finally be over rocked his funny bone. Still laughing Michael noticed there were three people in the room. An old man leaned on a table to his left. First things first. Michael stepped up to the man, drove his pistol deep into bony ribs and pulled the trigger. The old man spun around, hit the table and careened to the floor.

Now, his attention could be focused totally on Joanne. Laughing almost uncontrollably, Michael straddled the prone body, raised his gun and pulled the trigger. He thought he aimed for her chest; the bullet smashed into her clavicle. That got his attention. Controlling his laughter, Michael grasped his wrist to steady his aim. Slowly, and without the possibility of another miss, he took aim and pulled the trigger.

The gun was empty.

An uncontrollable rage wiped clean the slate of motive and dictated his next move with the irresistible force of a Saturn Five booster upon lift off. He would not be stopped. This time he would get it right. Michael threw his gun away and dropped to his knees. Now he looked as though he were having intercourse with his wife. But instead of loving caresses, he reached high and put his hands around Joanne's throat. With his last reserve of strength almost spent, Michael buried his hands deep into her throat.

Where or when he first concluded his conviction didn't matter. William could attest. There were men who presupposed as their inalienable right, the total degradation of the women unfortunate enough to fall in love with them. He detested the species. They used their hands to inflict pain, they used their verbal ability to browbeat into submission. And lastly, they used sex to degrade and humiliate. Yet they seemed to survive throughout the ages, as he did. Although the subspecies that just barged into his room seemed particularly virulent and crazy as a shit-house rat. He was, nonetheless, nothing more than a sick wife beater.

Much about Joanne's demeanor, her physical limitations, and overall reluctance to aspire, became bitterly apparent. This intruder had probably been her husband, or somehow romantically attached. Whatever the case, he obviously had done a number on her. Although the

deduction spontaneous, William had come to trust his instincts regarding such things. And something else his instinct now screamed. It said that if he didn't move real fast Joanne would be dead.

William reached deeper within himself than he had in a long time. Upon finding the will, he summoned the strength to rise up and crawl to where Joanne now fought for her very life. Once next to the crouching thing, William rose up and threw himself onto its back. He wrapped his spindly arms around its neck, shut his eyes, and pulled harder than he ever had in his life.

He didn't pull to remove the attacker, rather, he pulled the thing that perpetuated life. The very essential of the soul. That which separates man from the lower creatures was William's for the taking, and he took.

It only lasted a moment. No sound effects were heralded, no lights flickering. What happened caused no superfluous adieu. Michael Arnet ceased to live and breathe, and William Fennerman became considerably younger. William stood with Michael's husked remains in his left hand. Without hesitation he tossed the empty shell into the corner, then he walked over to Mr. Auckman's bed. "Right now, I need this more than you do. Thank you, friend." William took his neighbor's hand in his own. "Now go to sleep." When done he strode out of the room. A few minutes later a younger William walked back through the door. He knelt next to Joanne, grasped her hand, and gave.

Chapter 21

Six months later Joanne walked slowly through the grocery store at a leisurely pace, reading labels and letting her mind drift to wherever it wanted to go. She had no clear memory of what happened after she broke her arm in the hall and nobody could fill in the blanks. Her husband was found dead in the corner of William's room and William was nowhere to be found.

As the days passed, she thought about that night less often. She was getting good at blocking things out. Either block it out or go crazy. She stopped and looked up at the instant coffee. Her brand was on the top shelf and the only jar she saw sat twelve inches back from the edge. She'd have to stretch to get it. She moved then stopped, the memory of reaching for the same coffee on the same shelf came back, and the cramp that left her hanging onto the cart gasping in pain. The memory was bitter and clear.

She wanted the coffee, but not enough to relive such a memory. Joanne had decided to move on, then from behind her, an arm reached over her head and grabbed the coffee.

“Let me help.” The voice said.

“Thanks, I have a hard time stretching that high.” Joanne accepted the jar of coffee without looking at the person giving it to her. She wasn’t looking for random social contact and her self-confidence had serious chinks in it. Combine the two and her reluctance to look a stranger in the eyes became clear.

“You look good. Much better than the last time I saw you.”

Now she did look up, and took a step back at the same time. The man talking to her looked her age, he was tall and good looking. She focused on his eyes, then froze where she stood. William saw that she recognized him and smiled. “I’ve been waiting for you. Waiting for you a long time. Shall we?” William offered his arm and Joanne took it.