

Four Middies and a Dead Hippie



Jay Rose

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and
A Dead Hippie

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PROLOGUE

Ponzi scheme *noun*

Definition of *Ponzi scheme*

A form of fraud in which belief in the success of a nonexistent enterprise is fostered by the payment of quick returns to the first investors from money invested by later investors.

For more than 50 years, America's economy had been operated like a giant Ponzi scheme, fabricated on sinking ground by inept leaders using borrowed money, deficits, and mounting debt. Like all things 'too good to be true,' it comes to an ugly end in March 2020, with one more impulsive Presidential tweet: "Increasing tariffs on ALL Chinese goods to 100% effective IMMEDIATELY. China must pay for past transgressions!"

Finally fed up after three years of these brash tweets, the Chinese Premier quickly retaliates with a carefully worded tweet of his own: "China STRONG and PROUD. Can and will withstand MORE PAIN THAN AMERICA. China will NOT purchase U.S. treasuries until ALL tariffs eliminated."

It is the equivalent of mutually assured economic destruction, and in a heartbeat, interest rates rise by 10 percent, stock futures fall by 10 percent, and five minutes after the market opens, circuit breakers halt the day's trading. Both men refuse to blink and for five days this cycle—rising interest rates and a limit-down stock market—repeats, and by Friday March 15, 2020, interest rates have risen 50 percent while the U.S. stock market has fallen 90 percent. More than \$27 trillion in paper wealth has vanished in America alone.

As word quickly spreads that the U.S. money supply is being drained, depositors flock to banks amid rampant speculation that irregularities will be found in the banking system. When the money is gone and banks are forced to close their doors, the violence, rioting, and looting erupts, and America's collapse triggers world-wide pain. It is 1929, magnified by decades of greed, irresponsibility, and arrogance, and as the spring of 2020 begins, economic nuclear winter sets in.

By the summer of 2020, America is desperate for a real leader... a hero. They find one in Jack Kurtz, the retired 4-star admiral who, in 2019, had predicted the Collapse of 2020 in his now-famous book, *Wake Up, America*. As economic and social conditions continue to deteriorate, the Presidential election isn't close, and on November 7, 2020, with the U.S. and

world economies in shambles, Admiral Jack Kurtz, the Independent, is elected President of the United States.

Nearly three-and-a-half years later, Jack has successfully executed his three “R’s”—*repair* relations with China, *reduce* government spending through entitlement reform and enactment of term limits, and *re-engineer* the American economy for the long-run. By May 2024, America is back from the brink, and as the stock market screams past 40,000, President Jack Kurtz is being called the Wizard of Washington, and perhaps the greatest President in American history...

... one thing Jack is *not* being called is a conspirator to murder. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what he is. And that’s what this story is all about.

ONE

It ain't paranoia
if they're really out to get you...
--Anonymous

The mood in the Rose Garden on that cloudy mid-May afternoon was rightfully somber. After all, it wasn't every day the Vice President announced his resignation... or confirmed the rumors he was dying of ALS. Flanked by President Jack Kurtz to his right and his family to his left, Seth MacPherson stood rigid, his weakened and gnarled hands clenched tightly to the sides of the wooden podium for needed support. Pale and fragile, the former slugger who'd once hit 50 home runs in a single season for the Red Sox, looked like he wouldn't see the 2024 World Series. As Mac spoke, his wife Margie and their two grown children fought back tears and dabbed at their eyes with tissues.

"... and so, on July 31st, I will be resigning as your Vice President," Mac continued, a bit breathless and slurred and emotional. "But, please don't feel sorry for me. As Lou Gehrig said, 'today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.' I have lived a great life, have been married to the love of my life, and have two great kids to carry on my legacy. I am proud to have been your Vice President, and privileged to have served under the man who will be remembered as one of the greatest Presidents in the history of our great nation. It's been a great ride and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Fair winds and following seas, my friends, it's been a wonderful life."

As Mac finished speaking, Jack wiped his eyes and stepped in to embrace his VP, ever-cautious not to hug him too tightly. After helping his VP to a chair, Jack took his place behind the mic and looked into Mac's glazed eyes. "Mac, you've been my rock these past three-and-a-half years and none of our accomplishments could have been accomplished without you. Your country owes you a debt of great gratitude, as do I. As you fight the good fight, know that you and Margie and Patrick and Kelly are in the prayers of every man, woman, and child in America. And know that you will be remembered as one of America's greatest sluggers and greatest Vice Presidents. God bless you, Mac."

Visibly shaking, Jack let out a series of deep breaths. The end of Mac could very well mean the end of him.

After regaining his composure, Jack looked out and made eye contact with his Chief-of-

Staff Tony Moretti and FBI Director Vic Graves who flanked the bank of reporters and camera crews in the back of the garden. On the outside, each appeared somber and respectful as they took in this new development. But on the inside, each was undoubtedly bursting with glee. The number two spot in the number one country on earth had opened up quite nicely, and Jack could almost see their rotted souls turning the gears in their selfish minds as each plotted a next move. And Jack was sure even Jesus would have hated them, too.

“I intend to announce my nomination for Vice President in mid-July,” Jack stated firmly. “Until then, I will have nothing further to say on the subject. Thank you all and may God continue to bless America.”

With the ceremony over, Jack walked into his private study on the second floor of the White House, sat down at Grover Cleveland’s old desk, and broke down. And while he cried for Mac, who would surely be dead within six months according to the doctors, most of Jack’s tears were reserved for the country. The future hung in a delicate balance, and the next two months would surely test his leadership, his loyalties, and most importantly, his cunning foresight.

On the surface, picking a replacement for Mac seemed absurdly easy. After all, the qualifications to be VP were minimal-- be a natural-born U.S. citizen; be at least 35 years old; and be a resident in the U.S. for at least 14 years. That opened up the door to about 150 million Americans. And, as the President who had successfully rebuilt the collapsed U.S. economy, Jack knew he could choose just about anyone and his choice would be easily confirmed by Congress.

Unfortunately, as things stood, Jack knew the choice probably wouldn’t be his to make. With 36 year-old blood forever stained on his hands, Jack was a hostage to three co-conspirators, and two of them-- Tony Moretti and Vic Graves -- would surely do anything to get the VP job. It was, they all knew, tantamount to a Willie Wonka golden ticket to the Presidency.

Jack’s eyes strayed towards the hand-blown glass globe on the tripod to his right. Amidst the azure of the south Pacific, he saw the tiny brown dots of the French Polynesian Islands. The idea of resigning, chucking everything, and disappearing to a world away from the pressures and co-conspirators sounded inviting, and he imagined himself fishing on a sandy, white beach with swaying palms in the background. Perhaps he’d even write again. And this time, instead of a doomsday book predicting a 21st Century Depression, he’d write fiction... or maybe his autobiography... or maybe a book that sounded like fiction but *really was* his autobiography. *That* would be easy enough. After all, he was right in the middle of what sounded like a pretty good fiction novel. Jack envisioned how the book jacket would read:

The President of the United States has a problem-- he and three of his Naval Academy classmates and current top aides are hiding a secret. And it isn't something petty, like bugging a political

opponent's office, or boinking an intern, or hush payments to a porn star. No, this secret is deep, dark, and murderous, and if it were to ever surface, the man whom many refer to as the greatest President in American history, will be destroyed publicly and privately. *It is a secret men would kill to know, and be killed to keep from making known.*

In the fourth year of his first term, as he prepares for re-election, the President's worst fears are becoming a reality-- his VP is resigning for health reasons, and Jack knows his Chief-of-Staff is willing to cut a deal, expose the secret, and destroy the President... unless he's made VP on the ticket. But this is only the beginning. The President's FBI Director also wants the job. Two men... one slot... and one dark secret. Something has to give. *Would a man kill for the job? Or be killed to keep silent?*

Of course there is more. Unknown to the President, others are out there trying to expose the secret. Is everyone out to get the President? Or is it just paranoia?

As he looked around the darkened room, Jack could almost feel the walls shrinking in upon him. And while escape to the Polynesian Islands sounded appealing, Jack knew his best option might just be to come clean, admit his mistake, and accept whatever punishment the criminal justice system meted out. That might even stop the haunting nightmares and ease his 36 year-old guilt.

Feeling a migraine coming on, Jack laid down on the leather couch, closed his eyes, and hated himself for getting trapped in such a sticky, tangled web. Somehow, the Wizard of Washington needed to figure out how to entangle himself...

TWO

Man is not what he thinks he is,
he is what he hides.
-- André Malraux

Half a mile from the White House, in his modest corner office 12 stories above K- and 15th streets, Drew Matthews stood in rumpled khaki pants and an equally rumpled light blue button down shirt watching CNN's continuing coverage of Seth MacPherson's resignation announcement.

"Hey Allie, come take a look at this," America's most well-known, but most unassuming political sleuth called out to the adjoining reception room. From the next room, the 5 foot 4, short-haired blonde with eyes of blue and the Kristen Bell-like face glided into her 6 foot 1, bald boss' office.

She arrived just in time to hear one of the CNN talking heads say, "The front runners for the VP slot are likely to be Tony Moretti, the Chief-of-Staff, Vic Graves, the FBI Director, and Bob Grady, the President's senior legal counsel. All three are Naval Academy classmates and are part of the President's trusted inner circle."

"Wow, Drew," Allie reacted as she scrunched her tiny nose and squinted at the 40-inch screen to read the breaking news, "you were right-- Mac's resigning."

"Why do you always sound so surprised when you realize I'm right?"

"Truthfully?"

He nodded.

"Because you're not right very often." She couldn't contain her chuckle.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, geez-a-wheeze, well next time lie. Make me feel better at least."

"Okaaaay," she said, drawing out the word, "but sometimes lies hurt, too."

Drew laughed to himself. He wouldn't trade his daily exchanges with Allie for anything. Even on Mondays and Wednesdays, her least favorite days, Allie was worth her salary just for that. That she handled the day-to-day operations of the office, did all the legal research, and kept him on schedule were all bonuses. How great she looked walking around on Fridays-- mini-skirt day, as she had proclaimed it-- was beyond bonus. No matter how hard he tried, it was impossible for him to think of her in a fatherly way all the time.

“So what do you think of the list for VP?” he asked.

“I can't believe your name was left off.”

Given the three imbeciles on the list, it sounded like another dig at him, but Drew let it go. "Never end a sentence with a preposition," Drew said instead, using the line he often heard from her.

She thought quickly. “I find it bloody ridiculous that the esteemed and well-respected Sir Andrew Rowland Matthews was omitted from rightful and due consideration as the nation's number two,” she re-stated, this time in an overly thick, formal British accent.

The contrast to her normally slight southern accent drew a smile out of Drew. He liked that she could always make him smile. And she liked making him smile. She hated that he carried so much pain around inside.

“Brilliant, Allie. However did *you* become *so wise* at such a *young age*?” He had also taken on a British accent. And while 36 wasn't that young, the 47 year-old Bruce Willis-lookalike treated her almost like a teen. He didn't do it consciously, nor to demean or insult; rather, he did it because Drew's inner nature was that of a father. That made him feel needed. As his one and only employee, Allie just happened to be the one with whom the workaholic Drew spent most of his time. Like many who've been struck by personal tragedy, work was just about all Drew had left.

Seven-and-a-half years earlier, Drew really was a father, and work had mattered little to him. Back then, work was a place called the Defense Investigative Service, and Drew was one of the many nameless, faceless bureaucrats who worked there to support his family. That's not to say Drew didn't work hard or do a good job. He did. But he did it in a manner and perspective consistent with its importance to him. His family was first, his work a very distant second. But all that changed... in a heartbeat... when a drunk, dirt-bag Senator from Louisiana ran his wife and son off the road and sped away as they lay trapped and dying in a ditch.

Allie answered, "Well, I certainly didn't become wise from hanging around with an ornery old fart like you these past ten months."

The words 'ornery, old fart' hit Drew like a brick upside the head, almost causing his greying goatee to quiver. His Lori used to call Drew an ornery old fart, too, and now, whenever Drew heard the term, he thought of her. After she died, Drew didn't think he'd ever be called an

ornery old fart again... at least not playfully... and certainly not by a woman he thought he could love.

"If I'm such an ornery old fart, how come you're still working for me?"

"Truth or lie?" she asked, her eyes twinkling like sapphires. She loved open-ended questions like that from him.

He shrugged. "Like I said, whatever makes me feel better..."

"I think we need each other."

"Was that the truth or a lie?"

"A little of both," she answered with that patented cute chuckle of hers. "So, you think Jack will pick one of those three?" she asked, returning to the subject of VP candidates.

"Sure. Maybe. Who knows what Jack Kurtz might do? But he *sure does seem to love* his Navy classmates. "

His flippancy surprised Allie. "I thought you liked Jack?"

"I never said I *like him*. And I certainly don't *love him* like you do. I said I like the way he fixed relations with China, and how he restored the economy and instilled confidence in the American people. I'm not sure anyone else could have done what he's done, especially so quickly. But you don't have to like someone just because they do their job well."

He hadn't answered her question. "So, do you like Jack or not?" she persisted.

"Jack Kurtz intrigues me."

She was more interested in this answer than her previous question. "Why does he *intrigue you?*"

"Being the most recognized man on earth, while also being one of the least known." Drew puffed his chest out proudly, as if he'd just birthed a new concept.

"What are you talking about?" she shot back. "There's tons of information out there about Jack-- books about him as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, about his role in the Gulf War, even a couple of biographies. And George Will just wrote one about his first three years in office."

"You're missing my point," Drew said, shaking his head sideways. "I'm not saying a lot

hasn't been written about Jack Kurtz. What I'm saying is everything that's been written is just superficial fluff... even Will's book. It explains how Jack rallied the American people behind him and how he was able to reduce spending, reduce debt, and turn around the economy. But that's it. And the military books are about a young Marine Captain selling Schwarzkopf on the air war and the left flank around the Iraqi National Guard. Big deal. We know Jack's persuasive, we know he's got a keen military mind. And the biographies? All they tell you is where he grew up and what schools he went to. They tell you he was raised Baptist, that his Dad was a violent alcoholic who died in a hunting accident when Jack was two, that his older brother died in infancy, that Jack made B's and C's in middle school and then straight A's all through high school. So what? None of--"

"So what's your point?" she asked, cutting him off.

"My point is this-- I've read all those books and I still don't know what makes Jack tick, what drives him, what makes him the way he is."

"What do you mean, *the way he is*?" She made the quote sign with her fingers as she said it.

"I mean so strange, with a capital S."

Allie looked at Drew with a mix of confusion, disbelief, and curiosity. What he was saying, and how he was saying it, was typical Drew-- *strongly* opinionated and *strongly* confident. In fact, Drew was *strongly* everything in almost all ways... except inner peace. And that strength is what she liked best about him. Physically, he was defined by taut cheekbones, a protruding jawline, and ever-confident, almost piercing green eyes... the eyes of a man who thought himself smarter than most. And because he generally was, she'd learned to never underestimate him or discount his opinions... even the ones that seemed overly outlandish.

Drew answered the question on her face. "Face it, Allie, Jack Kurtz is a sta-a-a-range man."

"And Drew knows strange, eh?" she said with a smirk. "Listen, Drew, I've worked for you for ten months and I don't know what makes you tick. Does that make you strange?"

"You don't know what makes me tick?"

"Truthfully? No. I mean, I know you're a workaholic and all, but I don't know if that's all you want out of life. And I know you still hurt over what happened to your family. But truthfully, I have no idea what you really want out of life... other than to take down every dishonest politician you come across."

I just want my wife and son back. Other than that, Drew didn't really know either. Sure, he enjoyed being the CEO of DUMP, the nonprofit agency he'd founded with the singular mission to eradicate unscrupulous politicians from America. And while he made a boatload of

money, he wasn't happy. A job was a job, no matter how noble it sounded. As for all that money, it merely allowed him to buy better stuff, eat better food, and take better vacations. No matter one's work and economic status, happiness demanded something more. For Drew, that was a family. But he wasn't sure that would ever happen again...

"Alright Drew, I'll bite... what do you think is so *strange* about Jack?"

"Let's see, right off the bat I think it's strange that he doesn't eat meat, doesn't drink alcohol, gives every penny of his salary and money to charity, and never vacations. Basically," Drew summed, "he lives the life of a born-again 21st Century monk."

"So what if he's a vegetarian, doesn't drink, is anti-social, and loves Jesus. If I could meet a man half as normal as that I could be happy." She turned the argument around. "You're not exactly a fun-loving, social butterfly yourself. When's the last time you went on a vacation or did anything fun?"

When Lori and Luke were alive. "Hey, I may not be a socialite, but I'm no monk either. In fact, my Dad and I are going to Vegas next week."

"Oh, yeah, your annual father-son outing with Big Jake. Okay, Mr. Vegas, that's next week. So when's the *last* time you did anything fun?"

Drew thought quickly. "Last night. I played softball."

"Right... you and your middle-aged, beer-drinking buddies... the Arlington Thunderchiefs." The sarcasm in her voice was unmistakable.

"Thunderbirds, not Thunderchiefs. And it's a helluva lot of fun. You should come out and watch us sometime, you'd see."

"So where do you play, Drew? Right field?" Although physically strong, it was no secret that Drew put the 'clum' in clumsy. How else would you describe a guy who needed a toddler's Sippy cup for coffee and water so he wouldn't ruin another keyboard?

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're not exactly the most coordinated person in the world. I have trouble seeing you playing softball."

"I do alright."

"I'm sure you do," she responded in a patronizing tone. "So if Jack Kurtz played on your softball team, he wouldn't be strange then, would he?"

"Jack Kurtz couldn't make the Thunderbirds," Drew said with certainty. He smiled wide with pride at that one.

"Oh yeah, I forgot, you guys won the 'D' division league championship last year. Break out the champagne!" It was her turn to smile. "So what else do you think is strange about Jack?" She hoped there was more to Drew's theory than what she'd heard so far.

"For the record, it was the 'C' division. As for Jack, he doesn't seem to have any interest in women... or men... or anything remotely sexual. There's never been as much as a hint of porn stars, hookers, playboy bunnies, or hard-bodied boyish aides in his past..."

"He was married once," she injected.

"True. But even that's strange. He got married when he was 23, a year after he graduated from the Naval Academy. Less than two months later, he was divorced. That seems a bit odd, doesn't it?"

She didn't respond.

"Do you know why he got divorced?"

She shrugged.

"Of course you don't. Nobody does. Two years after the divorce his ex-wife died on a mission trip to Costa Rica and Jack has always refused to talk about her or their marriage."

"Two of my best friends are divorced, and their previous marriages aren't exactly favorite subjects, either. Nobody likes to talk about their failed marriages. Anything else?"

"He doesn't date, and he doesn't seem interested in dating... which is kind of weird for a man whom the press describes as JFK 2.0."

"And you're quite the ladies' man?" she ribbed, continuing with her theme of comparing Drew to President Jack.

"I do alright for myself."

"Riiiiiiight. So when's the last time you were actually on a date?"

He couldn't remember, nor could he think of anything witty. "I don't really have time for dating," he responded finally. "You know how busy I am around here." Almost immediately he realized he'd fallen into her trap.

"That's so sta-a-a-range," she said, drawing out the words the way Drew had. "Maybe,"

she said, raising her index finger up, "Jack Kurtz doesn't have time either. Maybe he spends a lot of time running the country, ending the worst Depression ever. He may not be the top dog of a political watchdog group, but I would hope that even you'd admit that the President of the United States has some fairly lofty responsibilities."

Though small in stature, she was tough and had a knack for cutting through the fat and reaching the bone. Drew liked that. But most of all, he liked the beautiful way she did it... and everything. Indeed, if he were to describe her in one word, it would be 'beautiful.' And not just her physical features, either; she was an intuitive, old soul housing a beautiful heart and beautiful mind.

Drew shook his head. "You're missing my point."

"Okay Mister Vegas, Mister Thunderbird, Mister Ladies Man, Mister Important Job... what exactly is your point? I still don't see what's so *strange* about Jack Kurtz."

Drew looked deeply into her eyes as if to emphasize the importance of what he was to say next. "Outside of his Naval Academy classmates, nobody is able to get close to him, like he's hiding something and he knows his best defense is to keep everywhere else at arms' length."

"Is that all you have?" She wasn't overly impressed.

"It just bothers me that I've never been able to come up with any dirt on him. Nothing. Everyone has dirty laundry... secrets... especially politicians. I just know he's got to be hiding something."

"You're just a hopeless cynic who likes to stir the pot."

That was true. He shrugged. "Maybe. But I also trust my instincts... and they're telling me something's just not right with Jack Kurtz."

"Okay, just for the sake of arguing, let's say you did find some big secret on Jack... what would you do? Would you really want someone else as President?"

"No, not necessarily... like I said, Jack's been a great President."

"So what's it matter then?"

"Wake up, Allie. Remember what we do here? Remember all that money I pay you every two weeks? We find dirt on dirty politicians. And when we do, we put it out there for everyone else to see. We're the ones who don't trust blindly, who question authority and demand transparency."

"All what money?" she reacted, still stuck on that part of his answer.

"I pay you good money."

"Good money? Shit, Drew, if you think you pay me good money, you must still think it's 1999. It's not. It's 2024-- the 21st Century is almost 24 percent over. A hundred K isn't much these days. Do you realize how much it costs to rent a two-bedroom townhouse in a decent neighborhood?"

Drew, the multi-million dollar homeowner who banked \$100K a month, shrugged. "I guess I don't pay much attention to things like that. You kind of lose perspective when you're making money hand over fist like I am." He winked.

"Oh yeah? Well maybe you ought to spend a month trying to make ends meet on my meager salary."

"I'll tell you what, Allie. You help me find out what Jack Kurtz is hiding and I'll switch paychecks with you for a month, okay?"

She nodded and thought about all the things she'd buy. But deep down, she knew none of that would bring her the happiness she desired...

THREE

The strangeness of this life
cannot be measured
--Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*

In his 4th floor office next to the Indian Treaty Room in the Old Executive Office Building, the shrill buzz of the red phone on his cluttered desk was greeted with mixed emotions by 57 year-old Don Meacham. On one hand he hated the red phone. Tan or blue or black or white would have been better for both his ulcer and his blood pressure... anything but red. All things red reminded him of Roxanne, his flaming red-haired Irish ex. Red was angry... red was stressful... red was the color of the goddamn Mercedes Benz convertible she'd bought after her lawyer-- the one with the red Washington power tie-- had sucked the green money and red blood out of Don.

But perhaps worst of all, red was the color of her lipstick on Tony Moretti's cheek... and chest... and wherever else she had kissed him. As much as the Naval Academy may have tried to instill honor and morality, none had obviously taken hold within Tony. He was a first-class d-bag. How else could you characterize a classmate who banged your ex-wife... just to add her to his list of conquests... just for kicks?

The phone buzzed a second time.

Still Don didn't pick it up. It was probably just Vic Graves calling for an update on Jack's schedule. Don took a long toke on his Marlboro and looked past his beaklike nose out the window at the eternal protestors in Lafayette Park. *Let the bastard on the other end wait*, he said to himself as he exhaled a lungful. *That's what the Marlboro man would do*. And that's the part of Don that loved the red phone. A red phone meant importance... a red phone meant power... a red phone meant you were needed. Roxy may not have need him, but the greatest President in history sure as hell did.

Before the third buzz, Don reached for the red phone. Secretly, he hoped it really was Vic Graves calling about Jack's schedule. That would be better than word of another death threat against Jack. Another credible one of those would be a death knell to his weekend plans, and if that happened, he'd once again disappoint his son Sean.

"Meacham," he answered in his gruff, throaty voice before the phone was even up to his mouth.

To someone who'd never called before, it must have sounded like the man answering had been kneed in the groin and was exhaling in pain. But a call via the red phone meant it was someone who knew of Don's greeting, or lack thereof.

"What the hell took you so long to pick up, Donno? You're not over there jerking off again, are you? I told you last week, I'm not buying you another new carpet. And you better not be smoking, either." It sounded like a good 'ol boy jabbing at a good friend.

Don perked up as soon as he heard the unmistakable southern drawl of the leader of the free world. He hadn't expected Jack. Quickly and quietly he cleared his throat. The smoke always tightened his vocal cords. "Sorry, Mr. President," he responded with respectful gusto, emphasizing 'Mr. President.' At the same time he brought his feet down from the windowsill, swiveled back towards his desk, and quickly opened up his schedule on his I-phone. "I was in the middle of some papers," he added.

"Cut the 'Mr. President' crap, Donno," Jack replied good naturedly to his former soccer teammate from the Academy.

"Sorry, Jack. But you know I still get a rush out of saying it. I guess I've seen too many Tom Clancy movies."

"Or taken too many hits on the pitch."

"More likely in the bedroom from one of Roxy's flying ashtrays." There was a mixture of sarcasm and truth, and instinctively Donno rubbed the thin scar above his left temple. It was one of the visible Roxy scars. The worst scars were inside, invisible to all but him. He continued talking, "Anyway, speaking of head injuries, Bernie said you had another migraine yesterday, after Mac's announcement. How you feeling today?" Bernie Grace was the President's personal secretary at the White House. As head of the Secret Service detail protecting the President, Don spoke with Bernie ten times a day it seemed. In reality, Don did more than just head-up Jack's Secret Service detail. As Jack's point man on all security matters, he managed a network of moles and spies in every branch of the government. But that was his and Jack's secret.

"Better," Jack replied truthfully. Waking without the migraine had been an unexpected, pleasant surprise. "But those goddam things are gonna kill me some day." He paused, as if lost in thought. "You know what amazes me?"

"That I'm not the CEO of a major Fortune 500 Company," Don replied sharply.

"No. Not even close," Jack replied, laughing aloud. "What amazes me is that we can build weapons capable of vaporizing entire cities, yet we can't cure the migraine. It just doesn't seem right."

"I'd take the migraine over an incoming W-88."

"Yeah, I guess I shouldn't complain. Yesterday wasn't as bad as usual."

"Did I hear right that you might be cancelling your schedule for the next few days?"

"Yeah. Doc thinks some R&R might help slow the migraines. I was thinking of heading up to Camp David for a few days. I thought you might join me. The weather's supposed to be nice up there... not like this steam bath down here. We can play some golf, maybe get a poker game going. Relax for a change."

"I'm flattered, Jack. But I promised Sean I'd take him camping, and --"

Jack cut him off. "So bring him up with you. He plays golf, right?"

"Yeah, but he's not that good."

"If I remember the last time we played, neither are you," Jack said good-naturedly.

"Come on, Jack. That was almost two years ago, right after Roxy told me she was leaving me. It was a tough time. The idea of hitting a little white ball into a hole wasn't exactly on my mind."

"I know, Donno. And you've done a yeoman's job of not letting the personal shit affect you professionally. I know I don't say this enough, but you're doing a terrific job for me. I'm not sure I could trust anyone else."

In appointing Don to head the Secret Service detail that protected him directly-- a job Jack had described to Don as the most important in his Administration-- Jack, indeed, trusted Don Meacham more than anyone. Turning around the country's economy had been done at the expense of many, and Jack had more enemies in the world than an abortion doctor at a Right-to-Life rally. He needed someone trustworthy to watch his back. But nobody-- Don included-- knew Jack's worst enemies were domestic, not foreign. But that would come forth soon enough. After all, that was the real reason Jack was calling Don-- it was finally time to entangle himself.

Jack returned to golf, "So what's Sean's handicap?"

"His mother," Don answered without hesitation, trying to contain his laugh. He re-answered over Jack's snicker. "Actually, he shoots around 90."

"So bring him up. We'll get one of the secret service agents to round out the foursome."

Don imagined his 14 year-old would jump at the idea. Playing golf at Camp David, with the President of the United States to boot, sounded a lot better than a weekend in the woods with him and the ticks and gnats. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Mind? Hell, no. I'm looking forward to it. It'll give us all a chance to do some male bonding." Jack took a deep breath. "Face it, Donno, it's been a long, hard, three-and-a-half years. You and I are way overdue for some relaxation. It'll be just like old times." Jack had a flashing thought. "In fact, have Sean bring up his allowance. I'll show 'em how I used to take your money when we played poker back at USNA."

... just like old times... back at USNA... the words echoed in Don's mind, and his memory kicked into high gear. In the 36 years since those old times back at the Academy, a lot had happened: his Huey Cobra almost shot down during a raid in Iraq; 22 years of dodging Roxy's flying ashtrays; the rock-bottom night in jail after she had him arrested for trespassing and battery; and a career split between the military and CIA that had never quite measured up to his James Bond- expectations. Now, even though the worst seemed behind, Don longed for the simplicity of Academy life, the innocence of youth, and the limitless possibilities of the future. He missed the sheer joy of sneaking a bottle of scotch from the ceiling panel in his room on Friday nights, 50-cent poker 'til morning meal formation, and endless talk of girls and war and sports and cars and back to girls. That's all they cared about then. Back at USNA, there was no such thing as ex-wives, alimony, and child custody. And back at USNA, if a classmate bilged you, like Tony had done with Roxy, you duct-taped him to a urinal, greased him, and feathered him like a mutant turkey.

Returning from memory lane, Don responded to Jack's invitation. "Alright Jack. It sounds great, just like old times back at Canoe U. Count Sean and me in. Thanks."

There was a noticeable pause, as if Jack wasn't ready to hang up, as if he had more to say but wasn't ready to say it. Don picked up on this. He also sensed more to Jack's call than just a weekend invitation to the Camp. In fact, there had to be more. With Jack, there was always more. And Don would've bet it involved a question of security. Jack Kurtz was nothing if not a security freak.

"Is there something else you wanted to talk about, Jack?" Don asked point-blank, breaking the silence.

Jack hesitated before answering. "You know, Donno, that's one of the things I've always liked best about you-- you always seem able to read my mood. Just like you always knew where I'd be on the pitch and could always get me the ball."

"Thanks, Jack."

"Anyway, there is something I need to talk about with you, but I'd rather do it in person. How 'bout coming on up to the study." Although Jack said it in his normal folksy tone, it was a command, not a request.

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Thanks," Jack said as he hung up the phone. Although the line was secure, what Jack needed to say warranted the sanctity of his personal study, where he felt safest. After all, it wasn't every day the President of the United States confessed he was being blackmailed. The fact his own Chief-of-Staff was doing the blackmailing made it even worse. If anything deserved the sanctity of the safe room it was that.

FOUR

A person who trusts no one
can't be trusted.
--Jerome Blattner

While other Presidents worked out of the bright and airy Oval Office, Jack worked exclusively out of his 12x12 foot second floor study. The dark mahogany wood was more agreeable to Jack's light-sensitive eyes, and the smallness reminded him of his bedroom growing up back in Tyrone, Georgia. That always kept him grounded. But the most important feature of the room was its air-tight security. In fact, in his first official act after taking office, Jack had completely gutted the old room and built the current room.

The current room was actually a room within the old room, with the inner walls six inches smaller in every dimension. Between those inner and outer walls, a special composite of titanium material, similar to the skin of the stealth bomber, prevented every spectrum of electromagnetic energy from either penetrating or escaping. As a result, no electronic bug could ever pester Jack. Inside that same wall gap, sound dampening material kept noise from escaping or entering the walls, and complex electronic gadgetry swept the room continuously for any electronic or recording devices. Words spoken in the room could not escape to the outside unless repeated.

Inside the room, nobody could have known all this. Of course. It was one of Jack's many secrets. And, so, as he sat at the old oak desk, Jack looked around the windowless room and gathered his thoughts, knowing the conversation with Don had the potential to be the most important in his life.

A muffled knock came from the door and Jack opened it to find Donno breathing a bit too heavily. After the customary handshake, Jack closed the door and signaled for his out-of-shape classmate to sit in one of the two padded brown leather chairs facing his desk. To Don's right was Jack's favorite leather couch.

Seated and facing Jack directly, Don was shocked by what he saw. Although his boss had sounded chipper on the phone, the dark circles around Jack's eyes indicated otherwise. He looked like an old, hungover raccoon, as if he hadn't slept in days, and Don had a fleeting thought Jack had been kidnapped and an impostor left in his place. Even Jack's salt-and-pepper hair looked different... the pepper was missing.

"I'm sensing a lot of worry from you Jack," Don remarked a bit breathlessly, wasting no time. Whatever was up, he figured, might explain Jack's haggard look.

"You're reading me well, Donno."

Don inched forward on his chair, nearly leaning on the edge of Jack's desk. Based on Jack's appearance, he expected solemnity. "That's part of the job description, Jack. In order to protect you, I've got to know you."

"Yeah? Well, don't get too good, okay. Sometimes it's scary."

"How's that?"

"You clandestine boys... and all your gadgets. Sometimes I think y'all might try to sneak some newfangled device into my brain... something to read my thoughts."

"So what's worrying you?" Don asked point-blank, trying to move the conversation forward.

"I'm worried about picking a VP."

Beneath his thick dark hair, Don's brow furrowed as he played Jack's answer over in his mind. It made no sense. Nor did it make any sense to hear Jack talking with self-doubt. After all, Jack's touch would have made King Midas envious.

"Look, Jack, I don't want to sound overconfident, but the election's pretty much a lock. You must know that. Your approval rating's almost 85 percent. And the poll in this morning's Post had you up more than 32 points against anyone the Republicans or Democrats could possibly put up against you. Hell, on Saturday night, one of the political pundits said you'd be in a dead heat against Jesus." Don chuckled before continuing as a thought struck him. "Face it, Jack, you could probably win a landslide with a running mate who dodged the draft, cheated on his wife, paid off a porn star, scammed on real estate, and was impeached."

Jack laughed. "Sounds like a few of my predecessors."

"Exactly, Jack. That's my point."

Although Don's assessment about the re-election was correct, Jack shook his head as if pained by Don's remark. "Donno, sometimes I think you are one of the most short-sighted thinkers in the history of mankind."

"How's that?" Don was trying to understand how he'd regressed so quickly. Hadn't Jack praised him just minutes earlier for his ability to read Jack so well?

"Because you're thinking of *this* election," Jack explained, rising from his chair. As Jack walked around the desk towards Don, the pause punctuated his answer and set-off the one to follow. "I'm thinking about the one *after* this," Jack added as he sat down in the chair next to Don.

Don considered Jack's words. Was Jack insinuating he was going to try for a third term--an Amendment to the Constitution, perhaps? It didn't make sense. Term limits were one of Jack's greatest accomplishments and had all but eliminated pork-barrel spending and self-serving politicians.

"My running mate is going to be my successor," Jack said with the trademark certainty Don was accustomed to hearing from his classmate. "I'll be picking the future President of the United States. That's an awesome responsibility... maybe even more awesome than being President."

Jack was indeed the ultimate electoral vote. "I still don't understand your apprehension, Jack. You've got the Midas touch."

Jack shrugged. "I've had my moments. Unfortunately, I just don't have a good feeling about this one. Anyway, I want your opinion on some of the names I've been kicking around." Jack was slowly moving toward telling Donno what he needed to know.

Despite Jack's sincerity, something struck Don as funny. "Come on, Jack. I'm your security guy. Remember? I keep you safe... I keep your motorcade from being blown-up... I keep the man with the golden gun from delivering a golden bullet to your golden brain. I might get confused for James Bond, but never James Carville. Plus, I think you once described me as one of the most short-sighted thinkers in the history of mankind."

Jack was smiling. He liked how his Academy classmate could sense his tension and pacify him.

"You know I was just kidding, Donno. You know you're one of the few people in this town I can trust. You're technical abilities to keep bad things from happening are one thing, but it's your intuition that's most important to me. In fact, when I write my memoirs I already know how I'm going to describe you." Jack was leaning forward in the chair, the distance between him and Don no more than a foot.

Don leaned forward, too, as if drawn in by Jack. "Oh yeah? How?"

Jack whispered. "Don Meacham: an intuitive, chain-smoking genius; one of those rare breeds who takes to clandestine activities as if born to them."

"Get rid of the chain-smoking and I sound like James Bond."

"Get rid of the chain-smoking and you'd turn into Barney Fife. As for Bond, I don't ever seem to remember him appearing winded when he walked into M's office." Jack winked. "That said, nobody in this Administration has a more important job than you, and nobody is more important to me personally."

Don locked onto Jack's eyes. "If I didn't know you better, Jack, I'd say you were about to ask me to get into shape and be your running mate."

A lot of people would have to die before you could be my running mate, Jack thought. Tony and Vic were just the start. There was Bob, too.

Jack burst out in a wide grin. "I couldn't do that, Donno."

"Oh yeah? And why not?"

"Because you've got too much baggage, buddy— too many flying ashtrays. Pardon the frankness, Donno, but politically you're *radioactive*. You know I went out on a limb naming you to head my secret service detail. Fortunately, I didn't have to worry about confirmation hearings. Putting you on the ticket would be a different story. Every women's rights group would be on my ass about that assault on Roxy. You know that."

"She had it coming."

"You didn't have to hit her."

"She didn't have to fuck Tony," Don countered unemotionally.

"I know. And you know what? I might have done the same thing."

"So you still want my opinion on running mates, Jack? Even though I'm *radioactive*?" Don made the quotes sign as he said it.

Jack nodded. His mood seemed to be improving with each minute. "Absolutely. You know as well as I do this political shit isn't as hard as all those slimy, self-serving political wonks want everyone to believe. That's how they can earn their seven figures consulting. Believe it or not, but you're my political barometer for the average, ordinary citizen."

... the average, ordinary citizen. It was one of Jack's favorite phrases, and Don thought of Jack's words from a week earlier. In private, Jack had said the average, ordinary citizen was as loyal as a puppy, but had the I.Q. of a lemming.

With that in mind, Don responded hesitantly. "I'm not sure Jack, but knowing how you feel about the average, ordinary citizen, you just slammed me or complimented me. Only I'm not

sure which."

"A little of both. But it was meant in good fun." Jack winked. "Anyway, just give me your straight-forward, gut-reaction to these names I've been kicking around."

"Okay."

"What do you think about Bob Grady?" Bob was the third of Jack's three co-conspirators.

Although rumored to be on the short-list, hearing Jack actually say Bob's name floored Don. Bob's name belonged on a ballot for the PTA, maybe some small town's City Council... certainly not on a Presidential ballot. Bob was not a future occupant of the White House. It had to be another of Jack's jokes.

"As VP?" Don retorted, drawing out his voice in unmistakable disbelief.

Jack nodded as if he wanted to hear Don's assessment.

"Let's see, on a scale of 10, a 1, maybe a 2. Bob's a good ol' boy southern lawyer, not a future President. You know that. He's timid, he's got no political savvy, and every time he opens up his mouth one of two things happens-- a butterfly comes out, or his other foot goes in." Don paused to reflect on his assessment. "I might rate him higher than Biden or Pence, but that's about it."

"A 2's generous. Can I tell you a secret?" Jack said.

"Can I blackmail you with it someday?"

FIVE

A man cannot be too careful
in his choice of enemies.
-- Oscar Wilde

Jack was struck by Don's eerie use of the word 'blackmail.' Coincidentally, that's exactly where their conversation was moving. Outwardly, however, Jack merely grinned at the question only a true friend would verbalize. "No," Jack replied simply. "Truth is I'm not really considering Bob for a running mate. I just wanted to hear your assessment. A litmus test of your political wisdom, sort of speak."

"Duh, Jack. How'd I do?"

"You're fully qualified as a political consultant. I'll have a seven figure consulting contract drawn up for you." Jack paused. "Should I have the check made out to you or Roxy?"

"It all goes to Roxy, anyway. Save me the hassle of declaring the income and paying the taxes and just make it out to her."

Jack laughed. "You're the most cynical divorcee I've ever met."

"If Roxy were you're ex, you'd be cynical, too, Jack. Anyway, now that I've passed your little consultant's quiz, who do you really have on your list?"

"Vic Graves."

"Vic's a 5, maybe a 6. No doubt he's smart enough. But he needs to lighten up, soften the edges, and get rid of the chip on his shoulder. He seems to have a grudge against anyone above him, and a disdain for anyone below him. That doesn't leave much room for most Americans."

Jack was nodding at Don's assessment.

Don continued. "But on the positive end, he knows how to get things done. And there's no doubt about one thing-- he's ambitious. Vic would kill for the job."

Jack thought about those last words. Although Donno was speaking figuratively, Jack knew the words were also true literally. Jack was sure Vic would kill to become VP. And Jack had a plan to find out if that was true.

Don continued on. "But there's one big negative with him. He's from the Boat School. You know as well as I do that putting Vic on the ticket would only add fuel to the fire that you play favoritism to classmates. A little diversity wouldn't hurt."

"You know I don't give a rat's ass about that diversity shit, Donno. I pick the best person for the job... no matter what." Even though Jack said it with firm conviction, it was a lie. In truth, Jack *had to* play favorites. That was the best way to handle people you don't trust-- when friends are really enemies, keeping them close is best.

Don responded, "Well, anyway, even though Vic wouldn't be at the top of my list, I'd say he's acceptable. You'd win easily enough, but your landslide might be reduced to a cascade of dust and pebbles."

Jack wondered what Don's assessment would be if he knew the real truth about his FBI Director. One thing was sure about Vic-- if he were ever to succeed Jack, it would be over Jack's dead body. Unfortunately, with Vic, that was a possibility.

"Okay," Jack replied. I don't disagree with anything you just said. Ready for the next candidate?"

"Bounce away."

"Drew Matthews."

"The head of DUMP?" Don repeated, surprised.

"Right," Jack answered. He respected Drew Matthews' passion and determination.

Don was struck by the symbolic charm of Drew, the anti-politician, as the second-highest politician in America. It also made incredible sense that Jack's successor would be another man-of-the-people, another non-career politician.

"I like Drew," Don responded. "He's got integrity, he's smart, and the public loves him. Philosophically he's a strong conservative like you, but the liberals like him because of his crusades to get rid of all the bad apples in Congress." Don shifted gears. "On the downside, though, he doesn't have any political experience per se. But like you've said before, being VP isn't exactly difficult. Biden and Gore and Pence all did it." Don smirked. "Four years with you and I could get comfortable with the idea of Drew Matthews as your successor. After all, he's got a lot of your same qualities-- grit, decency, and a sense of honor. Plus, he's not from the Boat School."

"Yeah, but his Dad was. Remember Captain Matthews? He was a Navy doctor."

Don's memory was in high gear. "Big barrel-chested guy?"

"Right. Hair always seemed too long."

"Un-huh. Kind of anti-military, right?"

Jack nodded.

Don was picturing the Navy Captain. "Cool guy. Didn't he drive that cherry red corvette?"

"Yup, a sweet ride... a '65," Jack replied, again nodding.

"I didn't know that was Drew Matthews' Dad. So how come Drew didn't go to the Academy?"

"Supposedly he tried to get in," Jack responded, "but he had a problem with his spine and couldn't pass the physical. Went to Notre Dame, though. That should help with the Catholic vote."

Don mulled over Drew Matthews as VP. "Have you done any background checks on him? You know, criminal records, financial records, nanny-gate scandals, assaults on cheating ex-wives, that kind of thing?"

"Not yet. That's one of the things I wanted you to do for me. You know the routine-- your eyes and my eyes only."

Don nodded. When not managing protection for Jack, he spent the majority of his time performing personal investigations like this for Jack. But that was okay-- he enjoyed the hands-on work and was an expert in electronic surveillance. "You want the Full Monty?"

Jack smiled. The 'Full Monty' was the term used to describe a complete head to toe investigation-- revealing as much as humanely possible. It meant wire taps and surveillance at both the office and home of the subject, as well as close friends and associates. Jack nodded. "As much as you can get. But I want all of his communications to come to me directly... I'll let you know what you need to know."

Don nodded and made a mental note. It was typical Jack— information was power and he wanted as much of it for himself as possible. While it had a chilling effect on Donno's effectiveness, it was what it was, and Donno dealt with it.

Jack spoke again. "Alright. Ready for the next name?"

"Keep bouncing, Jack."

"Tony Moretti," Jack announced, his tone low, embarrassed. In reality, he was embarrassed. Tony Moretti wasn't VP material. He really was a d-bag.

"Eeeeeewww."

Jack was amused by Don's high-pitched, pained shriek. "What's wrong?" Jack asked, feigning ignorance.

"What's wrong? You know what's wrong. You just bounced a pile of shit on me and it stinks in here. Wheeew."

"I expected a worse reaction, Donno. You must be warming up to Tony-boy." There was an edge of sarcasm in Jack's tone.

"I'll warm up to him when he's burning in hell. You're not serious are you? Tony? As your VP? Is this your idea of a sick joke?"

"I wish it were." There was conspicuous resignation in Jack's voice, as if he clearly wanted Don to pick up on it.

Donno did. "You're talking like you really don't want Tony... like you really don't have a choice."

Jack hesitated to answer. Although he had decided to bring the conversation to this point, he was approaching the point of no return-- of telling Don something he'd never told anyone. I would open Jack up to Don. But that wasn't so bad. At least Jack could trust Don. He couldn't trust Tony. That much was incontrovertible. Plus, at some point, Jack knew he'd have to tell Don.

Instinctively, Don sensed Jack was close to telling him why he'd been called into the study. He rephrased his response into a question. "Jack, is there something you want to tell me about Tony?"

"Maybe," Jack answered hesitantly, still putting off the inevitable.

Don jumped at Jack's hesitation. "Come on, Jack. I'm the guy who'd throw myself in front of a bullet meant for you. If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

Indeed. Plus, Jack knew there wasn't anybody else he could trust.

A long silence followed as each man considered where the conversation might be going. Sensing his boss still wasn't ready to tell him, Don spoke out again. "Look, Jack. I've never known you to mince words with me before. And I hope you never will. If there's something bothering you-- anything-- you know you can tell me. My job description is simple-- to protect you. But it goes a lot further and a lot deeper than that. You know that. I am here to serve you, and you alone. That's one of the things I like best about this job. You're my one and only client. I have no conflicts of interest, no moral choices. *You* are my interest. *You* alone. *Your* best interests are my *only* interests."

Don paused to let his words sink in. They were both heartfelt and true. More times than not, as a program manager in the CIA's counterintelligence branch, Don wasn't sure what the best interests were-- the chain-of-command wasn't always clear, there was too much deception, and too many people had too many conflicting agendas. More times than not, he needed a scorecard to figure out who was doing what, with whom, and to whom, and for what purpose. But now, as head of the Secret Service, Don finally had a job where his purpose was crystal clear. And that made a huge difference in how he approached his job. Finally, the bullshit wasn't intermixed with everything else.

Don continued, "Look, Jack, you know if want something, you got it. Anything. Like I said before, I would die for you." He looked deeply into Jack's eyes. "I would kill for you," he added. If loyalty were a ladder, Don had moved a rung higher.

Jack's heart was pumping and the hairs on his neck quilled as he considered Don's words. "I know," Jack replied as he wondered if he'd have to ask Don to do just that. "That's why what I'm about to tell you is between you and me. Nobody else."

Don was nodding. "Remember, Jack, I'm the rare breed who takes to clandestine activities as if born to them."

"Verbatim, Donno. Good for you. I'm impressed. Too bad you could never learn your rates that well during plebe summer." Although Jack had conceded to tell his trusted friend his problem, he was still delaying.

Don played along, not wanting to pressure Jack. "What are you talking about, Jack? I was four-point-oh, squared away."

"Right," Jack replied sarcastically, continuing to buy time. "I'll never forget you and Terrell Henry during plebe summer. Remember him?"

"Short, psycho guy with the macho complex? How could I forget? That fucker had me marching an extra hour every night after the rest of you were tucked all snugly in your beds."

Jack was chuckling. "Remember the second day we were there? He asked you, 'why you

didn't say sir,' and you were supposed to regurgitate that long answer we learned our first day?"

Now Don was chuckling as he thought back to the moment.

Jack continued, "But big, ol' country-boy you just said, 'Mr. Henry, look, I'll be honest with you, I know we've only been here a couple days, but I'm kinda tired of all this sir stuff.' Kevin Wilson and I literally had to bite our tongues to keep from bursting out."

"Terrell Henry was a psychotic worm. I hated saying 'sir' to him."

"Well, I don't think he liked you, either. And after that day, he sure had it out for you."

"Yeah. But I did learn to say that little spiel about 'sir.' Midshipman Psycho made me say it every time I marched. I must've said it 250 times one night."

"Still remember it?"

Don Meacham began speaking furiously, as if he were in a race to get the words out before he turned into a pumpkin. "Sir, sir is a subservient word surviving from the surly days of old Serbia, when certain surfs, too ignorant to remember their lord's name, yet too servile to blasphemy them, circumvented the situation by surrogating the subservient word sir by which I now address a certain senior cirriped who correctly surmised why I didn't say sir, sir."

Jack was clapping. "Very good, Midshipman Meacham. Did you ever figure out what 'cirriped' means?"

"Yes, sir," Don replied, still playing the role of Navy plebe. "A cirriped is a crustacean, typically a barnacle... sir."

"Excellent," Jack responded with a smile. As bad as plebe summer had been, Jack would have given anything to go back in time and do it over again. After all, as a plebe, he hadn't taken part in the unthinkable event now haunting him 36 years later.

Don took the opportunity to try to move their conversation further. "So do you want to ask me more rates, Jack, or do you want to tell me about Tony?"

"You're sure I can trust you?"

"Come on, Jack. Our friendship means more to me than Roxy ever did."

"Is that supposed to be comforting?"

Don smiled and nodded. "You ever wonder what the American people would do if they knew we joked around like this, Jack?"

"NBC would probably give us our own sitcom. I bet we'd pull in \$2 million an episode."

"Just don't tell Roxy I've got that much earning potential," Don scoffed. "She'll say I'm intentionally impoverishing myself and ask for more alimony. I'd be hauled down to court faster than you could say 'money-loving-cunt-bitch-whore.'"

"Money-loving-cunt-bitch-whore," Jack called out.

Donno surreptitiously reached down and touched the battery tester on his beeper. It beeped and he looked at the device. "Roxy's lawyer," he joked.

Jack liked the levity. Somehow he knew the future held little or no levity for him. Even still, he knew the moment had arrived. "Alright," Jack said, "enough levity. Brace yourself."

Don stiffened his chin into his face. "Braced," he replied through tight jaws, simulating another of their plebe summer rituals.

SIX

Don't feel bad, even geniuses
do dumb things.
--Sigourney Weaver in *Death and the Maiden*

Jack eyed Don hard. Although he'd thought long and hard how to tell Don about Tony, the words came out slow and jittery. "A long time ago, um, I was involved in something that would be, let's say-- *damaging* -- if it ever got out. Tony was there. He knows what happened." Jack wasn't ready to tell Don that Vic Graves and Bob Grady were involved as well. Unlike Tony, neither of them had ever threatened to disclose the secret... at least not yet. And anyway, it would be better to handle the situation bit-by-bit... one small step at a time... baby steps.

A million or more thoughts blurred through Don's mind as he played Jack's words over in his head. But, after a minute or so, only one statement-- of reassurance-- came from his lips, "You're not the only President who's ever had a skeleton in his closet, Jack."

A skeleton, yes, but not in the closet... in a hole... a very deep hole. "It's pretty bad," Jack confirmed. His eyes were low, as if embarrassed by the disclosure.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No," Jack responded quickly and surely. By his tone, it was hard to imagine there had been any levity between the two just minutes before. "Because to be perfectly honest, what happened isn't the important thing. At least not now. The fact is, it did happen. And the only other relevant fact is Tony knows about it and knows it could destroy me."

Don was putting the pieces together and picturing the scenario. "And you're saying Tony might use it against you if you don't pick him for VP?"

"I don't think Tony *might* use it against me, I *know* he would." There was no slack in Jack's tone. It was absolute. Then, as if pained by the conversation, Jack stood and walked towards the built-in bookcases opposite his desk on the far end of the room. Jack looked at the bookcase intently, as if searching for a Houdini book on extricating oneself from a tight predicament.

The lack of doubt shocked Don. He rose from his chair and walked over to Jack. "How

can you be so sure?"

"Because of past history," Jack replied coldly, his voice low. There was a fiery hatred in Jack's eyes.

"He's done it before?"

"Done it before?" Jack practically scoffed the words. "Shit, Donno, he's made one helluva good living off it."

"Are you serious?"

"As serious as Mac's ALS."

A million thoughts went through Don's mind, followed by answers to questions he'd never understood before. It finally made sense how a little shit-head like Tony had become a million dollar a year consultant—he'd blackmailed Jack. "Jesus, Jack, how long's this been going on?"

"Since '98, right after the Marines deep-sixed Tony. Remember that?"

Don filed away the fact that whatever happened must have occurred before 1998. "Of course I remember. He got passed over twice for O-4. For an Academy grad, that was tough to do."

"For a *normal* Academy grad it was tough to do," Jack clarified. "But not for Tony. You know that. He was a fuck-up from Induction day on. Face it, the only reason he got through the Academy was because he hunted down gouge and sucked up to the Instructors. That may have worked at the Academy, but once he got out in the real world, gouge-hunting and ass-kissing didn't cut it. Life is hard... it's even harder for stupid shits like Tony. And when he got caught with that 14 year-old girl in Okinawa, there's no way the Marines were going to keep him in."

"What 14 year-old?"

"Oh, that's right, you don't know about that." Jack chuckled with disgust and then explained. "One night when Tony was the Duty Officer his Company Commander caught him with his pants around his ankles. Tony was making the little Japanese girl who delivered his order from a local carry-out place earn her tip."

"Jesus, Jack. How come that's never made it out to the public?"

"Because his service record was sanitized."

"How do you know?"

"Because I arranged it."

Don had never heard Jack speak with such seriousness. "Okay, Jack. Keep going."

"After Tony got caught he called me and asked if there was anything I could do to help him out. I was at BuPers. Tony didn't threaten me or anything but it was clear what he was thinking. So I more or less volunteered to help him out. I guess I thought by doing him that favor it would strengthen our friendship and he wouldn't think to use what he knew against me." Jack shrugged. "Back then it made sense, at least. Anyway, that was the first time I helped Tony-boy out. But you know the old saying-- give a dog a bone and next time he'll want a steak. Anyway, to make a long story short, there were numerous favors to follow." Jack paused to let Don absorb the predicament.

"But you said he threatened you. When did that happen?"

"The first time was back in the early 2000's. Remember when I was in charge of the procurement for the vertical take-off program?"

"Un-huh."

"Well, about two months before proposals were due, Tony called me out of the blue. Said he was looking to do some consulting for Bell Helicopters. He asked if I could get him some info on the RFP."

"Like what?"

"Like the weighting factors the source selection board was going to use."

Don's mind was racing. "He must have known that would violate procurement regs?"

"If he didn't, he knew after I told him."

"So what happened?"

"Tony said he didn't give a shit about any procurement regs... said he hadn't really worked in two years and was at rock bottom. He sounded desperate."

"So what'd you do?"

"I told him I couldn't give him the weighting factors." Jack paused, holding back the rest of the story.

"And...?" Don said, trying to move Jack along.

"And Tony said he'd get even with me if I didn't."

"And you think he would've?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. He was desperate. And desperate men do desperate things. But I couldn't take the chance."

Don was putting the pieces together and picturing the scenario. "So you gave him the info?"

Jack hesitated to answer. Admitting that he'd done something illegal wasn't easy. "I really didn't have a choice. Tony was blackmailing me. I'm not sure what would have happened if I didn't."

Hearing Jack actually use the word 'blackmail' sent Don's mind racing even faster. He felt like he'd somehow managed a role in a movie. Uncontrollably, Don laughed aloud.

"What's so funny?" Jack asked, confused.

"All these years I've been trying to figure out how a stupid shit like Tony became such a highly sought-after consultant. No wonder I could never figure it out. I should've figured it had everything to do with you and nothing to do with him."

"Nothing legitimate to do with him," Jack corrected. "Anyway, that's how it started. With the weighting factors in hand, Bell was able to submit an unbeatable proposal. They got a \$15 billion contract, the Marines got a mediocre plane, and Tony got about \$200K or so in consulting fees. More importantly, though, he gained the reputation as the guy who could shake down thunder from the sky, the Golden Boy who could deliver the treasure at the end of the rainbow. Well, anyway, suffice it to say that after that, whenever a major contract was being bid, Tony became a highly desired commodity. And he knew how to keep his clients happy."

"So he kept blackmailing you."

Jack nodded as if lost in memories. "More times than I care to think about, Donno. As I moved up and came into positions of greater responsibilities and decision-making, Tony moved up right along with me. The more powerful I became, the more he was able to demand... the more powerful he became. It's been the proverbial slippery slope-- once you step out on it, once you start sliding, you can't stop. You just keep sliding down faster and faster, waiting for the crash."

"And he's still blackmailing you now?"

"Why do you think he's my Chief-of-Staff?" Jack replied with unfettered disdain. "You think I had a choice?"

Don considering the incredibility of it all as Jack continued explaining. "The Chief-of-Staff is supposed to keep the heat off the President. He's supposed to be the one person I can trust the most, the person I can confide in about anything. Tony puts the heat on me. What's more, I can't exactly confide in a guy who's been blackmailing me for 25 years."

"Jesus H. Christ, Jack. How come you never told me about this before?"

"Because I've always been able to handle Tony. You'd think making a bozo like him Chief-of-Staff would be enough. But it hasn't been. What's worse is he thinks he's a great Chief-of-Staff and would make a great VP. Anyway, the bottom line is I'm not sure I can handle Tony anymore. I need your help."

Don was spellbound. Whatever Tony knew about Jack must have been unbelievable. Jack was essentially Tony's puppet. "It never occurred to me that he's had something on you. You must hate that parasitic prick more than I do."

"Parasitic prick is right-- he's made a great living sucking off of me."

"So what do you want to do?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"That's easy. We have to get rid of Tony."

Based on what Don knew, Jack expected to hear that answer. And if things were as simple as Jack had portrayed them, it was the right answer. After all, Tony was the worst kind of security risk. In the simplest of terms, Tony was a terrorist in a three-piece suit, operating from within the executive branch, behind the title of Chief-of-Staff... the proverbial wolf in a three-piece sheepskin suit.

"I can't allow you to do that."

"Why not, Jack? If somebody's blackmailing you, they're blackmailing the country. Tony's no better than a foreign terrorist. In fact, he's a lot worse. At least when they plot against you they're doing it on foreign soil. The fact that Tony's doing it right here"-- Don pointed down-- "sticking it to you right here, in your own house, is not only criminal, it's a national security issue. You can't allow yourself to be blackmailed and manipulated."

Jack didn't like being lectured on his Presidential responsibilities. The situation was much, much more complicated. "It's not as easy as you're making it out to be. You don't have all the facts."

"I don't need all the facts, Jack. I've heard enough facts already. What matters is this: anyone or anything that threatens your safety or well-being must be eliminated. It's that simple." Don paused as if to punctuate the powerful message. It hadn't occurred to Don that Tony's death might be even more detrimental to Jack.

"Slow down, Donno. When I said I couldn't allow you to get rid of Tony, it wasn't because I'm scared it couldn't be done. I have utmost confidence that you could make Tony disappear from the earth without a trace, without any connection to you or me."

"Okay. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is it's not as easy as just getting rid of Tony. I told you, it's more complicated, okay?"

"So tell me the rest."

"The fact is, Tony knows I want him dead. And even though he's a dumb shit, he's got a very powerful sense of survival. In fact, it's so powerful he's insulated himself against death." Jack's eyes were locked on Don's.

"What do you mean he's insulated himself against death?"

"You know what a golden parachute is, right?"

Don nodded. "Of course. It's what every CEO sets-up to protect himself in case he gets shit-canned by his board or forced out by a merger or something. A huge pot of money makes the Board of Directors think twice before shit-canning him." Don thought about how the term applied to Tony. He had an idea or two. "So let me guess," Don added, "Tony set-up something such that the dirt on you will automatically deploy if anything ever happens to him... like his dying or disappearing."

Obviously the concept wasn't new to Donno. Jack replied, "The secret Tony knows about me will drop into the hands of every major media source in the U.S." Jack paused, then asked, "So, you have any idea how this golden parachute of Tony's might work?"

"I can guess. And it probably involves his lawyer and a safe deposit box, either with his lawyer or at a bank." But the devil is in the details.

"So's the salvation," Jack answered, using one of his favorite sayings. "You think you can get me the details?"

"Absolutely. If I could figure out how the Russian SVR infiltrated the Los Alamos computer system, I'm sure I can figure out how a dumb shit like Tony set-up his little golden

parachute insurance policy.”

Jack was almost wishing he had unleashed Donno on Tony years before. “Thanks, Donno. This is the most important thing you'll ever do for me.”

“So what happens after I do?”

“First find out how it works, then we'll talk about the next step.” Jack sat back down in his chair behind the desk. “Believe me, Donno, if I can keep him from deploying his chute, I'd have no problem letting you squash that little parasitic prick like the bug he is.”

While that was truthful, Jack had other plans... bigger plans. He was going to squash three parasitic pricks at once... and he was going to use the parasitic pricks against each other as the hammer.

Something was bothering Don, and although he was almost scared to say it, he overcame that fear by concluding that this conversation should leave no doubts unsaid. He spoke out. “I just don't see why you can't convince Tony to do away with his golden parachute, Jack. As the saying goes, you could convince an Eskimo to buy an icemaker.”

Jack smiled for the first time since the conversation had turned serious. “You're on the right track, Donno. Because that's where we're headed.” Jack purposefully used the word ‘we.’ It was now he and Don, in it together. “But don't ever forget-- persuasion is best accomplished through self-discovery.” Jack said it as if he were recounting a quote. “And the time has come for Tony to persuade himself that it will be in his best interests to do away with his golden parachute. All I'm going to do is facilitate his self-discovery...”

“And how are you gonna do that?”

Jack winked. “You let me worry about that, Donno. You just find out how his golden parachute works.”

“Aye aye, Mr. President.”

Of course there was a lot more to the tale Jack hadn't shared with his good buddy. But that could wait for another day.

SEVEN

Beware how you take away hope
from another human being.
--Oliver Wendell Holmes

Something was bothering Allie, and it wasn't just because it was Wednesday. She was clearly off her game, and Drew decided to call her out. "Hey Allie, can you come in here?" he called out.

She waltzed in and sat facing his desk, her look half-disinterested, half-downtrodden, and completely not herself.

"You okay?" he asked. He couldn't imagine why such a beautiful, smart, sexy girl would ever be unhappy. If he were her, he'd be happy... even on Wednesdays. But somehow, in that moment, he'd forgotten that everybody's fighting something... even the beautiful souls of the world.

"Yeah, fine. Why?" She said it curtly and without eye contact.

"You forgot to make coffee this morning, you didn't update my calendar, and you didn't sort the mail from last night. What's up?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. Sorry." Her eyes were down.

He didn't like when she wasn't herself... nor that she wasn't totally honest with him. "Look, we've known each other for ten months now, and I know when something's bothering you. You want to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's bothering me," she replied combatively, squinting now, as if trying to shut the window to her soul from his view. "Look, okay, I'll admit I've been a little off my game today. But it's not anything like you're making it out to be. I think you've been reading one too many of those two-bit philosophy books of yours. Did Marcus Aurelius say everyone who forgets a few trivial things has problems they need to talk to their boss about?"

Her overly defensive reply had turned offensive. That's when Drew knew he was right.

He shook his head. "No. Marcus Aurelius wrote, 'beware the short-haired blonde who's afraid to talk to her bald boss.'" He smiled at his quick wit. "Oh, and don't end sentences with prepositions." He purposefully ended with that to see if she'd be playful with it, like she normally was.

She smirked.

An unnatural silence followed, as if each were waiting for the other to speak. Normally words flowed between them as naturally as the Potomac River over Great Falls.

"So are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" He held up his hands as if to disarm himself, smiled gently, and looked deeply into her eyes. "No judgement... just think of me as a friend, okay?"

"Would you leave me alone if I told you I was in the middle of my period and I'm feeling really gross and out of it."

"If that were the reason, sure. But I know that's not it."

She was taken aback. "How do you know that?"

"Because according to my records, you had your period three weeks ago." He said it as naturally as if they were talking about when she'd paid the rent on their office space.

"Your records? What records? How do you know my menstrual cycle?"

"A good employer knows his employees," he replied with a sly grin.

"A good employer has liability insurance for sexual harassment." Now she actually flashed a smile, proud of her snappy comeback. That made him happy.

"The premium was too high. Anyway, since we both know it's not your period, why don't you just tell me what's bothering you."

Resignation filled her face. She'd spent ten months gaining his confidence, establishing the stable bond that could only be forged with time, and although she'd wanted to tell him earlier, the courage had never been there. But lately, during the past two months especially, she and Drew seemed to click, like ice in a glass, and she was beginning to feel more comfortable with Drew than without him. That's why she thought she might actually be falling in love with her bald, clumsy, softball-playing, cynical boss.

"Alright already," she said, taking an extra deep breath. "You really want to know what's bothering me?"

Drew nodded.

She swallowed hard, took another deep breath, and told herself to relax. She also told herself she had nothing to lose, and everything to gain, by telling Drew. "You know how I've never mentioned my mom to you?" she said with hushed solemnness that grabbed his attention.

"Un- huh," he said, nodding, leaning in.

"Well, it's because"-- her lips started to quiver-- "it's because it's too hard for me to talk about her." Her voice trailed off and Drew could barely make out the last few words.

Then the tears came-- big tears, that seemed to rise in her heart and gather in her eyes until they couldn't be held. They were tears of deep pain and they completely surprised Drew. In ten months, he'd seen nearly every emotional side of her-- happy, stressed, frustrated, silly, and mad... but never sad. Sadness, he knew first-hand, was the most guarded of emotions. Unfortunately, sadness was also the emotion that most needed to be shared.

Instinctively, Drew stepped forward, put his arms around her, and drew her into him. Her chest was heaving as she let out the emotions she'd obviously been holding inside for too long. Whatever it was about her mom hurt very badly. All too familiar with the feeling, Drew knew a hug would be the best thing for her. Indeed, more times than he cared to remember, he'd wished for someone to hug him, to share in his sadness.

"It's alright Allie," he whispered, stroking her thick, short hair, "just relax, I'm right here. Everything's gonna be alright." His every breath took in the sweet scent from her hair and a flood of memories exploded inside him. Seven-and-a-half years had passed since he'd held someone so close, with such genuine care and concern, and his own aching heart went out to the tough, fragile girl in his arms. He held her for another minute-- which seemed like longer, and he wished it could have been-- until he sensed she'd collected herself. As he released her, she drifted a step away, her head and eyes low, as if embarrassed by her emotional outburst.

"Allie, I'm here to listen if you want to talk about it. I can tell you first-hand, you'll probably feel better if you do."

She nodded, not yet able to speak. Then she drew back another step, took several deep breaths, and looked up at him through misty eyes.

Seeing her still upset, Drew figured a little levity might help, and he searched his mind like a computer performs a word search for an appropriate 'go-to' line. He seemed to have a line to fit seemingly every situation-- sarcasm, funny, sorrowful. An idea struck him and he reached into his back pocket, pulled out his hanky, and held it out to her. "I promise there's no boogers on it," he said with a crooked smile of straight white teeth.

Despite the tears in her eyes, she couldn't help but smile as she looked at the faded,

wadded-up hanky he extended. Like Drew, it had obviously seen better days. She let out a chuckle as she took it, and knowing Drew, even inspected it before wiping her eyes and face.

Of course she wanted to tell him about her mom. Drew was the only one who might be able to help her. He had a way of making all things possible. She finished wiping her eyes and looked back up at him. "Okay," she said, as she took a big gulp of new air, "I'll try again." Her voice had its usual determination.

Like a concerned father, he nodded, and winked encouragement, and her gentle smile seemed to thank him for being there and wanting to listen.

"I'll start from the beginning," she said as they both sat back down. "It was 1988, and I was 6 months old, living with my mom on a commune outside of Harrisburg. I didn't know who my Dad was, and I still don't. And frankly, I've never really cared either."

Drew was already intrigued-- living on a commune, not knowing her father. Despite her own pain, he sensed a mystery for himself.

She continued. "Anyway, in May my mom went down to Virginia Beach to visit her brother, my uncle Frankie. They were only eleven months apart, so they were pretty close. For all I know, she could have been going down there to see my Dad, because supposedly he was from there. But I'm not sure that's really relevant."

Not knowing where she was going with the story, Drew had no idea what was or wasn't relevant. As far as he was concerned, everything was potentially relevant. Still, he flashed her an encouraging look as if it say, 'okay, if you say so... keep going.'

Allie complied. "My mom went down on a Monday, stayed for five days, and was supposed to come back on Saturday. I stayed at the commune with everyone else." She swallowed hard. "Anyway, to make a long story short, my mom never returned."

She was teary-eyed again and Drew was about to rise and hug her again, but she put her hands up to indicate she was okay. After a few seconds, she continued talking. "According to Uncle Frankie, my mom left the beach around eight on Saturday night to drive back home. Why she left so late, God only knows, but Uncle Frankie told me she preferred driving at night. And according to my grandma, and some of my mom's old friends that I've talked to, that was typical of her... she was somewhat of a *night person*." Allie made the quotes sign as she said 'night person' and reflected on the fact that she had the same disposition.

Allie continued. "Anyway, she only made it a few hours when something happened to her car. At least that's what the police report said when they found it on the shoulder of a back road, just outside of Bowie, Maryland. But there was no trace of her." Her eyes welled up again and she dabbed at the corners of them with the hanky. "But after days and months of searching, they never found her. She just disappeared... without a trace. Today is the 36th anniversary of the last day I ever saw her... even if I was only a baby and don't remember her. I guess that's

why I've been in such a funk today."

Drew's heart was pounding. He wanted to say something to make her feel better, but knew there was only one 'go-to' line that seemed to fit. "Oh, Allie, I'm so sorry," he said genuinely.

She nodded thanks and continued with the story. "They didn't find any witnesses who saw her on the road that night, there was no evidence of a struggle or anything like that, and nothing noticeable was missing from the car... except her. For all I really know she could've just been tired of me and my crying because supposedly I was colicky even at ten months. Maybe she decided to move away and start a new life. Maybe that was her cover. I don't know."

The story of Melody Morgan disappearing into thin air, like a flash of lightning, floored Drew. That lack of finality-- of not knowing-- was something he couldn't have handled. It seemed like one of the worst things in life-- freezing a person in cruel limbo, unable to move forward with their life because they're not sure whether the previous chapter has ended or not. At least Drew knew what had happened to Lori and Luke. Plus, he brought their killer to justice on earth.

"Jesus, Allie, I'm really sorry." Once again, it was all he could think to say.

"Thanks," she sighed, relieved to have finally told him.

"How come you never told me about this before?" He tried to say it in a way that didn't sound critical.

"Actually, I wanted to. But I guess I didn't feel like bothering you. You know, we're always so busy, and everything around here always seems so important." She stretched her hands outward, as if circling a globe.

Her reply upset Drew. He wanted her to feel comfortable telling him anything at any time. "Allie, you could never bother me about something as important as your family. Family's the most important thing in the world." His words hung in the air like the souls of Lori, Luke, and, most probably, Allie's mom.

"Well, seeing as how my grandma died three years ago, and not really caring about my Dad, I don't think I have any family left, so that shouldn't be a problem."

"I'm in the same boat Allie." Even though he still had his Dad, so much of his family was gone that Drew, too, felt like a solitary soul in a big, cruel world. As depressing as that sounded, he wanted to say something to make both of them feel better. "Hey, we could always be each other's family," he suggested.

The corners of her mouth turned up in a slight smile as a witty response came to mind. "Okay, *Dad*," she said, exaggerating 'Dad.' "Mind if I borrow the Porsche tonight?"

Drew looked at her sternly. "Young lady, if you ever call me Dad again, I'll bend you over my knee and give you a licking you'll never forget." He tried to maintain the serious look, but the gleam in his eyes and his sheepish grin failed him.

She pictured the image and liked it. She also loved that he could turn her from tears to laughs to fantasies quicker than a traffic light went from green to yellow to red. "Okay, Dad," she replied daringly. She punctuated it with a cute wink.

The thought of bending her over his knee went through Drew's mind, but he chickened out. Just seeing most of the sadness gone from her face was enough for him. And as much as he enjoyed the brief respite, he knew she'd told him the story of her mom for a reason. Drew went after it. "So about your mom, Allie, what are you after?"

She was sad again as she thought about her lost mom. "I just want to know what happened to her, and why it happened. I was only joking when I said she went away because of my colic. I know she didn't. According to people who knew her, she may have been a wild and crazy free-spirit, but she loved me as much as anything, too." Allie swallowed hard and fought back another round of tears. "I know she's dead," she stated matter-of-factly, "but it's hard not knowing how and why."

Drew had been right about her intentions, and while he could identify with them, he knew it would be virtually impossible to satisfy them. Realizing her mom was dead, in all probability, was a positive sign, however. If Allie were harboring the unrealistic thought that her mom might still be alive, the undertaking would have been much more difficult.

"So what makes you so sure she's dead?" he asked, wanting to hear her reasoning.

"Besides the obvious reason-- that she hasn't been heard from in 36 years?"

Drew nodded, even though that was enough by itself.

"It'll probably sound silly," she said.

"Try me."

"Okay. Do you believe in angels?"

He did. And more deeply than Allie could ever have known. In fact, Drew was sure his life had been saved seven-and-a-half years earlier by a little eight year-old angel named Becca. Still, he maintained his nonchalant posture. "Sure, why not? It's like believing in God. If you believe in a higher supreme being, why wouldn't you also believe He has agents at work here on earth?"

She liked his response. It made her think of him as more than just Mister Practical.

Unfortunately, he continued to talk. "Plus, you know me. I like to hedge my bets. It certainly makes more sense to believe and perhaps be wrong, then to not believe and be wrong. Believing really doesn't cost anything."

So much for anything more than Mister Practical, she thought to herself. Sometimes he didn't know when to just stop talking. "Well, I think my mom's been watching over me, from above, like a guardian angel or something."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because, that's the only way I can explain all the things that have happened to me since she disappeared."

"What kind of things?"

She rattled off a list: "I always received anonymous presents on my birthdays while I was growing up. And on Thanksgivings, an entire dinner would magically appear on our front stoop. It was the same at Christmas, too. There were always presents left outside from Santa. One Christmas I even got an easy bake oven." Her eyes lit up as she remembered how happy she was that morning and the simplicity of life as a little girl. "My grandma couldn't afford things like that, so I knew it wasn't her."

Although charity was great, none of this sounded exceedingly angelical to Drew. "Sounds like some good Samaritan group tagged you and your grandma."

"It was more than just the presents and food," she countered, shaking her head. "When my grandma needed cataract surgery the hospital called and said the money magically showed up from an anonymous donor. That's how it was with my scholarships to Notre Dame and Georgetown Law, too. They just kind of fell into my lap."

Drew shrugged. While it did seem like a lot of good fortune, it didn't mean Allie's dead mom was watching over her.

Allie read Drew's thoughts. "And sometimes I think my mom's speaks to me, too, like she's trying to show me the way."

"What do you mean she speaks to you?" There was an edge of skepticism in his voice. "Do you hear voices?"

She didn't like his tone, or the way he asked the question. "It's not like that. I don't

actually hear voices or anything like that. It's more like the strong feelings I get— intuition, I guess. I think my mom's the external force behind my strong intuition." She paused, wondering if he thought she was mental. "Anyway," she continued, "after you busted my boss last year, I just knew I had to work for you... even if it wasn't the best way for me to get into politics." She paused. "Don't ask me how I know, but I think there's a very important reason I'm working for you, Drew."

"And you think it has to do with finding out what happened to your mom?"

"I don't know. But I believe everything happens for a reason, and I need to try and find out what happened to her. That's what I'm hearing... what I'm feeling. What happens after that, I don't know. But I know it's what I have to do. It's the same pull when I decided to come work for you last year."

Drew was busy thinking about Lori and Luke and her comment that things happen for a reason. *Sometimes*, he reminded himself, *the reasons were bad*.

Allie continued talking. "So, what do you think? Do you think there's any hope finding out what happened to my mom?"

Hope. It was one of the three most important words in the English language, along with faith and love. Her question resonated in his head and the rational side of his brain reacted: *Hope? Sure there's hope, Allie. But in this case, it's likely to be nothing more than delayed misery. Your mom's dead and you're never going to know how or why she died. And whoever killed her is never going to be punished... at least not by our earthly legal system.*

Unfortunately, that answer was too callous to vocalize.

Then the sensitive side of Drew's brain kicked in: *Hope? Of course, there's hope, Allie. Hope is what gives us the strength and energy to pick ourselves up when we're down, to do the uncommon, to become worthy of all of earth's vast suffering. We'll find out what happened to your mom, Allie, just like I found out what happened to my family... not only will we find her killer, but justice will be served. And when we're done, you'll be able to move forward with your life with your head held high and your mom will be able to rest in peace.*

Deep down, however, Drew wasn't sure the answers she wanted could be found. This wasn't like solving the mystery of Lori and Luke. He'd been lucky. They'd been dead for only two months when he nabbed that dirt-ball Senator. Going back in time and solving a 36 year-old mystery was infinitely different, infinitely unlikely.

But he didn't want to crush her hope, and so, out of his mouth came these words: "Allie, believe me, I know what you must be feeling, and I'll help you in every way I possibly can. And we'll do everything possible to find out what happened to your mom. That said, you need to be prepared for the likelihood that you'll never find out what happened to her. But if someone hurt her, you can trust that God knows and that eternal justice will be served." He paused to let the

words sink in, before adding, "I know that's probably not what you want to hear, but the odds, especially after 36 years, are stacked overwhelmingly against you. Every year thousands of people disappear without any trace."

She envisioned a football stadium filled with shiny, happy people on a bright, sunny day. Then, as if in some sickening, time-lapse photography, the sky began to darken and the people faded away into the clouds. In the end, cold plastic seats were left under a darkened sky. With that vision stuck in her head, she wondered what God thought of His world and the people He'd created-- people killing people, over and over. How could *that* be what He had in mind when He created the world? She felt tears welling in her eyes. The sin of mankind had turned the Garden of Eden into an empty football stadium of cold, plastic seats.

Outwardly she nodded at Drew's judgment about the odds being overwhelmingly against her.

While glad to see her giving some level-headed thought to what he'd said, Drew also wanted to end the conversation on a positive note. He knew firsthand to never deprive someone of hope. Many times, hope was all there was. He was back to thinking about his little angel named Becca who'd given him the hope to continue forth. He added, "You never know, though, Allie. Miracles can happen. But no matter what, we'll give it our best shot and see what happens."

She perked up at his words. They were signature Drew. And she knew when Drew Matthews said he'd give something his best shot, miracles were indeed possible. "Thanks Dad, I knew I could count on you." She rose, stepped forward, and hugged him like a daughter would hug a father.

Inside, he patted himself on the back, sure he'd have made a good father. Outwardly, however, he smacked her firmly on the behind before releasing her. "I told you to never call me Dad."

She stepped back, smiled, and stuck her tongue out defiantly, "Sorry, Pops!"

EIGHT

You can't be brave if you've only had
wonderful things happen to you.
--Mary Tyler Moore

Drew pulled his white 2015 Jeep Cherokee out of the Anne Arundel County police warehouse parking lot, turned south onto Route 450, and headed for his Dad's house just north of Annapolis. It had been 24 hours since Allie had told him the story of her mom's disappearance, and the political sleuth had spent the better part of that time looking into the matter for himself, knowing full well there was no substitute for first-hand knowledge.

Unfortunately, in this instance, first-hand knowledge was turning out to be no better than the second-hand knowledge he'd heard from Allie. Other than confirming what she'd already told him-- the police file was sparse, with no suspects, no leads, no helpful physical evidence, and no clues as to what had happened to Melody Morgan-- the only new information he'd learned was that the original investigating officer had died of cancer in 2018, at the age of 72. And as for the living members of the homicide division, none seemed to have any first-hand knowledge of the case, nor did any seem to care. The case was in the dreaded 'open but inactive' file, lingering, like a brain-dead coma victim on life support. And just as a court won't pull the plug without clear and convincing evidence the victim would have wanted that, in a similar way, police regulations stated that an unsolved case was never closed. Instead, the case was just open... inactive... comatose.

Thus, as far as trying to solve the case, Drew seemed to be on equal footing with anyone else. In a race, this would have been good. Only this wasn't a race-- there wasn't anybody to race-- there was just Drew and Allie. And, also unlike a race, there didn't seem to be anything to win. Even with the best of luck, they might confirm that Melody Morgan was indeed dead, and while that might provide some finality for Allie, it wasn't much of a prize. But without any new evidence, proving even that looked impossible. Worse, unlike Eggo waffles, 36 year-old evidence didn't just pop up. Thus, as he turned on Chesapeake Avenue, Drew was saturated with frustration, thinking he couldn't feel worse.

Unfortunately, Drew knew *that* was false. As if to confirm that fact, he looked down at the yellowing picture taped onto the dashboard and his heart sank even deeper. No matter his mood, seeing the seven-and-a-half year-old picture of Lori and Luke all decked-out in front of the Christmas tree, guaranteed he'd feel worse. Pictures of dead loved ones had a way of doing

that.

He'd put the picture there as a reminder to take nothing for granted, that everything could change in the blink of an eye. While a noble intention, the picture only reminded Drew how lonely and sad life was without them, and for all the days of his life he would remember them best as they appeared in that picture. Six year-old Luke was dimpled with excitement, all decked-out in his Christmas bow tie and navy blue blazer-- his 'Daddy jacket.' With his blonde bangs and pink chubby cheeks he looked as pure as a choir boy, a sweet and beautiful child, not an ounce of meanness in his body. Behind him was Lori, her face dominated by the enormous brown eyes that were so alive and warm and understanding. Even on a two-dimensional print, they still swallowed him up. Her long auburn hair, pulled back into the French braid that Drew always loved, framed her face. Hers was a face that never aged... and never would. She was, and always would be, the most beautiful woman in the world to him, and every day and every night that Drew aged, he missed her more and more. He wondered what she'd think if she knew how he felt about Allie?

As Drew drove across the Severn River bridge, the memories evoked by the picture came like flood waters...

..."It's a good thing he's got his mother's looks!" he heard his father, Jake, saying as they viewed newborn Luke through the nursery window at the hospital. Then he turned to Drew. "I'm proud of you, son. He's the most beautiful baby in the world. You are truly blessed."

..."Daddy," Luke said, "how can Santa Claus deliver the presents to everyone in the world in just one night?"

..."Drew?" Lori called out, "Can you take Luke to get a haircut? I want him to look nice for Christmas dinner at your Dad's."

"I can't, honey," he responded. "I have to put together his bike and a couple other toys."

She laughed. "I thought you were only going to buy pre-assembled toys this year. Remember what happened last year?"

Drew didn't need to be reminded how he'd labored 'til 3:00 a.m. the previous Christmas Eve putting the electric car racing set together. He'd cut himself and bled on their new beige carpet. "I'm a year wiser," he responded.

"You're a year clumsier," she said winking. "If you were wiser you'd have bought assembled toys." She kissed him on the forehead and smiled. She loved him and was never happier. "I'll take Luke," she said. "Plus, we'll stop by the mall and pick up a Poinsettia for your Dad. That'll give you a couple hours to assemble the bike and clean up any of your blood."

As the final words she had ever spoken to him trailed off, Drew's chest was tight and straining and he clenched the tan, leather-wrapped steering wheel. If only he'd taken Luke, if only he'd stopped her from going that day... maybe they'd all be alive... maybe he wouldn't feel so lonely... maybe his life would have real meaning.

Unfortunately, he hadn't. Instead, he just stood and waved as they backed out of the driveway. And while Luke received his last ever haircut, back in the modest brick colonial, not more than 20 minutes from the mall, Drew surveyed his work with pride and joy. Normally, just picking up a pair of vice grips or turning a screw would have been potentially injurious. But not today! On this day, he'd assembled three toys without so much as a drop of blood or a jammed finger. Not only that, but the toys actually looked like the pictures on the boxes. What's more, there were no extra parts.

Bob Villa, eat your heart out, Drew thought with hearty pride. God must have been smiling down on him this day, and, as he heard a car coming down the road, he peeked out the window to see if Lori and Luke were back. It wasn't them, and so, as he waited, he grabbed a victory beer from the fridge to celebrate his assembly success. It was going to be their best Christmas ever!

An hour and twenty-some odd cars later, Lori and Luke still weren't home. Still, Drew wasn't worried. The way he figured it, thoughtful Lori was probably just giving him some extra time with the toys, thinking he'd need it. Drew went to grab a third victory beer.

As he walked back into the living room, the sound of a car in the driveway and two doors slamming greeted him. It was Lori and Luke, he told himself. Beaming with happiness, he opened the front door expecting to see his family-- his life's meaning-- walking towards him.

Instead, two uniformed officers were approaching. "Mr. Matthews?" the leading officer called out in a somber voice.

"Yes," Drew replied, suddenly feeling weak.

"Sir, I'm afraid there's been an accident. Your wife and son have been killed."

Drew's head exploded. "Nooooooooooooooooooooo."

Drew barely heard another word as the two Fairfax County officers explained what had happened. In fact, from the moment the officer said his wife and son were dead, Drew had also died. Life was death.

And so it became the most miserable Christmas ever and time became a constant drudgery as each hopeless day blurred into a troubled, restless night, only to blur into yet another hopeless day. An hour, it seemed, could last a week. Perhaps time marked in place because there was no future for Drew-- no kids growing up, no college, no weddings, no grandkids, no retirement with Lori... no future. Instead, there was an empty, sad house full of memories and

voices from an answering machine that made Drew cry and wish he'd been taken instead. Time did not heal all wounds, it seemed... rather, it amplified them in sickening slow-motion agony.

For more than a month, Drew did little more than exist in this sad way, in the darkness of his bedroom. Too tired physically, too shattered mentally, and too broken emotionally, Drew would drink and think and cry-- over and over-- until finally, mercifully passing out, unmercifully awakening, and crying some more. Unable to see beyond his grief and suffering, he became a scavenger of earth-- sucking oxygen from the air, and giving back carbon dioxide; sucking the numbing effects from quarts of Jack Daniels and Jim Beam, and giving back piss. And to the little voice inside, that told him to get up and make something of his life, Drew just scoffed: there is no life.

Finally, on one of those cold, grey mid-January days, when winter has firmly set in, and it's hard to imagine that flowers will ever again penetrate the frozen ground, something happened that would change everything for Drew. It began with a ring of the phone.

Drew let the answering machine kick in. "Hi," Lori said upbeat and alive, "you've reached the Matthews." Then little Luke chimed in, "we can't come to the phone, please leave us a message...beeeeeep." Lying on his bed, staring up through the skylight at the grey heaven-less sky above, with his .38 on the nightstand, loaded and locked, Drew listened to the caller's message.

"Hi Drew, it's Dad. I just wanted to call and let you know I'm thinking about you. You're going to get through this, I know you are. And you're going to do some wonderful things in life. I just know it. Give me a call when you get a chance. There's something important I need to talk to you about. I love you, son."

Drew leaned over and hit the reset button on the machine. "Important?" he yelled out with an angry, mocking sarcasm, "nothing's *important*, Dad. Nothing." And in that moment, Drew hated his father, the retired Navy surgeon, the forever do-gooder and optimist. Why couldn't the Old Man just let him suffer alone?

He grabbed the bottle of Jim Beam from the nightstand-- or was it Jack Daniels? Jack, Jim... he didn't know which it was anymore. Either way, Drew was on a first name basis with both. He took another slug to get numb, yet no matter how many slugs Drew took, he couldn't numb the voice inside. Over and over again, like a needle stuck in the grooves of a worn record, that voice implored Drew to call his Dad. Finally, after a relentless hour and twelve ounces, Drew gave in and punched out his Dad's number. Despite the numbness, he could feel his head vibrating.

"Hi, son, thanks for returning my call. I know this is gonna sound strange, but I need to ask a favor." Then Drew's Dad recounted the story of Becca O'Neil, the eight year-old girl at Sibley, who'd miraculously survived a devastating car accident a week earlier. Severely banged

up, with almost as many broken bones as not, and severe internal injuries, his Dad said she had a 50-50 chance of surviving.

Drew listened indifferently, not understanding why his Dad was telling him about a little girl he didn't know... nor cared to know. Drew wished Big Jake would leave him out of his 'do-good' visits to hospitals around the area.

"Would you mind going down to the hospital and visiting with Becca?" Big Jake asked.

Drew's mind formulated a question: why don't you call her family?

Before he could verbalize the question, however, his Dad was speaking again, "Her father, sister, and two brothers all died in the car accident. She really doesn't have anyone."

"What about her mom?"

"She was in the car, too. She's in a coma in intensive care. The doctors aren't sure if she's going to come out of it."

A shiver went through Drew. His body may have been numbed by the alcohol, but his heart wasn't. Despite his own pain, Drew's heart went out to the little girl who'd lost her family, too. Goddamn God was even crueller than Drew had thought. "When?" he reluctantly asked.

"How about tomorrow?"

As he looked at the .38 caliber pistol on the nightstand, Drew figured he'd probably be dead by then. "Okay, sure."

"Great. Just go up to the intensive care nurse's station on the second floor, and ask to see Becca. I gave them a heads-up you'd be coming."

I'll be the guy with the bullet in his head, Drew thought as he hung up the phone. An hour later, with the loaded .38 still staring at him from the nightstand, Drew passed out.

NINE

The only thing I fear is not
being worthy of my suffering.
--Dostoyevsky

The next morning, a fatigued, but sober and still-living Drew awoke, and although his mind was a ball of fuzz, he remembered agreeing to visit a little girl named Becca who'd lost her family in an auto accident. That was a stupid thing to do. What good could he do her? What would he talk to her about? Godlessness? Pain? Suffering? Suicide?

Nonetheless, the suicidal Drew was a man of his word, and shakily, he showered, shaved, dressed, and drove to Sibley.

After getting lost inside the three-story brick building, he eventually found the intensive care unit and told the nurse behind the desk that his Dad-- Big Jake-- had asked him to come visit a little girl named Becca. He couldn't remember her last name.

The nurse knew, though, and she led a pensive Drew down a narrow, carpeted hallway. On either side, behind every closed or half-open door, Drew sensed pain and suffering-- a child's uncontrollable crying, the muted sobs of parents, hushed praying, and lots of deathly silence. Walking down that hall was like pouring gasoline on the fire of hate that burned inside him. Don't pray to God, he wanted to shout to the hushed prayer. There is no God. Look around. See? Look at all the pain and suffering. And even if there is a God, what kind of God can he be? He doesn't care. Can't you see?

"She's right in here, Mr. Matthews," the red-haired nurse said as she ushered him inside the room at the end of the hall.

"Okay," Drew muttered. He entered the room with trepidation and hate.

"She'll wake soon. Just push the call button next to the bed if you need anything." Then she was out the door and down the Godless hallway.

Drew looked down on the little girl. Engulfed by the big bed, she looked like a mistreated doll: dark circles around her eyes, a gauze bandage wrapped around her skull, and i.v.

tubes feeding into her like tentacles. She was, Drew concluded, another testament to the cruelty of life and the Godlessness of the world.

He sat in the chair next to the bed and continued to appraise the little girl. Despite the injuries, he could also see a preciousness about her: sweet blonde locks that peeked out from under the white gauze, cherry cheeks below the dark circles, and soft pink lips that were turned slightly up at the corners in one of those innocent little smiles that you often see in a dreaming child. As he continued to watch her, Drew had to remind himself that there was no God. But if there were, he philosophized, how could He create such a beautiful little girl and allow her such pain and suffering at the same time?

About ten minutes later, just as the nurse had said, the little girl awoke. She sat up a bit at first and looked around to get her bearings. Upon seeing Drew, she smiled instinctively, revealing a lost front tooth. "Hi," she said in a raspy-just-woke-up voice, "who are you?"

Her voice sent Drew's heart racing-- she sounded exactly like Luke when he awoke and Drew told himself to relax. He also reminded himself not to take his anger and hatred out on this poor little girl. As best he could, he smiled.

"Hi, Becca, my name's Drew. I just came by to see how you're doing." Drew liked the little girl immediately. She really did remind him of Luke.

She yawned. "Are you a doctor?" she asked, her voice now softer.

Drew thought about the answer: yes, he was... once upon a time... in a different life, in a different world, in a world with a different God... with a God who cared. Between sonograms, ear infections, strep throat, Luke's eye surgery, and stitches from a bathtub fall, Drew felt like he'd been through enough to qualify as a doctor. He had also been an Indian medicine man, a whiffle ball pitcher, a math tutor, and a bedtime storyteller-- all those things a good father was. "No, I'm just a regular person," he responded aloud. That is, he thought sarcastically, if being suicidal was 'regular.'

"Good. 'Cause these doctors aren't much fun." She shook her head from side to side and scrunched her nose, making the universal sign for distaste.

Well you'll just love me then, Drew thought, now even more sarcastic: I'm the funkmaster of fun, the hapster of happy. Outwardly he chuckled at her assessment of the doctors. "So how do you feel?"

"I'm okay. My head still hurts. I have another operation tomorrow."

For some reason, Drew liked the little girl immediately and they talked about nothing important, yet everything that matters-- holidays, the seasons, snow, sledding, fireworks, picnics, watermelon, the beach, and seashells-- and Drew grew increasingly anxious by the minute. She was so much like Luke: talkative and upbeat, with the same facial expressions of rolling her eyes

at his bad jokes, and scrunching her nose when she talked of things she didn't like.

After a half hour, Drew was ready to leave, unsure the visit had accomplished anything, for Becca or himself. He wasn't one of those people who felt better seeing someone else in pain. In fact, he felt worse. As he was about to stand-up and say good-bye she caught him.

"Would you mind reading me a story before you go?" she asked. "None of the doctors or nurses ever seem to have time."

Drew had heard the reading request countless times from Luke, and he didn't know if he'd ever hear it again. He certainly wouldn't hear it from his own children, and there would be no grandchildren either. Life, Drew reminded himself, would end when his life ended, with no continuation, no legacy, no lasting reminder that he had been. His footprints on the earth would be as memorialized as footprints in the sand-- erased by one evening's wind, by a chicken-shit driver who'd run his family off the road and driven away.

In spite of such a sad definitive end to his existence, Drew was somehow able to maintain his composure on the outside. "Umm, sure," he answered, knowing he couldn't say 'no' to a face and voice like hers. "Which book do you want to read?" he asked as he picked up the pile of books on the table next to the bed.

"The Velveteen Rabbit," she announced happily, "it's my favorite."

Drew's heart sank. Of course. It had been Luke's favorite, too. More than that, it was the last book Drew had read to him, just before he went to the mall to get his haircut. Instead, he got his head crushed.

Nervously, Drew found the book with the velvet-vested rabbit on the cover, sat back down in the chair by the bed, took a deep breath, and started to read in a somber voice: "There was once a Velveteen Rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunched, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink satin."

Drew gulped for air as his chest constricted. The memories were nearly unbearable and he was engulfed with grief and self-pity as he analogized himself to the toy rabbit: *'There was once a happy man, and just one month ago he was really splendid. He was kind, loving, and considerate, as a father and husband should be; his life was filled with the joy and happiness that comes from a loving family, and real meaning; his heart and soul were lined with love.'*

Through the sadness, he continued reading to Becca, his voice cracking with sorrow. "On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming. There were other things in--"

Becca interrupted. "Could you sit up here on the bed next to me?" she asked, scooting over to make room for him. It was the same thing Luke used to do on his race car bed, the one that no longer had a happy six year-old driver.

Looking into her cuddly, Velveteen Rabbit-like eyes, Drew swore he saw Luke, and had a passing thought to reach inside her and pull him out. Instead, he reached for the stainless steel bar on the side of the bed, lowered it, and climbed up next to her. He took another deep breath, and started to read again. Three pages into the story, when the Skin Horse explains that toys become *real* once they've become really loved, she reached over, took hold of his hand, and squeezed it. Whether she was squeezing to get strength from him, or to give him her strength, he didn't know. Either way, tears quickly filled his eyes and his voice started to shake with sadness as he continued to read. "'When you are real you don't mind being hurt,' the Skin Horse said."

The visit with little eight year-old Becca was starting to make Drew feel real again. Real, too, were the tears that streaked down Drew's face like raindrops on a window pane. The words on the pages were blurring now and Drew was unable to continue reading. Without saying a word he passed the book to her, climbed out of the bed, and walked towards the small bathroom adjoining her room. His body was experiencing a massive earthquake, his chest heaving, and by the time he closed the bathroom door, he erupted, crying like never before, with hot tears gushing from his eyes. For nearly ten minutes he did that, his grief magnified by the echoes in the small tiled room. Finally, completely spent, he sat down on the toilet seat and wondered whether this was the low point. Could he feel worse? Did his life mean anything anymore? Would it ever? Why, God? Why?

"Help me. Please," he begged silently to God. "Give me the strength to go on." And for what seemed like an eternal five minutes, he sat and thought about life, death and suffering, and God, heaven and happiness. No clarity later, he stood, took several deep breaths, splashed water on his face, and decided to go back out. As he opened the door, Becca was waiting patiently for him, looking at the picture of the Toy Rabbit staring at the Real Rabbits in the garden, as if nothing had happened. He climbed up next to her and settled in, ready to continue reading.

She took hold of his hand again. "It's okay, Drew," she said, as if she'd known him her whole life, "I'm sure they're safe in heaven."

Her out-of-the-blue remark confused him. "Who?"

"Your family. Just like mine. They're safe in heaven with God and the angels." She said it with an unnatural conviction.

"How do you know?" he asked, his voice cracking, but at the same time soft.

"I don't know. I just believe."

She sounded convincing, like she really knew there was a heaven and God and angels, like she knew they really were safe and happy there.

Now lightheaded, Drew took a deep breath. Something inside believed her. "Who told you about my family?"

"Big Jake... the man who comes to visit me. He's really nice. He tells me lots of stories."

Drew took a deep breath as he envisioned his Dad sitting next to Becca and talking with her. "What kind of stories?"

"Neat ones. About heaven, and saints, and angels. He's the one who told me my family was safe in heaven, and my brother and sister had lots of friends and were happy, too. He said your family was killed in an accident just like mine. I just figured they're safe in heaven with my family."

"Did this Big Jake say anything else?"

She nodded. "He told me that God has a reason for everything and even if we can't understand what it is, I should trust that God knows and not worry. I like Big Jake. He always makes me feel better."

The idea that his family might be safe and happy in heaven seemed to relieve the pressure and pain Drew felt. He pulled Becca close and hugged her. "You're really nice, Becca." He didn't doubt that she was an angel. And in that moment he loved his Dad like never before.

He took a deep breath and continued reading to the little angel. There were only a few more tears, and a few more aftershocks, but that was normal. Suicidal or not, Drew always cried when the Velveteen Rabbit, after having been loved so much, became real.

When he finished, Becca gave Drew a hug, and he climbed out of the bed to leave. Deep inside, beneath all that is physical, he felt a little bit real again.

"Would you come see me tomorrow?" she asked with pleading eyes that, if patented, could have made her rich with money.

"Sure."

She lit up. "Thanks."

No. Thank you, Becca, Drew thought as he turned and waved good bye. From the rooms on either side of the hall, sounds of laughter had replaced the muted crying and hushed praying from earlier. And without thinking, Drew whispered a silent prayer to God for Becca and the other children in the ward.

That night, in the solitude and darkness, new thoughts exploded in Drew's head-- about Becca O'Neil, Luke, and Lori; about life and suffering and meaning; about God, angels, and heaven-- and for the first time since the accident, Drew decided to not reach for the bottle of Jim or Jack. Instead of passing out from exhaustion and alcohol, Drew fell asleep. It was also the first time Drew was able to dream...

...he saw Luke, dressed in dazzling white, playing in a beautiful green field. He appeared perfect-- no scars from the accident, no bruises or bandages. Drew saw his face up-close-- even the scar above his eyebrow from his bathroom fall when he was two was healed. And his eyes seemed different-- deeper blue in color and sparkling, as if illuminated from within. Luke was laughing, his bucked front teeth somehow straight. As the scene became panoramic again, Drew watched Luke kick a ball and round first base, trying to stretch his single into a double. He was doing what he loved best-- playing kickball. And he had so many playmates, all dressed in the same dazzling white, all happy, all perfect. As Luke slid safely into second, Lori smiled from the bleachers and clapped for her son. Like Luke, she, too, appeared perfect.

...Far, far away, in another world, in the bedroom of his Falls Church home, a sense of calm enveloped Drew, and deep within he heard Lori's voice call out to him: "Get up, Drew. Don't give up. Luke and I are fine. You must not quit. Make the most of your life. Give it meaning... become worthy of your suffering." And then her voice was gone.

For the nearly twelve hours that he slept, Lori's message played over in Drew's head: *become worthy of your suffering... become worthy of your suffering.*

The next morning Drew woke dazed and confused, the words from his dream flowing through his mind: become worthy of your suffering. What exactly did that mean?

He didn't know. But he intended to find out. And he began his journey of discovery at the place it had all began-- at the hospital with Becca.

Every day, for a week, Drew visited her and it made both of them feel better. Gradually, Becca began to recover and after her second major operation, this one to clear excess fluid from her lungs, Drew was there, holding her hand as they wheeled her into the operating room, squeezing it to let her know he was there, giving her back some of the strength and love she had given him. And when she awoke, he was beside her bed to witness her single-toothed, innocent smile... the smile that seemed to be thanking God for the gift of life.

As he marveled at the strong-willed, fearless little girl with the never quit attitude, Drew began to question himself: if an eight year-old could be so courageous and perseverant, couldn't he? Wasn't one supposed to become stronger and greater and wiser with age? What did it mean to become worthy of one's suffering? Did one become worthy of suffering by choosing the right attitude and making the most out of life in spite of the setbacks and shattered dreams that are sure to occur? Was the real measure of life what we have overcome, rather than where we end up?

He thought that was part of it... and it made Drew feel better.

Finally, one month after Drew's initial visit, another miracle occurred-- Becca's mother awoke from the coma.

The visits with Becca had given Drew hope-- even though he couldn't change the past, he could change the future. That's when he vowed to never quit until he found the killer of his wife and son. That's when he went and got his video camera...

... and the trajectory of his life changed forever.

TEN

My father gave me the greatest gift
anyone could give another person...
he believed in me.
--Jim Valvano

Back from the memories now, Drew continued driving towards Big Jake's house. Thinking about all he'd overcome made him feel better. No doubt, he had suffered; but no doubt, he had become worthy of his suffering, too. That was the only way to achieve inner peace in such a crazy world. And one day, if he could find the supreme happiness that only comes with love, he might even be whole.

Although the memories boosted Drew's confidence, that confidence was tempered by what he'd learned about Allie's mom. The only significant evidence-- in fact, the only evidence-- was Melody Morgan's car itself. Now, 36 years later, the car and its contents remained intact in the huge Anne Arundel police warehouse that he'd just left.

Upon learning the car was still in police custody, Drew thought he might have caught a break. Normally, in inactive cases like this, the police would comb the car for every bit of evidence possible and return it to the victim's family. But, as the sergeant-in-charge of the warehouse had explained, according to the record log, Melody's grandmother had refused the car. "I want my daughter back, not her car," the record stated. "You can give me the car back when you've given me my daughter back." And so, the police kept the car. At one time, there was talk of selling it, along with several others that sat in the warehouse, but the decision was deferred until, or if, the warehouse ran out of space. That had never happened.

In the warehouse, Drew had walked around the white 1977 Dodge Diplomat while examining a copy of the police report. There was nothing unusual about the car's exterior, no particular dents or anything indicating an accident. Nor, according to the police report, was there anything unusual about the interior-- no blood stains, no unusual hair samples or biological material, or anything like that.

On Sunday, May 23rd, the day after Melody's disappearance, the car had been found near Bowie on the shoulder of Collington Road just off Route 50, with all four doors locked and the hood up, indicating car trouble. Indeed, the subsequent police investigation confirmed the distributor in the Diplomat had overheated and fried. Inside the car were the usual knickknacks--

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a box of tissues, some CDs, a hairbrush, an old teething ring found under one of the seats, some maps, and an empty can of Coke.

The only fingerprints found inside the car were those of Melody Morgan, which were confirmed via a check of her fingerprints from her 1987 arrest for protesting in front of the Pentagon, and a baby's fingerprints-- little Allie's, Drew knew. Another set of fingerprints was found near the front grill, but those prints were smeared and unmatchable-- most likely, according to the police report, from a severe thunderstorm during the morning of May 23rd. A 36 year-old photograph of rain-obsured tire tracks found on the shoulder of the road behind the Diplomat was also useless. Sadly, that was the extent of physical evidence.

Drew turned into the gravel driveway that led to the modest white brick cape cod with the cedar shake roof. In the background, the Severn ebbed slowly towards the Chesapeake.

Drew entered his Dad's house without knocking and heard movement upstairs. "Dad?" he called out and up.

A voice not unlike Drew's called back down, "Be there in a minute, son. I just need to find my glasses."

Drew chuckled to himself. The Old Man was always looking for his glasses. More than likely, they were propped-up on his forehead. After a minute, the 6' 2'', broad, white-haired man with black-rimmed 1950's glasses was waddling down the steps, struggling with two bulging bags.

"Found 'em. I'm ready." From his tone and glowing face, Big Jake was clearly fired up for their annual three day junket to Vegas.

Drew met him at the landing to help with the bags. "Did you remember to bring an extra bathing suit this time?" The year before the Old Man had ripped the seat out of his suit doing a cannonball off the diving board.

The Old Man smiled as if waiting for that question. "Yep. In fact, just yesterday I went out and bought two new ones... low cut speedos that the European men wear. High quality. Cannon ball indestructible. And very sexy." The Old Man stood erect, sucked in his gut, and winked at his son.

Drew shuddered as he envisioned his thin-legged, knobby-kneed, barrel-chested Dad in a speedo. He'd look like some badly designed alien. "I hope you're joking about the speedo, Dad. I don't want us banned from the pool."

"Banned from the pool? What you talkin' about, boy? Afraid I'd be too much of a turn on for all the ladies?"

"No, I'm afraid you'll scare all the little children." He laughed aloud at his cut. Bantering and joking back and forth was what the two generations of Matthews enjoyed most.

As the Old Man locked the front door, Drew grabbed the bags and threw them into the back of the Cherokee and they were off to BWI.

As they turned onto Route 50, the Old Man spoke first. "So, what's new with the inmates on Capitol Hill?"

"They're fine, I guess," Drew responded. He wished his problems were nothing more than the routine crooks on the Hill. The bigger problem of Melody Morgan's disappearance was bothering him more than he could have imagined. And Drew knew why-- it was because of Allie. He wanted to do something great for her. And that had Drew pressing.

"In fact," Drew explained, "what I'm working on has nothing to do with politics."

"Nothing to do with politics? Then how come you're involved?"

"I'm trying to help a friend with something."

"With what?"

"Do you really want to hear about it?"

"No, son, I'd much rather talk about incontinence and senility." The Old Man said it sarcastically. "Of course I want to hear about what you've got going on, Drew. I live vicariously through you. You are my main man. You are the *prime time lemon lime* from which all that is *divine shines*. You are--"

"Whoa, Dad. Stop already," Drew said, cutting him off. "I'm not sure I can take four days of Sir Rap-a-lot. You need to stop watching rap videos."

"Hey, son. What can I say? I'm *dope*. So anyway, tell me what's up."

"Okay. But promise you'll stop rapping."

The Old Man nodded.

"I'm trying to find out what happened to someone who disappeared a long time ago."

"Who?"

"Allie's mom."

Upon hearing Allie's name, the Old Man perked up. He loved her like the daughter-in-law he'd lost. "*Your Allie?* She's alright, isn't she?"

"Yeah, Dad, she's fine. Like I said, it's about her mom. And it happened a long time ago-- 1988 to be exact." As he merged into traffic on the BWI parkway, Drew recounted the story Allie had told him-- her mother's car stranded on the shoulder of the road near Bowie, the missing 24 year-old, the absence of any physical evidence, no leads, and no suspects... the classical unsolved disappearance of a young girl.

The Old Man listened intently. In the process, he was transported back to 1988 as if in a time warp. Personally, it was a tough time for him. In January, his oldest son, Tom-- Drew's older brother by three years-- had hung himself in the woods. Two months later, his wife had left, mostly from the strain of Tom's death. A year later, she was dead, too, of a self-inflicted gunshot.

Yet even with the flood of these memorable memories, another memory-- which didn't involve his own family-- dominated the Old Man's memory: 1988 was the year in which that young girl had disappeared, just four days before the Academy graduation. Could Drew be describing that same tragedy? The Old Man thought back to the newspaper stories that still stuck in his head even after 36 years. At the same time, he was remembering something which had never made the newspapers. And that's why the disappearance of Melody Morgan stuck so heavily in his mind. Something had happened the morning after the disappearance that never seemed right. Sadly, though, he never did anything about it, and deep down, to this very day even, something felt wrong.

Out of all these memories, one question surfaced: could it be that Allie was Melody Morgan's little girl?

"When did she disappear?" the Old Man asked.

"In 1988."

"You already said it was in 1988," the Old Man reminded Drew, his tone short. "When in 1988?"

Like it made a difference if it was January or May or November, Drew thought sarcastically to himself. "May."

"May what?"

"May 'what's it matter?'" Drew responded sarcastically.

"What day?" the Old Man persisted.

"The 22nd, Dad. May 22, 1988."

The Old Man was chilled-- Allie *was* the disappeared girl's daughter. "That was a Saturday, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Does it really matter?" Drew answered, almost frustrated, wondering what difference it mattered to his Dad whether it was a Saturday, a Tuesday, or a Thursday. The questions were typical of his Dad-- always too exacting. And while Drew knew it was a carryover from being a surgeon, it was bothering Drew now.

"I'm just trying to get the facts straight. Seems like if you're trying to solve a mystery you ought to at least have the facts straight."

"Okay, already, jeez, Dad. Yeah, May 22nd was a Saturday."

"Don't get all angry with me, Drew. I'm just trying to help."

"Sorry. I'm just a little frustrated by it all."

With the 36 year-old memories cascading through the Old Man's 75 year-old brain, he asked the pivotal question, "What's Allie's last name?"

The question surprised Drew. The Old Man had taken Allie sailing once and it struck him as odd that he didn't know her last name. He responded, "Morgan. Allie Morgan."

Morgan. *Of course.* Now he knew for sure that Drew's Allie was Melody Morgan's daughter. Jesus! What an incredible circle of events. The Old Man's expression changed noticeably, from curiosity to disbelief.

For the next several miles the two normal chatterboxes drove in an unnatural silence. To Drew, this alone communicated more than any words could. The Old Man was too talkative and animated to sit so quietly, especially on the way to Vegas. Normally, he'd be explaining his latest theory on betting, or quizzing Drew on the cardinal rules for winning at blackjack, or talking about the how much money he won playing craps on the computer. Hearing the disappearance story, and learning Allie's last name, had sent the Old Man into his mood. Drew wondered why.

"What's up Dad?"

The thick, grey haired man turned toward his bald son and sighed, "Nothing. I'm just sitting here daydreaming."

And now, Drew knew his Dad was lying. Daydreaming was out of character for Jake Matthews. The rambunctious surgeon was, and always would be, a focused, purposeful thinker,

the kind of Dad who tells a daydreaming 15 year-old to "get back to work painting that fence... you'll have plenty of time to dream when you're sleeping tonight."

Feeling guilty by his lack of forthrightness, the Old Man spoke out, "Actually Drew, I was thinking about what happened to Allie's mom. The fact that such a sweet girl like Allie lost her mom makes it even more tragic. You know I really like her."

Continuing with the topic of Melody Morgan wasn't what Drew wanted to hear. In fact, he was hoping the trip to Vegas would take his mind off the unsolvable case. Knowing he wasn't going to be able to help Allie bothered Drew. Yet now, he was back to thinking how hopeless it was.

"She's a sweet girl alright. And I *do* know how much you like her. I just wish there was some way I could help her. But it's just not going to happen... not now at least. Too many years have gone by. The police never even got close, and from what I know right now, without any evidence or leads, I don't see myself getting close either." The frustration in his voice was clear.

"So what do you think happened to her that night?"

About that, Drew had a pretty good idea. "Well, her car definitely had a fried distributor, so assuming that's what really happened, I'd say someone came along and stopped to help her... probably some low-life loser, some drifter. But instead of helping her, he probably ended up killing her."

Drew thought about that ultimate irony before he elaborated. "That's the usual M.O. for a girl who just vanishes-- her car breaks down or she's out hitchhiking; a man comes along and offers to help; she gets in his car and thanks him for what she thinks will be a ride to a gas station or down the road; he nods; they make small talk; the man starts thinking about how nice she looks; pretty soon his dick gets stiff and he starts smiling; the girl looks at him, wondering why he's smiling; finally, he can't contain himself so he pulls onto some dark side road and grabs her; she tries to fight him off, loses, gets raped, beaten up, and raped again; then, the man strangles her and she ends up in a roadside ditch or some shallow grave in the woods."

Drew paused to catch his breath and let the scenario sink in. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out that's probably what happened. Ninety percent of missing girls end up dead at the hands of sex-starved men." Drew shook his head in disgust before continuing. "The problem is, almost anyone could have come across her that night. And since her body was never found, there were no real clues. After all, that's where the real clues would have been. She could have been dumped almost anywhere."

Although he didn't know anything for sure, Drew's description struck the Old Man as eerily accurate. "So if that's what you think happened-- and that just about anyone could've done it-- what were you planning to do?"

Drew's strange confidence in thinking that he could somehow, someday solve anything didn't seem to be the right response, so he ticked off a different answer. "I was hoping there might be some physical evidence in the police file-- fingerprints, tire tracks, footprints, hair, clothing fibers, blood, semen-- that kind of thing. Something I could run with. The forensic data bases for are so much more extensive today than they were 36 years ago, I thought I might catch a break."

"Don't you think the police would've already tried doing that if there were any evidence like that?"

Drew shook his head at the logical question. "Not likely, Dad. At least not after this long. The police don't have the resources to spend their time on old cases like this. Their hands are full with current caseloads. Just think about the numbers-- every year there are about 25,000 murders and disappearances in the U.S., and nearly a quarter of them go unsolved." Drew had already done the figuring in his head. "Work the math for the past 36 years and that comes out to about 200,000 unsolved murders and disappearances. With that kind of caseload, if a case isn't solved within a year or two-- three at the most-- the police just move on. The fact is, the older the case, the less likely it is to be solved."

Drew continued. "But, there's no doubt she's dead. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if the killer's even dead by now. After all, the case is 36 years old. The police may tell you the case is still open, but after five years, ten at the most, you can pretty much kiss the police good-bye. The only person who would ever take the time to solve an old case like this is someone who has a personal stake in the matter. In this case, it's Allie. I just wanted to help her."

The words 'personal stake in the matter' echoed in the Old Man's head. He couldn't help but think that he, too, had a personal stake in this one. But, of course, that was just speculation.

Drew continued. "But there's no way this case is going to ever be solved. Her body was never found and neither was the crime scene. All that's in the police file is what they found at her abandoned car. And that's pretty much nothing. Obviously, there was very little interaction at her car with whoever picked her up."

Drew thought some more. "Or maybe she was picked up down the road somewhere as she walked to find help. Either way, the crime-- rape and murder, I bet-- actually took place somewhere else. Her car wasn't the scene of the crime, it was just an intermediary point. So, without any witnesses who might have seen her, or who might have come across her that night, which I don't expect to find after 36 years, what's really needed is the body or physical evidence from the crime scene."

Drew shook his head as he summed up. "But if it's not already in the police file, there's no way to come up with physical evidence now."

The Old Man responded. "What you need is some new information."

"No shit, Sherlock. But about the only thing I can think to do that is put an ad in the Annapolis-area papers or on Facebook. I figure I could offer a reward to anyone who provides any information about anything weird that happened during that same time. It's a longshot, probably just a waste of time and money, but I got nothing else. It's just been too long."

"So, assuming you get nothing from that, where do you go then?"

"Truthfully, Dad?" he said looking over to his right.

The Old Man nodded.

"Nowhere. Without physical evidence, it would be pretty much impossible to solve a crime like this. If her body were found, there might be some useful DNA evidence. You know about that kind of stuff."

The surgeon nodded. "I've heard of a couple of cases where 50 year-old blood stains and semen have been used in criminal cases, but you're right, it's pretty remote. And even if you had any of that kind of evidence the odds of matching them to a name would be almost impossible... unless, of course, the person who did it had a criminal record and were in one of the criminal data bases."

Drew responded, "And all that presupposes her body could be found in the first place. That, in and of itself, is probably the most unlikely thing in the first place. It's a big world, filled with lots of bad people, and it's not too difficult to hide a body. In fact, it might be easier to find life in another galaxy than finding her body."

Both men considered the situation in silence.

Drew's Dad spoke. "They just found that meteorite with bacteria on it from Mars."

Drew shrugged. "Yeah, well that meteorite came to us-- a one in a million chance. I bet I'd have better odds throwing ten passes in a row at the craps table tonight than coming across any new, significant information about Allie's mom. You know? I mean, where would it come from? I've gone over the police files with a fine-toothed comb, looking for any connections to other crimes during that time, I've checked the hospital records for all hospitals within 50 miles, looking for anything unusual that might have happened... nothing. I've crapped out... snake eyes." Drew shook his head at being beaten so early, before he'd even really had a chance to bat. He always felt that as long as he had another inning, even another out, he'd pull out a miraculous win.

He continued. "I just have to tell Allie that she'll never know what happened," he added with resignation. "She just has to forget about it and move on with her life." His voice trailed

off.

"That sounds easy, Drew. But you and I know that's not as easy as it sounds," the Old Man shot back.

And with those words, the Old Man returned to staring out the window at the green scenery, thinking about all the beautiful summer days he'd seen in his lifetime, wondering how many more he'd see. In spite of all the pain in his life-- the loss of a wife to suicide and a son to drugs-- he was still thankful. He had lived his life as well as he could, having learned that some things were beyond his control and comprehension. Through it all, through all the trials and tribulations, he'd come to the realization that only two things mattered: to be true to ones' self and one's God. After that, it was all just mystery, faith, and a whole lot of luck.

And now, as he contemplated his existence and the only absolute truths of life, the Old Man thought about the information that he'd carried around in his head for 36 years. Something just wasn't right that Sunday morning, May 23rd, 1988, when Midshipmen Vic Graves and Bob Grady arrived at his house in that VW camper van. Their story, about a bar fight with a girl and her boyfriend, had been too convenient, too concocted... and the wound in Vic's back too clean. It looked like Vic had been cut without realizing it. It was tough to imagine how anyone in a bar fight could have been cut so cleanly-- unless someone else were holding him down. But that wasn't what they said had happened. And the deep scratches in Vic's back were undoubtedly from fingernails. Yet, in spite all these troubling facts, the scared look in their eyes had been the most troubling. Their eyes said that they were guilty of something more, something hideous and shameful.

Regretfully, the Navy Doctor hadn't pursued it. Instead, he accepted their story, and later that day, flew to a medical conference in New Orleans. In fact, by the time he checked into his French Quarter hotel, the incident passed without any further thought. And why not, he asked himself so many times afterwards? At that time, there was no news about a disappeared girl, nothing in the papers, radio, or t.v. The world was different back then-- mass media wasn't what it was today. And so, with nothing else to go on, Vic and Tony's story could very well have happened. Now, 36 years later, it seemed to be coming full circle.

Knowing he could die any day the Lord decided to throw a pair of dice with his name on them, the Old Man was sure of this: he didn't want to keep the information about Bob and Vic inside, having never told anyone. That's when the Old Man turned and looked at his middle-aged son-- his baby-- his last legacy on the earth. He was proud of Drew, proud of him for not quitting; proud of him for coming back so strong; proud of him for becoming worthy of life's suffering.

Damn proud.

He felt tears well in his eyes.

And now, to see him so frustrated and hurting, like only a father can see, hurt. That Drew

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cared about Allie more than just a friend or as his assistant at work was no secret to the Old Man. A good father sensed even the slightest change in his child's behavior. And Drew's changes weren't slight. The way he perked up, the mischievous look in his eye, the sharp wit-- all of these traits came out when Drew was around the diminutive blonde whose mom had disappeared 36 years earlier.

And so, the Old Man wanted to help his son, even if it was just a longshot. After all, from what Drew had told him, a longshot was better than no-shot. He was sure what he needed to do.

ELEVEN

The best secrets are the most twisted.
--Sara Shepard

"Drew, there's something I've got to tell you," the Old Man finally said, his voice solemn, almost embarrassed.

From his tone, Drew could tell the Old Man had something important to say. He looked at his Dad. "What's up Dad?"

"Well, maybe I'm being overly dramatic from watching too many episodes of *Law and Order*, but I think I may have a clue about Allie's mom's disappearance."

"What?" Drew reacted to the unbelievable words.

"Well, it's a longshot, but since you don't have anything else to go on, it's something you might want to check out."

Then the Old Man recounted the 36 year-old tale of the visit from Vic Graves and Bob Grady that Sunday morning after Melody's disappearance.

Drew listened intently, but reserved, to the story that had the potential to implicate two senior government officials-- the FBI Director and the President's senior legal advisor-- in the disappearance of Allie's mom. Although the story seemed far-fetched, Drew's intuition told him there might be something to it. That was the best thing about intuition-- it lacked the reservation of logic.

When the Old Man finished, Drew asked the first of many questions reeling in his head. "So, the morning after she disappeared, these two Middies drove up to your house in a VW camper van and Vic had a big cut in his back?" Drew asked, to make sure he'd heard right.

"A big cut is right. About four-inches long and half an inch deep. It looked like someone took a knife or scissors and just ripped down. Vic also had a full set of fingernail tracks down his back. The big wound needed about ten stitches," the Old Man added. "He'd lost a decent amount of blood and could have gone into shock if I didn't get the bleeding stopped."

"And they told you they got in a bar fight?"

The Old Man nodded.

"Did they say what bar they were at?"

"No. And I didn't ask. At the time, I had no reason to doubt their story."

"Where was I when this happened?" Drew asked.

"You were at your mom's that weekend. Remember, she moved out earlier that year... after Tom's... you know." The Old Man couldn't say suicide.

Drew nodded and quickly moved the conversation away from that unpleasant memory. "So, you think they were somehow involved in Melody Morgan's disappearance because Vic had a stab wound and fingernail tracks in his back?" Drew's tone was one of incredibility.

"I didn't say that. I said I have *a clue* for you to check out. Maybe it's something, maybe it's nothing, I don't know. It could have just been a coincidence. But you've got to admit, it's more than what you had fifteen minutes ago."

"Anything's better than what I had fifteen minutes ago." Drew thought for a moment before adding, "It's interesting, Dad, but not very likely." Logic had now overtaken intuition in Drew's mind.

"Why's that? Fifteen minutes ago and you were talking about putting an ad in the newspaper, ready to pay good money for any old scrap that somebody would throw at you. If someone told you about a guy stabbed the same night that girl disappeared, what would you do?"

"I guess I'd look into it."

"So what's your hesitation... because I told you?"

Drew shook his head. That wasn't it. "Dad, you know as well as I do that Annapolis isn't exactly a sleepy little town, even back in 1988. And especially in May... during June week no less. There were probably 50,000 people who could've come across her that night. You've given me two names out of 50,000 who were in Annapolis that night. Those aren't exactly good odds to bet on."

"Yeah. So? But on the very night she disappeared, how many of those 50,000 people were stabbed and had a set of fingernails scraped into their back?"

"Probably not too many," Drew answered at the interesting way his Dad framed the

question. "But the odds that Vic Graves and Bob Grady are the ones I'm after is pretty remote. Two midshipmen from the Academy weren't exactly who I had in mind."

"Why not?"

"Because. I just can't imagine two Middies could have done something like that."

"Maybe. But not many people would've expected Senator Hebert to have gotten drunk at his office Christmas Party and run over Lori and Luke, either." The Old Man hated to bring up the all too painful reminder, but it drove home his point that nothing in life was unbelievable. He could almost see Drew's mind remembering back seven-and-a-half years.

His Dad continued talking. "Just remember, Drew, a 22 year-old is still a 22 year-old, whether he goes to the Naval Academy, works at a gas station, or goes to the University of Maryland. And all 22 year-olds do crazy things." The 1968 Academy grad knew this first hand. "The Academy mission may be to prepare midshipman morally, mentally, and physically to be Naval Officers, but sometimes things don't work out as smoothly as all that sounds. Every class has its share of immoral, stupid, and out-of-shape graduates, and every year there's at least one cheating scandal, drug scandal, or sex scandal. Remember 1996? They had a drug ring, a car theft ring, and the infamous dine and dash from Denny's. The next year a plebe was convicted of murdering her boyfriend's lover. And those are the scandals that make it outside the Academy walls. There's just as many, maybe more, that don't. So don't believe for one minute that these guys walk on water."

"I didn't say they walked on water, Dad. I said I didn't have them in mind as suspects in the disappearance and possible murder of a 24 year-old girl. I just don't see how they could've been involved in something like that?"

"That's because you're too focused on the fact that it had to be a derelict of some sort, or that it had to be intentional. Maybe they didn't mean to. Maybe it was an accident."

Drew nodded, more open to that possibility. "So you'll agree that it's not the kind of thing they'd have done intentionally."

"Probably not. But I can also think of some scenarios where they might have." Thirty-six years had given the Old Man plenty of time to think about it.

"Like what?"

"Like maybe one of them was Allie's father?"

Drew was confused, unsure how that could translate into the disappearance of Allie's mom. Before he could ask his question, the Old Man was explaining. "One thing we know for sure is that someone got her mother pregnant. I know you like Allie a lot, but I seriously doubt she was conceived immaculately. Maybe it was a Middie who knocked her mom up... maybe it

was Vic or Bob. Maybe she was coming to confront them or get child support or wanted the father to marry her. Maybe she was going to blackmail them."

"What do you mean blackmail? How could she do that?"

"Easy. Before all this crap about women at the Academy, and all these new inalienable rights that the bleeding heart liberals have found in the Constitution, you weren't allowed to have kids while you were a Middie. If you did, and they found out, they made you quit. No questions asked." The Old Man couldn't help but laugh aloud as a 50 year-old memory stirred in his head.

Drew was confused by the snicker. "What's so funny, Dad?"

"I was just thinking about what happened to one of my classmates," the Old Man responded. "We just finished plebe summer... the most grueling plebe summer in the history of the Academy I might add"-- he winked-- "... and this guy's girlfriend was up visiting during parent's weekend. Well, anyway, she brought along their one year-old son. Obviously she didn't know the rule about having kids, and neither did he. So, anyway, this guy-- his name was Scott Leyton, I think-- was so happy to see them, and so proud, that he brought his girlfriend and son over to meet our company officer. Well, this Captain was as cool as a cucumber. He just smiled nonchalantly, shook the girlfriend's hand, patted the little boy on the head, and told them what a great job Scott had done surviving plebe summer. A couple minutes later, the company officer excused himself and went off. Everything seemed fine. Well, he went off alright-- straight to the Commandant. Later that afternoon, the proud plebe who'd done such a great job during plebe summer, became an ex-plebe and was sent home to play Hubby and Daddy."

"You're saying one of them might have killed her to keep from getting kicked out of the Academy?"

"I said it's *possible*. They could have made the whole thing look like an accident with her car and everything."

Drew considered the possibility. It still seemed too drastic. "I don't know Dad. I still find it hard to believe she was killed because of something like that."

The Old Man nodded. "Stranger things have happened, but you're probably right. If it was them, I bet it wasn't intentional. It was probably some sort of chance meeting and accident. And if I were betting, I'd say it was probably similar to the scenario you described earlier, where they stopped to help her, but then, somehow, things got out of hand and some kind of accident occurred."

Drew was still trying to reconcile that a Middie could have somehow been behind it. "I've never heard you badmouth the Academy before, Dad."

"I'm not badmouthing the Academy. I'm just trying to help you out, Drew. In order to understand a Middie, it pays to have been a Middie. Time may never stop, but you'd never know that inside the walls of Bancroft Hall."

"What's that mean?"

"It means Middies are Middies are Middies-- past, present, and future. And except for all this equality stuff with women, about the only thing that changes in Bancroft Hall is the music Middie's listen to. It's an artificial world, with its own language, its own way of telling time, its own penal system. And Middies do the same things today as they did last year, last decade, and last century."

The Old Man could tell that his son didn't understand, so he tried a new tact. "It's hard to explain, Drew. Kind of like what sex feels like-- you have to experience it to understand it." The Old Man winked. "Anyway, having been a Middie, I think I've got a pretty good idea what makes a Middie tick."

"Okay. Keep talking, Dad."

"Another thing to consider is the fact she disappeared during June week. That fact alone makes it more believable that a Middie could have been involved."

"Why's that?"

"Because during June Week, all Middies do the same thing... they party. And it's serious partying, especially for Firsties like Vic and Bob were in 1988. The big thing is to get as drunk as possible and get laid as many times as you can." The Old Man couldn't contain his smile.

"What's so funny? You didn't do that, did you?"

"How do you thing Tom was conceived?" the Old Man said with a wink.

Drew thought back to his dead brother. "I thought he was born 9 months and a week *after* you and mom were married?"

The Old Man laughed. "He was."

"So what's so funny?"

"Your mom was two weeks *late* delivering. Why do you think he weighed almost ten pounds?" More 50 year-old memories filled the 75 year-old's head, and he was lost thinking about a better time in his life. He verbalized the memories, "Your mother and I had the best time of our lives that June week. That was the week she finally gave herself to me."

Although somewhat shocked to find this out 50 years after the fact, Drew felt a surge of

happiness that his brother Tom was the product of such a happy time between his parents. God only knew how unhappy his mom was after Tom's suicide.

Drew returned the conversation to the present. "Talk some more about June week and Middies, Dad. What else makes you think that Bob and Vic could have been involved?"

"Because Middies can get pretty wild at times. A lot of people don't realize that. Confining a couple thousand hormone-laden young guys for weeks at a time can be a recipe for disaster. On weekends, when Middies are freed, they tend to get somewhat wild. Believe me, I've seen it and done it. And June week is the worst. Shit happens-- maybe not intentionally, but it still happens. Accidents happen, too."

Drew nodded. If a Middie were involved, he was betting on some shitty accident.

The Old Man summed up. "Anyway, you said you were looking for some info that might narrow things down. If nothing else, you have to admit, this does that."

Narrowing things down was an understatement. This theory brought things down to a pinpoint-- pointed right at the FBI Director and the President's senior legal advisor.

Drew turned into the airport parking lot and took the parking ticket from the automatic dispenser. Although he'd driven to the airport a hundred times, he'd never forget this trip.

"Still, Dad, you have to admit there's not necessarily any connection between Vic's wound and a girl who disappeared. Maybe they really did get in a bar fight. You're making a pretty big jump connecting those wounds with Allie's mom's disappearance. There must be something more?"

Drew's instincts were true, and the Old Man nodded as he began to explain. He'd been saving this part of the explanation. "There is more," he responded. "The way Bob Grady looked, and the way he acted, made me think something more was wrong. The fact that he looked like hell wasn't such a big deal. I just figured they were up all night partying. But he had this disturbed, scared look about him, the kind of look you get when you've seen or heard something terrible. Believe me, I've seen that look too many times in the waiting room after telling a family member the bad news. When you're walking out there, they have this look of hopefulness, but then, as soon as you tell them the bad news, they get that look-- the look of death-- almost immediately." The Old Man paused. "It's almost like God ingrained the look in mankind. It was the same look your mom had in her eyes when we buried Tom."

Drew was familiar with the look, and not just because of his brother's suicide. After Lori and Luke had died, he'd seen it reflecting in the mirror every day for that first month, before Becca had come along. He tried not to think about that now. "So how was Bob acting?"

"He were nervous... too nervous. His eyes were darting around as he talked... that kind of thing. All the classical signs of lying."

Drew nodded, as his Dad continued with his explanation. "I could understand Vic being shook up-- after all, the cut in his back was deep and he'd lost a lot of blood. But in spite of all that, he was pretty calm and cool about the whole thing. But Bob was actually stuttering when he tried to explain what happened. I'll never forget it. I had met him once before-- at a Superintendent's reception-- and I remembered him talking just fine, no stuttering at all. But that morning, he was stuttering like he'd just seen a ghost, and the whole time Vic was trying to get Bob to shut up, like he knew Bob wasn't a good liar. I'm no psychologist, and you know I don't go for all of that psycho-babble crap, but I can tell when someone's not telling the truth about something."

Drew laughed to himself as he thought about all the times he'd been caught lying as a kid. His Dad would always take him aside, look at him with those piercing blue-green eyes as if looking for the truth in the crevice of his brain, and Drew would fall apart like a house of cards in hurricane winds.

"Wouldn't you have been scared if your friend had been stabbed?" Drew asked, playing the devil's advocate.

"Maybe. But not *that* scared."

"Even if he lost so much blood?" Drew kept pressing.

"Vic was hurting, no doubt. But it really wasn't life-threatening or anything that bad. If I were Vic's classmate, and graduating in three days, I'd have been giving him a ration of shit for the whole thing... especially if it was just a bar fight like they said... especially if Bob wasn't involved." He paused for effect. "Think about it, Drew. Bob was graduating from the Naval Academy in three days... four years of hell behind him. Believe me, I know what it feels like to get there... it's the greatest week of your life, and just about your greatest accomplishment to date. Every worry you've ever had seems to disappear. So, in spite of what happened to Vic, Bob should have been on top of the world. If nothing else, you'd think he'd have been razzing Vic about the whole thing. There's a big difference between being scared for a friend and being scared for yourself. And Bob Grady was scared for himself. I know it. That's why he kept stuttering. In fact, if it wasn't for the seriousness of Vic's wound, it would have been almost comical."

Drew parked, they gathered the bags from the back, and walked across the parking lot to the terminal. While interested in Bob's stuttering, Drew had other questions to get out of the way first.

"So why did they come to you?" Drew asked as they started up the low inclined ramp leading to the terminal.

"Vic said he was scared the Commandant might delay his graduation or put a letter of reprimand in his service records if he found out about the bar fight."

Before Drew could ask a follow-up question the Old Man was elaborating. "And, knowing the Academy, he was probably right. Some sort of disciplinary action probably would have been taken against Vic if things happened as he said."

The Old Man stared into Drew's eyes. "I told you some things never change. So anyway, that's why they came to me instead of a hospital. They knew I was a surgeon, they knew I wasn't one of those Navy diggity-dogs, and they figured I would keep it on the down-low. I had a reputation as one of the *cooler* officers."

They made their way through the terminal to the ticket counter and Drew's father continued his explanation. "Anyway, at the time, it all sounded legitimate. And maybe it was. Unfortunately, I've always had this strange feeling there was another more pressing reason why they wanted to keep it quiet."

Drew pondered the whole story. "How come you never went to the police with what you knew?" He tried to say it in such a way that his Dad wouldn't feel like he'd done the wrong thing.

"For one thing, I didn't find out about the disappearance until almost a week after it happened."

"Why not? I went back and checked the Annapolis Gazette and Baltimore Sun. Her disappearance made the front page on Monday, two days after it happened, two days before graduation."

"You're right. Only I wasn't in Annapolis that Monday, or for the rest of the week for that matter. Six hours after stitching up Vic, I was on a plane to New Orleans for a medical conference. I didn't return to Annapolis until Friday, two days *after* graduation. That's when I first heard about the disappearance."

"So when you heard about it, did you think there might be a connection to Vic and Bob?" Drew asked as the two made their way through the security checkpoint.

The Old Man shrugged at the obvious question as he watched Drew walk through the metal detector. When Drew emerged on the other side, he answered. "Sure I thought about it. But by the same token, I convinced myself that Bob and Vic probably weren't involved. I mean, let's face it, in terms of probability, they probably weren't. You said so yourself, just a minute ago."

Drew nodded.

The Old Man continued. "I didn't want to damage their careers if I was wrong-- you know, just the inference." The Old Man paused. Even after 36 years that rationalization troubled him. "Believe me, many times since then, I wished I had done something. But obviously I didn't know for sure, and I still don't. Now, knowing that it was Allie's mom-- which, of course, I never knew before-- I guess I wish I'd have taken the chance a long time ago. The fact you're involved, and seem to be at a dead end, makes me feel like I should tell you what I know."

Drew's mind was already in fourth gear thinking of the possibilities and the associated consequences of the longshot theory. "Have you ever thought about what this might mean, Dad?"

"You mean that Vic or Bob might have been involved?"

Drew nodded.

"Of course I have. We're talking about a serious crime here. And when you add Vic Graves and Bob Grady to the equation, we're talking about an even more serious situation. I can tell you this," the Old Man transitioned, "whenever I see Vic or Bob on t.v., or quoted in the papers, I think about that Sunday morning. And more times than not, I wonder if I should have done something different. It's bothered me a lot. But I'll say this: I've never heard Bob Grady stutter since that morning... and that's kind of weird."

As they reached their gate, Drew looked to be deep in thought. He motioned towards two relatively isolated seats near the window. His Dad continued talking as they sat down. "Anyway, you said you needed new information. Well, that's what I gave you. I just hope for Allie's sake that you can make something out of it. She reminds me so much of Lori that I just can't help but feel sorry for her."

Allie was indeed like Lori-- an amalgam of diametric qualities that formed the perfect whole: outwardly tough-minded, inwardly soft and gentle; serious and responsible, yet at the same time playful and carefree. Drew only wished she were able to love him like he did her.

"Pretty wild theory, eh?" the Old Man said with raised eyebrows and a wry grin.

"Unbelievable, Dad."

The Old Man had the look of a man who knew an even bigger secret.

Drew didn't miss the look. "What?"

"If you think what I've told you is unbelievable, you might die when I tell you the rest."

TWELVE

You have no idea what
you're up against.
--Demi Moore in *Disclosure*

"The rest?" Drew repeated back. He couldn't conceive of anything more incredible.

The Old Man dropped the even bigger bombshell. "If Bob and Vic were involved then chances are so were Jack Kurtz and Tony Moretti."

"President Jack Kurtz?" Drew repeated back as if to confirm what he'd heard. He looked around to see if anyone else had heard this. "Why do you say that?"

"Because Jack and Tony and Vic and Bob were nearly inseparable. They were roommates ever since plebe summer."

Drew's mind was reeling. "Wow. So you really think Jack could have been involved too?"

The Old Man shrugged. "Like I said Drew, I don't know if any of them were involved. All I know is what I've told you. The rest is just speculation. But you have to admit, it's kind of interesting."

"Interesting's an understatement-- this is like something you'd read about in a paperback novel. But it's almost too outrageous... maybe even for fiction." Drew paused. "To think America's greatest President ever and three of his top aides could have been involved in something like this. Jeez. Talk about explosive."

"I don't know if its truth or fiction, but I do know that over the course of my 75 years on this earth the line between the two gets blurrier and blurrier. There's almost nothing I wouldn't believe. "

As Drew considered his Dad's theory, questions ran across his brain like stock quotes on

a tickertape... about dark secrets... and shared secrets... and weird, almost inexplicable relationships among a President and his top advisors. But mostly, Drew wondered how he could determine if this crazy theory was crazy or not.

Accompanying the questions in Drew's head were answers to questions that had escaped him for over three years. Finally, after what seemed like a few minutes, he said, "You know what, Dad?"

The Old Man looked over.

"The more I think about it, the more I think you might have something."

The Old Man could almost see the sparks of speculation jumping from neuron to neuron in Drew's mind. "Why? What are you thinking?"

Drew's mind was indeed jumping... sprouting ideas like a magical beanstalk. "It makes sense the way the four of them have stuck together. Think about it. Tony Moretti is probably the worst choice for a Chief-of-Staff imaginable. He's abrasive with the press, a womanizer, and he's got a checkered past for shady lobbying with Congress. I could probably go on and on, but you get my point-- he's a big embarrassment."

The Old Man nodded. "Characterizing Tony as an embarrassment might be the understatement of the day. He's certainly not the kind of guy you'd want as a right hand man, out on the front lines talking with the press, working with Congress."

"Exactly. And the way Jack goes out of his way to give Tony credit. Remember when Jack decided to embargo imports from South America?"

"Un-huh."

"Well, a source of mine inside the White House told me Tony tried to talk Jack out of that. Said Tony actually got in a shouting match with Jack in his private office. It got so loud and hostile that the secret service agents almost had to break in and keep Tony away from Jack. A couple months later, after South America agreed to the peace payments and Jack put an end to the embargo, Jack went out of his way to thank Tony for his solid advice on the matter. I knew something wasn't right about the two of them. And now... the rumor Tony's the front-runner for the VP slot... does that make any sense?"

"It might if Tony and Jack were involved in killing Melody Morgan 36 years ago," the Old Man responded.

"And Vic Graves as Director of the FBI?" Drew rolled his eyes. "Hell, Vic's probably the shadiest man in government. Would you trust him to run this country's secret police?"

"I wouldn't trust him to run a day care center."

Drew continued. "And Vic and Jack aren't exactly the best of friends if you believe some of the stories that have circulated about the two. Did you read George Will's book?"

The Old Man nodded. Of course he'd read it. There wasn't a book about the Academy or written by a fellow grad he hadn't read.

Drew continued. "Of the three serving under Jack, Bob's the only reasonable one. And as Jack's senior legal advisor, even he's way out of his league." Drew paused for dramatic effect. "So why in God's name did Jack Kurtz choose Vic Graves, a guy he really doesn't like, to head the FBI, Tony Moretti, the idiotic womanizer, as his Chief-of-Staff, and Bob Grady, the country-bumpkin lawyer, as his senior legal advisor?"

"Classmate loyalty," the Old Man volunteered. Now he was playing the devil's advocate. "At least that's what all the editorials said after Jack appointed Tony Moretti."

"Come on, Dad, you don't really believe that, do you? Jack Kurtz is an independent if there ever was one. He's never felt any obligation to anyone except himself. Remember when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? He fired two of his own classmates for pretty minor screw-ups."

"One for accepting a \$300 watch from a contractor and the other for having an affair with a woman who told him she was separated when she wasn't."

"Right," Drew said.

"Not really the most egregious mistakes," the Old Man agreed. "But, no matter how you slice it, you've got to admit that Jack's done one helluva job."

"In spite of Vic, Bob, and Tony," Drew added.

As the boarding announcement came on, Drew continued with his original train of thought. "So, the question remains, why did Jack ask Vic and Tony and Bob to be on his staff?"

"Maybe he didn't have any choice."

"Right," Drew said. "Because if Jack and those three were involved in Melody Morgan's disappearance-- as your theory goes-- then the three could easily have forced Jack to put them in any job they wanted." A thought flashed in Drew's head and he wondered why Tony was the frontrunner as the choice for VP? Why not Vic? Or even Bob? Why Tony? And how did the others feel about that? Were they mad? Did they feel slighted? Or did they all agree that Tony was the best one? Drew filed the questions away.

"It's certainly a more believable explanation than classmate loyalty," the Old Man agreed. "So you think they pressured Jack to put them in their current positions?"

"*Pressured* isn't the word I was thinking, Dad. They probably demanded that Jack put them in their positions."

The Old Man tried to think of a flaw in the theory. "I read an article in the Post last year where Bob Grady explained that Jack asked him to serve."

"So? I'll bet if you go back and look at all the press releases and public statements about Jack and the three of them, every one of them will say something like that. It's the perfect answer because it raises no suspicions. It all becomes what Jack wants. I'll bet if Jack had any choice in the matter, those three would be his last choices. But since he doesn't really have a choice, he puts as positive a spin on it as he can... makes it really sound like classmate loyalty. Plausible denial at its best."

"You can't argue with it."

"It's a helluva theory," Drew said, shaking his head as he began to develop an affection for it as if it were a newborn.

"But still a helluva longshot. The big question is what to do with the theory?"

Drew hadn't gotten that far in his thinking yet. He was still looking for fatal flaws in the theory, wondering if he'd overlooked some glaring aspect. 'What to do' was something he'd have the entire time in Vegas to think about.

"The problem is there's no proof," Drew blurted out, "and no clear way to get any."

"Then you have to try and find proof."

Drew nodded. Another question popped into his head. "Why haven't you ever pursued this before, Dad?"

"I don't know. I guess I wondered what it would have accomplished. Like you said, I guess I never felt like I had a personal stake in it. Now, with you and Allie involved, I guess now, maybe, I do." He paused. "Plus, what info did I have? The same as you have. And it's just speculation... no hard facts, no evidence, nothing to prove that they might have been the ones behind this. It's a crap shoot at best. Plus, what if I had pursued it? What would it have proved? Would it have been the best thing for the country? You, yourself, agreed that Jack has done an unbelievably great job. What if the theory were correct? What then? Blow the whistle on Jack? Would that be good? Would that make the wrong right?"

Drew remembered similar words Allie had said just a week before, when they had talked about finding dirt on Jack. "So you don't think I should pursue it?"

"I'm not telling you one way or the other, Drew. You do what you have to do."

It wasn't like his Old Man to be so un-opinionated. "Why are you so ambivalent, Dad? If they were involved, they should be held accountable."

The Old Man stared into Drew's eyes as if to say that the answer might not be so black and white. "Maybe. Have you ever heard the story about Coventry?"

Drew shook his head.

"It's a city in England," the Old Man explained. "In April of 1944, the British had just cracked the secret German code, and from one of the first messages they were able to decipher, they learned the Germans were about to launch a huge air strike on Coventry. So the Brits were faced with a terrible dilemma: whether or not to evacuate citizens from the city. If they evacuated, the German's would probably figure that their code had been cracked and they'd change it. If they didn't evacuate, many would die. But at least the Germans wouldn't know that the Brits had cracked their code. With D-Day just a few months away, the Allies knew that having the German code would give them a huge advantage. In fact, knowing the German code had the potential to save a lot of lives in the future because it could have even shortened the war. The Brits were forced to decide whether to remain silent and preserve the secret for a bigger, more important day, or save the citizens of Coventry."

"What'd they do?"

"Outwardly, nothing. Keeping the secret about the German code was paramount because it had the potential to save hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of lives. But they were able to alert the citizens of Coventry to hunker down. That, in and of itself, saved a lot of lives without giving away the secret that the Allies knew the German code."

"So basically they turned it into a win-win."

The Old Man nodded. "Exactly."

"So if Jack was involved in the disappearance, do you think a win-win is possible?"

"Anything's possible, Drew. You know that as well as anyone."

"So what do you think I should do?"

"I don't know. But I do know this: whatever you do, I know it'll be the right thing."

They were words every son would like to hear from a father.

As the two men boarded the plane, both seemed lighter on their feet. The Old Man was glad to have shared this long-held secret, and Drew was glad for the lead, no matter how big a longshot. At least he was getting some sort of a chance at bat, a chance to get a hit for Allie. But he also knew a lot of things could happen in a plate appearance... he could still strike out... or worse, get beamed.

The flight was intense for Drew and for nearly four hours he speculated as to what might have happened to four midshipman and a 24 year-old girl nearly 36 years earlier. And although it was just speculation, it was cool speculation. Even Drew had to admit that much. Plus, Drew loved speculation. Without speculators, human life would become a stagnant pool and human intellect would cease to be necessary. Man would become nothing more than sheep or cattle.

Speculation was, after all, the seed from which ideas grew. Sometimes the seeds of speculation would grow into something real, sometimes they wouldn't. Not knowing which was what made it worth pursuing. And if something did grow, not knowing what might result-- monster or beauty-- made it doubly interesting.

Speculation removed constraints and made anything possible. Everything that ever was or ever will be starts as a spark in a speculator's eye. Without speculation there would be no dreamers, no "what if" questions, and no answers. That's why, in Drew's mind, the greatest thinker wasn't necessarily the one with the answer, but more times than not, the one with the question. What if man could fly? Could he then walk on the moon? Could he then someday find other life in the vastness of space? And what if lead could be mined from the earth and made into knives and guns and bullets? Could other natural elements such as uranium be mined to make even greater weapons? Could weapons of even greater mass destruction be made?

What if a group of four young midshipmen were somehow involved in the death of a young girl 36 years ago? So what? Well, what if one of those young midshipmen someday became the greatest President in history? Then what? What if Drew came up with this as a credible theory? What should he do? Should he follow through? Should he attempt to bring the great man down? Would that make restitution? Would justice be served? Or would the net result be an injustice-- the loss of a great leader? Would the American people care what their President had done 36 years ago? Would they want to know? If it were true, would they want a murderer as their President? What if he was the greatest President ever? Was it the 21st century version of Coventry? Would the United States be better with or without Jack Kurtz as President? Was win-win possible?

The questions brought about by such speculation were endless and significant. Drew knew many of the questions but few of the answers... except for one. Fortunately, it was the answer to the most important question. He knew he couldn't just sit on his hands as long as it involved Allie. Plus, the possibility was too intriguing for passivity. One thing a speculator can't do is nothing.

By the time the flight had touched down in Vegas, Drew had come up with two options-- one good and one a joke.

The joke option was to go public with his theory. Coming from him, a well-respected investigator with a reputation as a straight-shooter with no hidden agendas, it would certainly generate a lot of hype. But hype would probably be about all. Talk is cheap, accusations even cheaper. And accusations were all Drew really had. With no hard facts to link any of the four to the crime, Drew knew it would be the word of the four highest ranking members of the most successful Executive Branch in history versus his speculation. That was a no-brainer... while speculation can be interesting, it was no substitute for facts. Facts convict, speculation doesn't. And Drew could already envision the scene that would transpire if he went forth with the joke option...

...in response to Drew's allegations, the White House spokesman would issue a statement such as this: "these allegations are nothing more than a sensational, tabloid-like accusation aimed at undermining the President's credibility in an election year. There's absolutely no truth whatsoever to such an incredible, unfounded, unsupported charge."

That's probably as far as it would get, and in the end, Drew would look like the boy who cried wolf. And crying wolf wasn't Drew's style. Besides the certain ineffectiveness, such an option lacked finesse.

Fortunately, Drew had the good option. Preying on the guilty conscience, it would be a Pearl Harbor sneak attack.

As to the potential moral issue of going forward-- the Coventry-like dilemma-- Drew wasn't worried about that... not yet at least. First, he had to try and crack the code. If he could do that, there would be plenty of time to worry about what to do with the knowledge.

On the craps table that night, Drew had a most unbelievable hot streak, and with each roll and successful pass the excitement around the table grew. So, too, did the stack of chips in front of Drew and the feeling of something big. Nine passes in a row!

Drew remembered his words to his Dad on the way to the airport-- "I bet I'd have better odds throwing ten passes in a row at the craps table tonight than coming across any new, significant information about Allie's mom. Now, here he was, with that new information in his head, and nine passes in a row! Life, it seemed, couldn't be better.

Drew winked at his Dad. "Shall we press the bet? Go for ten in a row?"

The Old Man smiled. "Let's do it!"

Drew nodded as he pushed the mound of black \$100 chips forward to the Pass Line. What had begun as an innocent \$10 bet had grown into about \$5,000. Why not risk it? After all, this wasn't about the money. It was about ten in a row... about a longshot come true.

As Drew cradled the dice in his palm, he gave them a couple shakes. *This is for Allie*, he thought to himself as the two-deep crowd began to yell and scream in anticipation of his roll. Drew felt almost supernatural—unstoppable-- and with a quick flick of his wrist, Drew sent the dice flying through the air towards the opposite end of the table. "Yo, seven!" Drew yelled out.

The dice struck the far wall of the table and careened back towards Drew, coming back almost as far as they'd been thrown, wobbling and spinning on the green felt as if unsure which way to fall. When they stopped, they stared back up at Drew-- snake eyes. The crowd groaned as the stickman swept the chips away, and Drew felt a shiver go through him, like an omen... so close yet so far.

THIRTEEN

I think of her every
waking moment.
—Gary Cooper in *Ball of Fire*

Having cut his Vegas vacation short by a day in order to get back to D.C. and potentially take down America's greatest President based on a wild and crazy theory, Drew fidgeted in his first class seat as the 757 taxied toward the runway. Statistically, Drew knew flying was the safest mode of transportation, but during takeoffs and periods of heavy turbulence or rough weather, statistics provided little comfort, and Drew hated the idea of sitting passively as a passenger, without any control of the yoke and throttle. Whether that qualified him as a control freak, he didn't know. Whatever it was called, when Lori and Luke were alive, Drew's biggest fear was dying in one of those horrible, fiery plane crashes.

Gravity was constant and unapologetic and Drew knew it wouldn't take much for one of those fiery crashes to happen. If the pilot, the mechanic, the riveter, the engine mount inspector, or the air traffic controller--just to name a few-- failed in their duties, a plane could plummet like the 250,000 pound stainless steel tube it was. The idea was always a bit unsettling to Drew and invariably he would say a prayer before every take-off.

But after Lori and Luke died, everything changed, and Drew began to fly without fear and prayer. After all, only his life was left to lose, which didn't seem like much. He felt terrible for it, and deep down, he longed to fear flying, to have a real reason to live.

Now, as the pilot revved the engines and the plane began rolling, those anxious feelings about crashing and dying crept into Drew's mind, and for the first time in more than seven years, he was actually happy to be scared. As they accelerated down the runway and the majestic hotels on the strip blurred by, Drew even whispered a quick Our Father and Hail Mary. He was thinking about the crazy theory, the even crazier plan he'd formulated, but mostly the not-so-crazy Allie. One thing was sure-- he didn't want to leave her behind. Not yet... not with this unbelievable theory in his head... maybe not ever.

Four hours later, Drew was back on solid ground and excited for three reasons-- one, he was going to see Allie in just three hours; two, they would be taking the first step in

corroborating the crazy theory; and three, he loved good Chinese food.

For the first time in over 20 years, Drew felt nervous as he reached for a doorbell, and although it wasn't a date, somehow it felt like one. But before his index finger was on the button, the door opened and Allie stood before him. Dressed in faded blue jeans with strategic slits in the knees and thighs, a Hard Rock Café tee shirt from Punta Cana, and holding a clear drink with a lemon wedge on top, she looked even cooler than normal... and younger, too. He felt old in his conservative khaki chinos and black polo shirt.

"Hey stranger," she said beaming, "come on in." Although she hadn't seen him in three days, it felt like a lot longer, and that comfortable feeling of being around him returned quickly and enveloped her. She couldn't pinpoint the reason why, but she always felt better around him, as if he would always be there for her, to protect her.

Having never seen her in anything but work clothes and Friday minis, Drew was dazzled by her in jeans. Had he told her how much he loved the look of a pretty woman in blue jeans?

He stepped into the small foyer of the two story townhouse. "Sorry I'm a little late. The lady at the Chinese place couldn't find a pen for my autograph."

"Your autograph? For what? Your book?"

He chuckled. "No. My Visa card."

She smiled as she took the bag of Chinese from him, almost weighing it in her hands. It felt light. "You didn't forget the eggrolls did you?"

"No, dear." He missed saying 'dear,' even if he didn't say it with complete seriousness.

"Dear?" she said aloud as she led him down two steps and into the sunken living room. "Hmmm. Does that mean I'm gonna get my bonus?"

"Not necessarily. But it does mean you're probably not going to be fired."

"Probably not going to be fired?" she repeated back aghast, "I'm trying to picture what you'd do without me."

"Probably not be scared of flying."

By her facial reaction, she clearly didn't understand.

"It's a long story," he explained. "I'll tell you about it sometime. But don't worry, it's a good thing."

She filed his answer away. "So I guess that means I must be doing something right."

"Yeah. That, and I can't afford a sexual harassment suit." He chuckled. "So, did you miss me at work Friday and today?"

"If you want me to say yes, I will, Mr. Bonus Man, but I have to admit, it was kind of nice having the office all to myself."

"So did you get any work done besides shoe shopping and surfing the web?"

"Of course. You know me, I pretty much run the office." She winked.

"Did any real work get done?"

"Un-huh. Verizon came out today and installed a new high speed internet line. The guy who installed it was really nice. He even came here and put in a new higher speed modem for me... for free." Her voice was excited. "He just left. He said he'd put one in your home, too, if you want."

He was probably nice because he wanted to get in your pants. That's how guys are. I'm sure he'll charge me. Drew shrugged.

She looked in the bag and saw the eggrolls. "So, how much money did you lose in Vegas?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Lose? What are you talking about? I won."

"At the airport you said you lost..."

"I lied." He was grinning mischievously.

"So I might get a bonus then?"

"We'll see."

She perked up. "Well, in that case, I just might be a little nicer to you."

"What goes around comes around."

"And your Dad's coming back home tomorrow?"

"Yep."

"Did he have a good time?"

"Pretty much... except for one little incident at the Roulette Wheel."

She took the bait. "What incident?"

"He got in an argument with the lady spinning the wheel. He thought he won a bet that she said he lost."

She didn't buy his low-key tone. It sounded serious. "What kind of argument? What happened?"

"Oh, it's kind of stupid," Drew said, now even more a matter-of-fact. "Dad has this thing about the number 6. For some reason he's just never liked it. He thinks it should be considered odd, not even. The lady at the Roulette wheel didn't agree. So when he bet 'odd' and 6 came up, she took his money. Dad got mad."

"Are you serious?"

"What do you think?" His grin was mischievous again.

"Sometimes I never know with you, Drew." She gestured towards the couch, "Have a seat." Then she continued on past the glass dining room table, up to steps, and under an arched entrance into the kitchen. "You want something to drink?" she called out over her shoulder.

Drew eased down onto the beige overstuffed couch and reminded himself to be witty. "What's a young, single girl who gets by on a measly 100K a year got to offer?"

She opened the white wooden shutters over the breakfast bar and leaned out towards the living room. It was time for her to take control. "More than a bald old man who makes 100K a month could probably handle." She said it with the glee of youth. Proud of her snappy comeback, she disappeared from the breakfast bar opening before he could respond.

Ouch! "What's that supposed to mean?" he called out as he looked around the townhouse. While he knew the place from the pictures she kept at work, it was homier in person. It almost had the feel of an English cottage. The dark hardwood floors were covered by wool throw rugs; the couch and loveseat were flanked by dark cherry end tables; a glass coffee table made from a weathered rectangular window frame was in the middle of the room; opposite the couch, a shaker-style armoire concealed the flat screen; several Monet prints in golden wood frames adorned the walls, while on the long wall above him, a beautiful six foot stained glass piece was suspended from the ceiling, illuminated from behind by spotlights; forest green drapes framed the two ceiling-to-floor windows, and Victorian floor lamps provided a soft but intimate glow; on the mantle above the stone fireplace, several candles burned. The place was comfortable, yet beautiful and elegant, just like Allie.

He heard the click of ice in a glass from the kitchen, then her voice as she responded to his question, "It means I've got more to offer than you could probably handle." She was back at the breakfast bar grinning mischievously.

"Are we still talking about drinks?"

"Drew, I'm talking about anything and everything-- whatever it is, I'm sure I've got more than you could handle." She winked at him in an exaggerated, cocky fashion. Normally, in the office, where he was king, he did most of the winking. Outside the office, however, it appeared their roles might be reversed.

He was thumbing through the latest edition of the *Washingtonian* magazine and looked up as she returned from the kitchen holding two clear glasses with lemon slices floating on top. She plopped down effortlessly on the couch next to him without spilling a drop and handed him his drink.

"What's this?" He fumbled as he took the glass and a few drops hit the cushion. He quickly wiped it with his hand.

The smell of her sweet perfume danced in the air as she leaned towards him and whispered semi-seductively, "It's a gin and tonic, with a twist of lemon and a dash of my magic potion. I use it on all the men who come calling at my door." She was smiling sly again and Drew wondered why she was acting saucier than tabasco. "The potion relaxes them and put them under my power." She gestured with her one free hand like a sorcerer.

Give me a double, Drew thought as he sniffed at the drink. It smelled like a triple. Either that, or it was strong on the potion... or perhaps both. Drew wondered if putting him 'under her power' meant getting him drunk. A small sip caused him to shake throughout. "Whoa! I'm warning you now," he said, "if I drink all of this I may be too drunk to drive home." He wanted to hear her response.

"Don't worry. I have a big, comfy bed..." she said with raised eyebrows.

Drew's heart jumped, but he didn't respond.

"... and a small uncomfortable futon for you," she added with a chuckling grin.

She was too cool. He loved that.

"You hungry now?" she asked.

"I'm always hungry for good Chinese."

"Me too." She got up from the couch and walked back towards the kitchen. "So tell me why you wanted me to get those old movies of my mom?" she called out from the breakfast bar.

He ignored her question, and instead asked one of his own. "How many movies did you get?"

"Two. There's one of her playing with me and one from a Halloween party about seven months before she disappeared. They're 8 millimeter."

She walked back a few minutes later carrying a large wooden tray with two plates of Chinese, bowls of soup, and chopsticks.

"You have a projector?"

"No," she answered, as she set the tray down on the glass-topped coffee table, "I hold the film up against the light and whizz it by my eyes."

He chuckled. "You really ought to get one. The movies are so much more enjoyable to watch."

"Yes, I have a projector. The library loans them out." He watched her walk over to the foyer closet in jeans that would have been too tight for any daughter of his. Taking another sip, he reminded himself she wasn't his daughter.

She returned with the projector and set it down on the floor in front of the coffee table. He thought it looked complicated.

"Umm, Allie, can I get a spoon for my soup?"

"Oh, sorry." Then she was off to the kitchen again.

"Which movie do you want to watch first," she said, returning with the spoons.

"Let's watch you and your mom first."

"Why that one? She's more herself in the party movie. In the one with me, she's kind of boring... you know, the typical mother cooing at her baby, that kind of thing. In the Halloween one, she's more like you'd expect a 24 year-old girl to be."

Then, having watched the movie earlier that afternoon, Allie corrected herself, "Maybe more than you'd expect a 24 year-old girl to be. Suffice it to say, my mom was probably more at ease rolling around naked with a guy, than rolling around with a naked baby. You'll see what I mean."

"I want to see what you were like as a baby."

"Why? That's not relevant, is it?"

"You need to quit thinking like a lawyer. This has nothing to do with relevance. It has to do with curiosity."

"What kind of curiosity?"

He was beginning to relax even further as he sipped the last bit of his drink. "My curiosity. I want to see what you looked like as a baby."

At least he was showing some interest in her. "Why? What are you expecting?"

"Aw, you know, a cute, blonde with chubby cheeks and bright blue eyes."

How chubby? She was forever weight-conscious. "Is that a compliment?"

"What do you think?"

"I never know with you."

"Good."

"Why good?"

"Because that's the way I like it."

"Why? Are you scared I might get to know the *real* Drew Matthews?"

"Maybe."

"And you're afraid I might not like the real Drew Matthews?"

"No. I'm afraid I'll lose my mystique."

She nearly burst out laughing. "Hah. I'm way past your *mystique* Drew. Don't forget, I'm with you every day at work." She took her right hand and made the 'knock knock' sign next to his temple. "Hello?" She called out loudly. "Is anyone home? Remember me, Drew? The one that loads your stapler, retrieves the files you accidentally erase, gets you a new keyboard and buys you Sippy cups."

He smiled back at her. She did a lot more than that.

She continued her list. "The one that picks up the sweaty towels and t-shirts you throw in the corner after your work out. And listens to all your dead lawyer and dumb blonde jokes." She made the knocking gesture again. "Hello..."

"Okay, enough already," he said good-naturedly, "I get the point." He loved being around her. Drew looked down at his plate. "Hey, can I get a fork, too?"

"Oh, right, sorry. I forgot about your dexterity, or lack thereof." She was walking back into the kitchen.

"Actually, I know how to use chopsticks," Drew called out to her backside. He moved onto the floor in front of the coffee table and started to load the 8 millimeter film into the projector, determined to demonstrate a modicum of dexterity. Unfortunately, the buzz from the strong drink wasn't helping.

"So why do you want a fork then?" she asked when she returned.

"Actually, I don't really *want* one," he said, looking up from the projector.

"Then why'd you ask for one?"

"Truthfully?"

"No, Drew. Let's keep lying to each other. That way our relationship will always be trite and meaningless and we'll always keep each other guessing." She rolled her eyes. "Of course, truthfully."

He hoped she wouldn't think he was a dirty old man. "I kind of like watching you walk around in your tight jeans," he answered sheepishly. He looked down and saw he was losing the battle with the film.

Really? "I always wondered if you were a dirty old man." She said it good-naturedly.

"So that makes me a dirty old man?"

"Truthfully?"

He smiled and nodded.

"No. In fact, I'm flattered. I thought you never noticed me."

Notice you? I notice every detail about her-- the way your blue eyes light up and sparkle when you're excited, the way your hair frames your face when you talk on the phone, the way your nose scrunches when you're unsure, the way you sip coffee and chew doughnuts so

gorgeously... everything. Don't you know that? Sometimes I think I'm obsessed with you. Sometimes I think I'm falling in love with you...

He looked up from the spaghetti mess he'd made with the film. "Okay, maybe I'm not very dexterous," he conceded.

She moved in to help. "Here Mr. Right Field, let me do it." She began to un-snake the mess, and in less time than he'd taken to mess it up, she had it loaded correctly. "See? What would you do without me?"

"I already told you. I wouldn't be scared of flying."

"Oh, right... that again. You're going to tell me about that sometime," she reminded him.

He nodded. "Right. Anyway, I really do wish I were better with my hands." He sulked as he sat back down on the couch.

"Don't pout, Drew. It even took me a couple of tries to figure it out," she said as she started the 36 year-old film.

"At least you figured it out. I'm not sure I would have."

"Not even with your *mystique* to help you?" She turned out the light.

He made a mocking face she couldn't see in the darkness.

FOURTEEN

Love comes to everybody in many different ways.
Attraction is always the first thing, no?
But love must be more than that.
It must be magic.
--Julio Iglesias

As soon as she sat down on the couch next to him, the living room wall across from them lit up with the grainy black and white image of baby Allie and her young, soon-to-be-missing mom. "You've put on weight Allie," Drew said with a chuckle as he watched her crawling around on a knitted throw rug in a one-piece pink outfit with feetsies.

"I've also learned to use the potty, my pj's don't have feet in them anymore, and I can bathe myself," she countered.

He pictured her relaxing in a bubbly tub, looking beautiful. "Drew," she'd call out whimsically, "would you be a darling and wash my back?"

He'd kneel down next to the tub and begin to gently wash her.

"Ummm, that feels good," she'd say.

He'd smile at her, happy to be needed. "I thought you told me you could bathe yourself," he'd say.

She'd raise her eyebrows and smile wickedly. "I lied. The fact is, I need you, Drew." Then she'd pull him into the tub with her and kiss him wildly...

He looked over at her. She seemed lost in thought, as well.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Nothing," she responded quickly... too quickly.

He challenged her. "Nobody's thinking nothing when they say they're thinking nothing."

She laughed at his tongue twister. She bet he couldn't say that three times quickly... maybe she'd challenge him after another drink?

"So what were you just thinking?" he persisted.

"Promise you won't laugh?"

He crossed his heart.

"I was thinking of soaking in a big bubbly bath..." She paused and looked away, as if embarrassed. "... with you," she tacked on.

He felt light-headed-- perhaps there was potion in the drinks. *Could she read thoughts?* He returned his attention to the movie on the wall. The baby up there was now a sexy woman beside him. On the wall, she had a shoe in her hand and was putting it in her mouth.

"But I was cute, wasn't I?" she said, now somewhat embarrassed about the bath comment.

"Yeah, especially when you put that shoe in your mouth." Drew smiled as he thought of something witty. "Ummmm," he said in a baby girl's voice, "who says they're just for walking in. Tastes great, less filling."

"Ha, ha, Drew. I guess I must have known that I'd end up working for someone so cheap I'd have to lick his shoes to get a raise. I must have been practicing."

"So when do we get to the proverbial bath scene?"

"Sorry, boss, but there isn't one. Please don't tell me you like to see little girls naked."

"Depends on what you mean by little." The gin was really getting to him, and even in the dim light he could see her eyebrows raising.

Allie's mom came into full view on the wall and Drew studied her as the camera zoomed in on her smiling face. She looked like a hippie version of Allie, but taller and skinnier, with a more elongated face. "Your mom was beautiful," he said as he reached for his drink and took another sip. He was almost finished with it.

"She really was," Allie agreed with mixed pride and sadness.

"You look just like her," he mumbled. The gin was also giving him some confidence-- at least a mumbled compliment was better than no compliment at all.

"Really? I can never tell what you think of me."

"Seriously? Come on Allie, you know you're a good looking girl." He called almost every female younger than him 'girl', and while it may have bothered some, Allie actually like the label. She knew it wasn't meant to be demeaning.

"No I don't," she answered, and then thought about her answer. "Well, maybe. But I never knew *you* thought *I* was good looking. You're always so neutral when it comes to me."

He didn't think he was. But if she did, so be it. He decided to go along with her. "I have to be," he answered.

"Why?"

"Because you scare me." That was definitely true.

"No woman should scare you, Drew. You're one of the 50 most eligible bachelors in Washington."

"What?"

She laughed at his naivety. "It's in *Washingtonian* magazine this month-- the 50 most eligible bachelors in Washington. You made the list."

"Really? Me?"

"Yeah. The magazine just came out today." She grabbed the magazine from the coffee table and held it up in the darkened room. "You'll probably have a hundred messages on your answering machine when you get back home tonight. Pretty wild, eh?"

"Pretty pathetic. That goes to show how much *Washingtonian* magazine knows."

"Drew, why can't you just go easy on yourself? You're a great guy." She paused to let that sink in. It also gave her time to decide whether to bring up the past. She decided she would. "You couldn't have helped what happened to Lori and Luke. Just like my mom probably couldn't have helped what happened to her. Like Forrest Gump said, 'shit happens,' and in spite of it, you deserve to be happy."

He took another long pull on the drink and returned his attention to the movie, to the cute baby crawling happily around on the wall. That same baby was now grown-up, sitting next to him, and giving him advice he knew was right. Sure, he was worthy of his suffering-- he didn't doubt that-- but why couldn't he be happy? Why did he have to feel like a martyr?

"I know," he answered. "But real life's not as simple as Forrest Gump makes it sounds like on the big screen. I've never been able to forgive myself for not being there to protect them. That was my job."

"Drew, you did everything you could. It was an accident. But you did what it took to get justice."

"I guess." He paused to watch baby Allie crawling around on the wall. "What number?" he whispered.

"What number what?"

"On the list of the 50 most eligible bachelors. What number was I?" He was grinning impishly.

"Oh, come on, Drew. I was just joking, just trying to make you feel better about yourself."

There went his ego again. He grew silent and returned to the movie.

She watched him deflate and quickly felt sorry for him. He was so damn easy to mess with when it came to things outside the office. She leaned close to him and whispered, "44."

He could almost taste the sweetness of her breath. When he drank, his breath turned into a still. Hers seemed to turn into sweet nectar.

"Serious?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I'm the one who doesn't know when you're lying."

"So?" she replied.

"So that scares me."

"Why?"

"Because, if I don't know when you're lying to me, I'll be at a tremendous disadvantage. The only thing I could possibly have over you is a mental edge. And if I don't have that, then I'm at your mercy."

She liked that thought. "What would be so bad about that? Do you think I would take advantage of you?"

"I hope not." Drew definitely felt a role reversal this evening. Maybe she wasn't joking

about the potion.

"So trust me," she said.

"I guess I don't have any choice."

"You're right, Mister Bonus Man," she said, chuckling. She changed the subject. "So what do you think of me as a baby?"

"I'm not sure if you were cuter then or now."

"I don't know about cute, but I'm a lot more fun now." She rose from the couch, hit the lights, and made her way back to the kitchen to freshen up their drinks.

As she did, Drew managed to load the second reel into the projector. He was proud of himself.

Returning from the kitchen, she noted his correct loading of the film. "See Drew, you are tractable."

Tractable. Only she would think to call him tractable. He liked that she was so comfortable around him. He took a sip of the new drink. It was even stronger than the first one. Ouch!

She noted his nearly full plate. "If you don't eat your dinner, there's no dessert," she said, her voice almost motherly.

Her words and her tone triggered a memory that caused his heart to sink... *he was sitting at the dinner table, with Lori across from him and Luke to his left. Luke was pushing around his peas with his fork, spreading them around to make it look like he'd eaten some... the old 'scatter-the-peas' trick. Lori didn't miss this. "I'm serious about eating up, Luke," she said. "If you don't eat your dinner there's no dessert."*

The memory sucked the air and silliness out of Drew and he took a deep breath to compensate. What would Lori think of the way he was acting if she could see him? He was 47, not 36. It wasn't right for him to be here now, laughing and joking and acting silly... at least not with them gone.

Allie missed the change in his demeanor. "Now you'll see my mom as she really was," she said, as she started the projector and killed the lights. "This is the Halloween party."

Almost immediately the quiet of Allie's living room was broken by loud 80's music, jumping bodies on a darkened dance floor, and the sounds of laughter and conversation. It looked and sounded like a fun party. As the camera panned across the dancing bodies, it focused on a corner of the room where a young girl, dressed up like an obvious hooker, was sitting on

Frankenstein's lap in a big lazy boy recliner. The hooker reached out with her right hand and curled her index finger, drawing the camera closer. No cameraman could have resisted that invitation, and the camera jiggled as it moved in on her. As the camera zoomed in, she smiled seductively, pursed her lips together in a big kiss, and licked her bright red lips.

"Meet the *real* Melody Morgan," Allie announced. "Hard to believe she's the same person you just saw crawling around on the floor with me, don't you think?"

"Quite a contrast," Drew replied, agreeing. Melody Morgan certainly didn't seem shy, and Drew couldn't help but think she'd have made a helluva hooker if she'd so chosen.

"I told you she was a *night person*."

"I guess I didn't really understand what you meant. But do you think it's really her, or the costume?"

"It's more her than anything. In fact, from everything I've learned about her-- from friends that knew her, even my grandma-- this was pretty typical of her. She was definitely not afraid to let loose... and she loved to party. I guess you'd say she was the prototypical hippie, flower child... wild, free, and somewhat of a nymphomaniac."

"Does her daughter have the same trait?" Drew asked without thinking. The words seemed to have come out of his mouth on their own. Forgive me, Lori, he thought, as he wondered what was really in the drink.

"Remember what you always say, Drew-- 'don't ask questions you don't think you'll like the answer to.' Do you really want to know?"

"Maybe".

"What if I said 'yes'?"

"I don't know," he responded, backing off now.

"What if I said 'no'?"

"I still don't know."

She laughed at his quick retreat. It was kind of nice to have the upper-hand with him at something. At the same time, she reminded herself to be gentle with him and not abuse her power. "Let's just say I'm probably not as wild as my mom." It was a safe response even though she wasn't sure whether it was true or not.

"Okay."

They returned their attention to the wall and the assortment of wild, long haired monsters, hookers, angels, devils, and other associated creatures of costume at the 1987 Halloween party. The thought struck Drew that Halloween costumes were as timeless as death and taxes.

There was one more scene of Allie's mom. In it, she was being interviewed by an Elvis Presley impersonator.

"Uh, thank you, thank you very much," Elvis said, talking into an imaginary microphone. "Hey baby, how 'bout a word with the King."

"Ummmm," she said, as she nuzzled up against his black leather jacket and stroked his slicked back jet-black hair, "how 'bout if we talk later Elvis." She started to take his jacket off. "Right now I'd like to make you howl just like a hound dog." Melody Morgan was smiling seductively.

Elvis looked over at his girlfriend, who was dressed up as a psychedelic Alice in Wonderland. Scary Alice flashed Elvis a dirty look. "Ummm, uh, sorry, I'm afraid Mrs. Alice Presley won't let me."

"Too bad Elvis. I was looking forward to seeing your hunka, hunka of burning love." Then the camera panned back to the dance floor.

"There's more of the party," Allie said. "But that's it for my mom." She shut off the projector and hit the lights. "So what do you think?"

Drew took the last sip from his second drink. *I think my head is spinning and your potion is starting to work.* "About your mom?" he responded.

"Yeah?"

"Beautiful, uninhibited, a little too wild for my blood."

"My grandma was probably too wild for your blood, Drew," Allie said with a roll of her eyes.

"If she was anything like the other women in your family, you're probably right."

"You know, Drew, you don't have to be so tame. It's alright to let your hair down."

He smirked at her choice of words. "You mean my scalp?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you can let down anything you want. I just want you to have some fun. You know as well as I do that you're not getting any younger." She smirked.

"Thanks for the reminder, *Miss 'I Was Born in the 1980's.*"

"Hey, now. There's nothing wrong with being born in the 80's."

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. But when you're born in the 70s, it does tend to make you feel a little old." He paused before continuing. "I'll never forget the first time I saw a Playboy centerfold born in the 80's. That's when I knew I was getting old."

She let out a pronounced gasp. "The great moral compass of our nation, Drew Matthews, looks at Playboy?" She said it with exaggerated disbelief.

"I *read* Playboy. Why? Is there something wrong with that?"

"No. I'm just surprised to hear that you do. I didn't think it was consistent with everything else in your overly conservative way of life."

"Playboy has good articles," he said, using the line made famous by men for more than half a century. He held up the copy of *Washingtonian* magazine. "A lot better than articles about the '50 Most Eligible Bachelors in Washington'."

"And I suppose you never look at the pictures?"

Right... I hate to look at beautiful naked women. He shrugged. "I'll take an occasional peek to make sure nothing radical has changed with the female physique."

She chuckled. "Have you noticed any changes?"

Only that the older I get, the better they look. "Nah. SBDD."

"SBD... what?" she asked.

"SBDD. Same Bodies Different Decade."

She chuckled again. "I always wanted to pose for Playboy." She said it without hesitation or embarrassment.

"Seriously?"

"Sure. I would love to look that sexy. I think every woman would love to look that sexy... whether they want to admit it or not."

Three potential responses popped into Drew's head: (1) you already look that sexy; (2)

take your clothes off and pose for me and let's see how you look; and (3) you wouldn't want a bunch of dirty old men like me looking at you naked, would you? Number three was the safest, so he opted for it.

"Geez Drew, and I was hoping you'd tell me I was already that sexy." She took a quick sip. "Or you'd ask me to pose."

Drew felt drunk and inadequate.

She changed the subject. "So are you going to tell me why we just watched two 36 year-old films of my mother?"

"Eventually. But not yet. I want to think about things now that I've seen her in the movies."

He knew it was the wrong answer when he saw her eyes smolder.

FIFTEEN

One can't believe impossible things.
--Lewis Carrol in *Alice in Wonderland*

Left in the dark, and pissed at Drew's secretive behavior, Allie let loose her feelings. "I don't see how it matters how my mom was 36 years ago," she said impatiently, her tone sharp. "So what if she was wild, or a tease, or a nympho." Her voice rose with every word and she glared at him with visible resentment. She wanted to know what he knew.

Her quick anger shocked Drew out of his drunkenness. But before he could respond, she was speaking again. "I wish you would tell me what you've found out. You treat me like a little kid, and I'm getting sick and tired of it." Tears welled in her eyes but she held them. "I'm 36 years-old, I graduated from Notre Dame and Georgetown Law, I was legislative director for two different congressmen, and I'm smart... very fucking smart." Her eyes were filled with both tears and rage as she stood up. "So quit treating me like some stupid little girl who can only type, and make coffee, and sort your mail." She turned and stomped up the two stairs towards the dining area.

Wow! He'd seen her mildly upset at work once or twice, but never like this... and never so quickly... and never at him. The one person who made him fear flying had just devastated him.

He walked over to her. She was facing the kitchen, wiping her eyes with a napkin. "Allie," he said, talking to her back, "look, if I've done anything to hurt you please know I never meant it that way. I hope you realize how important you are to me. You know you're not just a typist or a mail sorter or a coffee maker. You're very important. And not just around the office." He paused. "All kidding aside, I really don't know what I'd do without you."

She shrugged her shoulders and sniffled, wanting him to say more.

"Just be patient with me, Allie. That's all I'm asking. I'm just not sure now is the right time to tell you what's going on. I don't want to get your hopes up, and I don't want you to get hurt if things don't pan out." He thought his noble intentions would make her happy.

He was wrong again... big-time wrong. And as soon as she turned and looked directly into his eyes, he knew it. She was smoldering again. "Listen to me, Drew, and listen good-- she was my mom, not yours. If you've learned something, or even *think* you've learned something, then I deserve to know. Your concern for my welfare is nice, but that's not what I need from you. I'm not the poor, little, helpless baby girl you saw in that movie."

Her eyes were on fire now. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm a grown-up woman. And I can hold my own with you in *every* adult way possible. I can handle failure, I can handle disappointment, and I can handle my emotions. And, just for the record, I'm not your little kid. I don't know why you won't admit that to yourself. Maybe you treat me like that because you lost Luke and you think of me as some kind of surrogate, but that's one thing I really wish you'd stop. I hate to remind you, but you lost a wife, too. But you wouldn't think to treat me as a surrogate for her, would you?"

"So what do you want from me?" he asked, frustrated at himself more than anything. He didn't like failing her.

"I want you to stop acting like my father."

"Alright," he said calmly. "What would you like me to be then?"

Be anything that makes me something more than a daughter to you. Be anything that makes you think of me as an equal. Be my lover, she came close to blurting out. "Just treat me like a grown-up, like you'd want to be treated if you were 36."

He was listening intently, weighing, but not judging her words as their eyes met.

"I don't want to be your daughter," she said with resignation.

He nodded.

"Anyway, if you don't think I can handle knowing what you know, then you don't know me very well."

Drew broke out into a soft smile, liking how she's stood up for herself. Moreover, she was absolutely right-- *this* was her cause. She had enlisted *him* to help *her*. "Alright, Allie," he capitulated, "have it your way. But I hope you're right and you really can handle it."

"Don't worry, I can. Tell me."

"Okay. But after I do, you're going to sleep with me."

"What?"

"You said you wanted to be treated like a grown-up."

"Yeah. So what's that got to do with sleeping with you?" She wouldn't have resisted, but she wanted to know the connection.

"I'm blackmailing you," Drew said, now smiling impishly at his quick wit. He wanted to get them back to their normal bantering relationship. "Welcome to the world of grown-ups, Allie. Up here, lots of bad people do lots of bad things-- they lie, they cheat, and they steal. And sometimes, those are the good ones. The bad ones blackmail, rape... even murder." He raised his eyebrows. "And, just for the record, I have noticed you're grown-up."

"So, are you serious?" she asked, almost hopeful.

"About what?" he said, not sure what she was asking about.

"About me sleeping with you?"

"Noooooo," he said, with a chuckle, drawing out the word for effect. "That was what I call a shock test. There was an article in Playboy about this guy who went through life making crazy propositions like that. Every once in a while he'd get lucky and a girl would take him up on it. I just wanted to see how you'd react." He grinned sheepishly. "Why? You want me to be serious?"

She thought briefly before responding. "Yes and no."

"Good answer, Counselor. Shall I petition the Court for interpretation, or would you do me the favor and enlighten me."

"Drew, you know how I feel about you-- I'd do anything for you. You're my hero, and I want to see you happy. So if you really wanted, I'd sleep with you. I'd like to make you happy. That's why I said yes."

Overwhelmed by her 'yes,' he wondered what the 'no' was. His heart was racing in anticipation.

"But I'm kind of in the middle of my period," she added.

He had expected a different reason-- something to do with love and commitment. "That's right," he responded quickly, trying to lighten the moment. "I should have checked my record." He winked and she smiled.

"But maybe someday," she added.

He could only hope to live 'til then. "Okay, I promise to do my best to treat you more

like a grown woman rather than a little girl. Deal?" He put out his hand.

"Deal," she responded, sweeping away his hand and hugging him instead. "Thanks, Drew." She walked back and sat down on the couch. "So tell me what you learned about my mom."

He sat down next to her again. "Alright. But once I start telling you, promise you won't interrupt me until I'm done, okay? You're going to think it's crazy, but just hear me out."

He was still talking to her like a child, but she let it go. At least he was going to tell her what he'd learned. "Okay, okay, I promise. Just start talking."

Slowly, Drew recounted the story his Dad had told him-- the visit from Vic Graves and Bob Grady the morning after her mom's disappearance, the stab wound in Vic's back, the fingernail tracks, and Bob's exaggerated nervousness. Allie's eyes were wide with amazement as she listened, her mind in overdrive.

She couldn't contain herself, "I can't believe--"

Drew cut her off. "I'm not done yet. There's more... lots more. Jack Kurtz and Tony Moretti may have been involved too," he added, dropping the biggest bombshell.

At the mention of Jack's name, Allie's expression changed from amazement to utter and complete disbelief. Was she drunk? Or dreaming? Or was there really a magic potion in the drinks? Drew's insinuation that her mom's disappearance could have come at the hands of men who were now the President and three of his top officials was too unbelievable. It had to be a joke, but she couldn't believe he was that insensitive.

"You're shitting me, aren't you? Jack Kurtz? As in President Jack Kurtz?" She thought back to their conversation a week earlier, when Drew had talked about finding dirt on Jack.

"I swear to God I'm not. I may joke about stuff like bonuses and roulette wheels, but I would never joke about something as important as this. This is about your mom."

His sincerity made her think of her mom's face on the wall just minutes before, and she wished her mom could speak out from heaven and tell her whether it was true or not-- Jack Kurtz, Vic Graves, Bob Grady, and Tony Moretti. Jesus! "I can't believe it," she exclaimed.

"Why not? Because you can't imagine that four twenty-some year-olds who grew up to be President and three of his top aides could do anything bad?"

That was it-- exactly. "Yeah, I guess."

"I couldn't believe it either. But back then, they weren't who they are now, Allie. Don't forget that. They were just boys... 21, 22 year-olds. Remember when you were 22? You

probably did things that were stupid and wild and crazy-- things you wouldn't be caught dead doing today."

Allie thought about all the things she'd done-- drag racing in her boyfriend's car, dining and dashing at the IHOP in South Bend, mud wrestling and a wet t-short contest in Daytona over Spring Break. And most of those things were done when she was only half-drunk. She'd done even worse things completely drunk... or so she'd been told the next day.

Drew continued. "And it's not just you, it's universal-- everybody does wild and crazy things when they're in their twenties, things they can't imagine when they look back on. So before you jump to any firm conclusion that these four couldn't have been involved, just remember this: they were only twenty-some year-olds at the time."

"I guess... but it's still hard to believe."

"At first it is. I know. But the more you think about it, the more it starts to make sense. I've been thinking about for the past four days." Then Drew explaining his logic about Vic, Bob, and Tony being in their positions.

That made sense to her.

"So what do you think might have happened between the four of them and my mom?"

Drew shook his head. "That's the \$64,000 question."

"Maybe you should start reading the Wall Street Journal instead of Playboy, Drew, because in today's economy, it's probably more like a \$64 billion question. We're talking about the most powerful man in the world."

"Actually, I've got a couple ideas what may have happened." Then he explained. "Picture this-- it's Saturday night, four days before graduation, and the four of them are probably out partying and having a good time."

She could envision the four drinking and joking and laughing.

"Then, somehow in the course of the night-- maybe they were going from one bar to another-- they come across your mom stranded on the side of the road. They stop to help her. But then, somehow, somehow, the unspeakable happens: your mom ends up dead."

Allie envisioned her young peace-loving mom dying at the hands of the four Middies. Somehow, she knew, sex had to be involved.

Drew could almost read her thoughts. "It's really not important exactly how it happened,

or even why... maybe it was an accident, maybe it wasn't. What is important, however, is the idea that it did happen. And like almost every tragic thing that happens, it couldn't be undone..." His voice trailed off.

"So what would they do?" Drew said, picking back up. "They've got a dead girl on their hands and they're scared-- more scared than you or I could ever imagine. The only thing they know is this: no matter what, nobody can find out what happened. They've worked too hard to let something like this prevent them from graduating and they can't let down their family and friends. Maybe it was just a big accident. But maybe that doesn't even matter. What matters is that they wouldn't give up everything they've worked for because of this."

Allie was nodding at Drew's logic.

Drew continued. "So they did the only thing they could: they hid her body, probably in some out-of-the-way grave, and prayed they'd never get caught."

Allie envisioned her mom's lifeless, unclothed, bloodied body covered over by dirt and leaves and sticks in some dark field. She could almost see the fear in the eyes of the Middies as they walked away.

He waited to hear her reaction.

She thought long and hard, but her mind was still numb at the idea. Finally she offered something. "I guess it's possible they could have been the ones who stopped to help her after her car broke down. And it's possible that something could have happened between them." But something about Drew's theory was bothering her. "But I know my mom was pretty much a peacenik, definitely not a physically aggressive person, so I can't believe she would've done anything to hurt them... at least not without them doing something to her first."

"Plus, there were four of them," Drew agreed. "I can't imagine she would have gotten in a fight with four of them."

"The way my mom was, whatever happened between them could've been something related to sex, you know?"

He nodded. Sex and disappeared girls went together like milk and cookies. "I don't mean any disrespect, but after seeing your mom in that last movie, I'd be surprised if sex, of some sort, wasn't involved."

Thoughts of her mother being raped by the four went through Allie's head. She felt rage. "Do you think they could have raped my mom and killed her?"

"I thought about that, but I just can't imagine four Middies doing something like that. That seems too out of character... even if they were drunk or something. If I were betting, I'd say it started out as consensual and ended in some sort of accident."

She didn't know Middies well enough to argue, but she knew 22 year-old boys. Nonetheless, she let it go. "Like what kind of accident?"

"I don't know. Suppose they did pick her up on the road that night. Maybe they had some sort of accident with their car and she got killed."

She cut in. "If it were an accident, why wouldn't they have reported it to the police?"

Drew shrugged. "Maybe they got scared. Maybe they were drinking and driving and they flipped their car or something. If they reported that, the Academy might not have let them graduate." After talking with his Dad, Drew had developed several theories about what might have happened. He was convinced it had to have been some sort of accident. And then, out of fear of the Academy punishment, the four had tried to cover it up. Something like that would have been logical and still 'in character' for the four Middies. He couldn't fathom the four had done something intentionally malicious.

He continued, "Or maybe they were out partying and your mom OD'd or something. Maybe they didn't want anyone to know they were out with someone who was involved with drugs. I don't know."

Allie wasn't buying any of his theories. After all, Drew was forgetting one very important detail. "Or maybe they raped her, Drew. And then they killed her. What about the stab wound to Vic Graves and the fingernail marks?" That was the very important detail he hadn't explained. And that was the one fact she couldn't reconcile. "How do you reconcile that with *an accident*? After all, isn't the stab wound and the fingernail tracks really what your whole theory is based upon?"

She was right, he knew. *That* was the most troubling fact. Somehow, he couldn't help but think those wounds were caused by Melody Morgan as she fought for her life. And if she had fought for her life, could it have been an accident?

"That bothers me," Drew responded with a conciliatory shrug. He paused as if considering another plausible explanation. "Maybe they really did get in a bar fight and they weren't even involved with your mom. I don't know."

"So what are we going to do?" she asked, noting his frustration.

"The first thing we're going to do is find out if this crazy theory is really crazy or not." He talked like he had a plan.

"And how are we going to do that?"

"What do you think we should do?"

The hell if she knew. She was back to thinking about their conversation a week earlier when she told Drew about her mom's disappearance. Coincidentally, that was right after Drew had broached his idea that Jack Kurtz might not be all he appeared to be. And now this. It was all too bizarre and she couldn't help but wonder whether she'd somehow fallen down a rabbit hole. The world felt different, like she was Allie in Wonderland-- it was all too unbelievable. "I thought you had a plan," she said.

"I have an idea or two, but I still want to hear what you think."

"I feel like I'm in Wonderland," she verbalized, "because this whole chain-of-events just can't be happening."

"Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's just an illusion from your magic potion. Maybe you ought to check your ingredients next time." He made a twisted smile and gnarled his fingers. "Maybe you should let me pinch you and see if it hurts," he said, witch-like.

Before she could respond, he was Drew again, wanting to hear her solution. "Come on, Allie. Think. How do you figure out if someone committed a crime a long time ago?"

SIXTEEN

Never underestimate
the element of surprise.
--Odo

"I don't know," Allie offered meekly as she considered Drew's question, "find some evidence."

"Next to impossible," he responded quickly, almost coldly. "You have to start with the proposition that the only evidence is going to come from the suspects themselves. That's what's going to make this so difficult. Try again."

"This isn't fair," she protested in frustration. "You've had a few days to think about this. I just found out."

"Don't pout. It's not easy. It took me the entire flight to Vegas to come up with even one reasonable plan of attack."

"And what's that?"

"You think you can handle it?"

The last time he'd asked that question, he told her the President and three of his top aides might be responsible for her mom's disappearance. Now, she wondered if she really could handle something more. "I guess. It can't be any more unbelievable than what you've told me already."

"First and foremost," Drew spoke, sounding like a teacher, "we need to use the advantage we have over them."

"What advantage?"

"The most important element in warfare-- the element of surprise." Drew paused after he said that, and thought about just how powerful surprise could be. "Don't forget," Drew added,

“that’s how I brought Senator Hebert down to his knees.”

Allie nodded as she remembered the story from his book...

... Drew had set up a hidden video camera on the road where his wife and son were killed, recording the make, model, color, and license plate of every car that passed. At the end of each day, Drew would review the list of possibilities and follow-up on the most promising. Usually this meant a check with DMV to find the owner and their address. Next, using his DIS credentials, Drew would run credit checks and insurance claim checks on these car owners to determine if they'd recently spent money on car repairs or had submitted any insurance claims. Though illegal to use his official government credentials to obtain private information, Drew couldn't have cared less. His justification was justice. And any search that moved him closer to justice was justified... by God, if not the government.

Though tedious and time-consuming, Drew’s theory was simple-- somehow, someday, someday the driver of that killer car would be on that road again. And although Drew didn’t know when, he was prepared to stake out the road until the day he died. That was the only way Drew would be able to look back on his life, from his death bed, and know he'd done everything humanely possible.

And so, for nearly a month, Drew did all this... without success.

Then, on April 24, 2018, Senator Landry Hebert drove by Drew's hidden camera. Three months had passed since the fatal accident, and during those three months, the Senator had consciously avoided Route 236. But not this day... he was late for a dinner party and the traffic on Old Chain Bridge Road was backed up to the hilt. Hoping to save ten minutes, the Senator took Route 236.

Back at his Falls Church brick rambler, Drew doggedly reviewed the day's info. It looked like another wasted day. Of course he was discouraged. Why wouldn't he be? After checks on more 2,000 cars without any luck, his longshot theory was getting longer every day. He wondered if such frustration was a necessary ingredient towards becoming worthy of his suffering.

But, he vowed to never quit, and that's just what he intended to do. Never quit. Deep down, he knew, quitting was not an option.

Then, as Drew downloaded the picture of the Silver Lexus 300, a strange feeling flowed through him. Somehow, someday, this was the car he had been looking for... he knew it, and for nearly twelve hours, he felt almost giddy. Unfortunately, after checking DMV records the next morning, his giddiness had turned back into discouragement. A United States Senator was not the kind of man he was looking for; Drew was looking for a dirtball.

Nonetheless, Drew followed through and checked the Senator's charge accounts. And when he saw the \$3,500 charge at Willie's Body Shop in Barksville, West Virginia on 12/29/17,

the hair on his neck quilled and a thousand questions filled his head. Just a week after Lori and Luke died, why had the Senator spent \$3,500 at a body shop in West Virginia? Why West Virginia? Why not Virginia? Or Maryland? Or the District? After all, it wasn't as if the Senator was from West Virginia. He was from Louisiana. Perhaps Willie's Body Shop was another kind of body shop? Perhaps the Senator went to West Virginia to get a workout on his own body? That would make more sense than an automotive body shop.

And so, the next day, Drew took a drive west and visited Willie's Body Shop in Barksville.

"Hey there," a tall skinny man in greasy overalls and a 'Make America Great Again' baseball cap hat called out as Drew stepped out of his Jeep Cherokee. It was definitely an automotive body shop... unless the Senator had some kinky thing going with a West Virginia man in greasy overalls.

"Hello," Drew replied with a smile. "Is the manager around?"

"That's me," the man said, pointing to his left breast. Beneath the grease, Drew could see "Willie" scripted above the torn pocket.

"Do you remember a man coming in here a couple months ago with a Silver Lexus for repair?"

The man looked Drew up and down. "What's it to you?" he said.

Drew reached into his back pocket, pulled out his credentials, and flashed them.

Willie squinted as he looked over Drew's badge and the official-looking emblem. "What's Defense Intel... Intelligence Service mean?"

"It means I'm investigating a serious crime. This man I'm looking for wants to assassinate President Trump. I'm trying to stop him." What better way to get a man with a 'Make America Great Again' ball cap to talk, Drew figured, than to evoke the name of the President of the United States.

Willie's eyes grew wide. "No shit?" The old man who had brought the Lexus in sure as heck didn't look like an assassin. But maybe that's how assassins worked, Willie told himself.

"Yes, sir. And if I don't get the answers I need, President Trump might die. Can you help me?" Drew made it sound like the fate of the free world rested on Willie's sloping shoulders.

"Yes, sir. Sure."

Then Willie provided all the information he had-- a copy of the repair bill; before and after pictures-- "we always take before and after shots," Willie explained. "It's a good way to show what good work we do here at Willie's;" and the coup de grace-- out back, in the junkyard, Willie had the old Lexus front quarter panel.

Drew studied it closely. While the red paint from Lori's Toyota Camry almost made him cry, at the same time, he was bursting with excitement. Yesssss!!!

"Thank you," Drew told Willie. "You've been very helpful. I'll make sure President Trump hears about what you've done."

Willie's eyes grew huge as he envisioned a multi-million dollar expansion of Willie's Body Shop... President Trump could easily slip that into the next Defense Appropriations Bill!

"Alrightee, then. I'm glad I could help," Willie replied, excitedly. "Good luck."

With the quarter panel in the back seat, Drew waved and drove off. He was through needing luck.

It took less than an hour for Drew to learn that Senator Hebert had attended his office Christmas Party at the Tysons Corner Ritz Carlton on December 24, 2017. That put him in the vicinity. Drew also learned the most direct route for the Senator to his McLean home was via Route 236. And so, that night, the very worthy feeling Drew payed a surprise visit on the Senator.

The Senator's wife answered the door of their McLean Colonial holding a highball. "May I help you," she said, as she looked over Drew. She thought he was one of their neighbors from the next street over.

"Good evening, ma'am. I'm Drew Matthews, here to see the Senator."

"Is he expecting you?" she asked, sounding pretentious. Her husband was in ensconced in his study and hadn't mentioned anything about visitors for the evening.

He's expecting me like death. "No ma'am. But if you would, please tell him that the man whose wife and son he killed on December 24, 2017, is here to see him."

The Senator's wife almost dropped the highball. "What?"

"Please ma'am, just tell him. He'll know what it means."

It had to be one of those weird codes they used in the government, she concluded. "Just a minute," she said as she closed the door. She wasn't about to invite Drew inside.

Three minutes later, the Senator appeared at the door. "What's this about?" he asked, his tone gruff. The Senator was known on the Hill as a no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners kind of politician.

That was good. Because Drew Matthews was on a no-nonsense mission to take him prisoner. "Good evening, Senator. I'm here to escort you down to the McLean police department."

"For what?" He said it with disdain.

"For killing my wife and son."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. But I do know that if you don't get off my property, I'll have the police here faster than you can say, 'I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, Senator.'"

Drew smirked.

The Senator wasn't used to being smirked at.

"Senator, the game's up. I've been to Willie's Body Shop. I've got the quarter panel you had replaced on your Lexus. The paint on that quarter panel matches the paint on my wife's Toyota Camry. Remember her car? The one you ran off the road on December 24th after you left your office Christmas Party?"

The Senator's eyes darted about. "You're mistaking me for someone else," he responded, still cool. But deep down, there was no doubt Drew wasn't mistaking him or bluffing.

"I don't think so, Senator." Drew paused for effect. "If the paint chips fit, no jury will ever acquit," he said, parodying Johnnie Cochrane. Drew was serious.

"I told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine," Drew replied, unfazed. "I'll be back in an hour with the police and a reporter from the Washington Post."

With that, Drew turned and walked toward his Jeep. Before getting inside, he looked back. "I hope you know, Senator," Drew shouted back to him, "how much I loved my wife and son. I loved them as much as any man could love a wife and a son. I really wish you knew that."

Then Drew started up his car. Before driving away, he remembered one other thing he wanted to say. He rolled down his window. "It would be a lot easier if you would just do the

right thing and confess. Everyone makes mistakes. But now, you're making an even bigger mistake. Take responsibility for your actions... that's what you always say on the Senate floor, isn't it, Senator?"

Then, just as Drew began backing out of the driveway, he glanced forward. The Senator was on his knees, his head in his hands, looking like a man who'd been hit upside the head by the truth. Drew quickly stopped, got out, and walked back to the front landing.

"It was an accident," the Senator said, looking up at him with tears in his eyes.

Drew nodded. "I'm sure it was, Senator. And you know what, if you stand up and take responsibility for it, I'm sure people will understand. Show me that you're sorry and I'll be the first to forgive you."

The tears were rolling down the Senator's face as he spoke. "I'm sorry. I swear, I'm sorry. I just got scared. I didn't know they were killed until the next day."

Drew nodded, his expression dispassionate. He would never forgive this man. What he was really sorry about was getting caught. "Are you coming with me to the police station?"

The Senator nodded.

As the Senator's old career ended, Drew's new career began.

Allie returned from the memory. "And what exactly is our *surprise*?" She made the quotes sign with her fingers as she said it.

"The fact that we're out here, and we're going to go after them." He raised his eyebrows. "Think about it-- whoever killed your mom, obviously thinks they're free and clear. After all, it happened 36 years ago. If you did something that long ago would you worry about it today?"

She shook her head.

"Of course you wouldn't. Time is more than just the great healer, it's the great eraser, too. It has a way of cleaning the slate, eroding evidence, and wiping away anyone who might care. At this point, they probably don't think anybody cares what happened to Melody Morgan. We're going to let them know that just ain't so."

Even though she liked his reasoning, she was still unsure what it translated into, practically speaking. "I still don't understand what we're going to do."

He smiled like a man with a secret. "We're going to administer a lie detector test," he said matter-of-factly, hoping to get a rise out of her.

It worked, and she looked at him like he had two bald heads. "Right, Drew," she said

sarcastically. "We'll just hook one of them up to a lie detector and ask them if they killed my mother. I'm sure that'll work." She rolled her eyes.

"Close," he responded grinning. "You've just got the details a little wrong. Always remember-- the devil is in the details... and so is the salvation." It was also one of Drew's favorite expressions.

"What do you mean I'm close?"

She listened closely as Drew explained the basics of his plan to her. By the time he'd finished, her earlier sarcasm was completely gone. Now, her mind raced with enthusiasm at the possibility that Drew's plan might work. It was as simple as it was brilliant. And she agreed with Drew's reasoning: without warning, the conscience can't lie. That was a major problem with traditional lie detector tests-- if a person knew it was coming, they could mentally prepare for it and even convince themselves they weren't lying. After all, if the will is great enough, the mind can rationalize anything. That's why the Slick Willies of the world are able to look directly into the camera, lie their asses off while looking as sincere as a mom gazing at her newborn.

And that was why their lie detector test had to come out of the blue, with no warning. If Drew was right, the conscience wouldn't be able to lie and the guilty mind would expose itself.

"So when are we going to do it?" she asked.

"Wednesday."

The suddenness grabbed her. "Wednesday? As in two days?"

He smiled. "Sure. Why not?"

"That just seems so quick. Don't we need more time to plan?"

"What's there to plan? On Wednesday I'm having lunch with Bob Grady at the Old Ebbitt's Grill. I've already set that up. He and I will have a drink, make some small talk, and then we'll administer our little lie detector test to find out what he knows about your mom's disappearance. That's it."

She didn't like Drew's casualness. After all, this first step was the most important. Anything that might follow would depend on what happened Wednesday. Based on Bob Grady's response, they would either pursue the theory further or drop it. Perhaps Drew was trying to keep her from feeling the pressure. "So, why'd you pick Bob?" she asked, playing it cool.

"Lots of reasons. One, he's the most accessible. Two, he's the most out of his element here in Washington, which makes him the weakest. Three, he and I have talked about getting

together to talk about publishers, so he can get a big fat book deal when he leaves D.C. later this year. That gave me a built-in excuse for lunch with him."

Allie nodded. She knew about Bob's desire for a book deal.

Drew continued. "But the most important reason is because of what my Dad told me-- Bob's nervousness when he and Vic showed up on my Dad's doorstep the morning after. Of the four, Bob is likely to be the most vulnerable to an attack of the conscious."

A million or more questions passed through Allie's brain and they all led to the same conclusion-- it just didn't seem like they were ready to jump into it so quickly. Drew's plan seemed to be lacking something. "So what's my role? Am I just supposed to sit there and observe? And then what if your little theory is right? Don't you think we'd be in danger afterwards?"

He was stuck on her previous sentence. "*Little* theory?" He practically scoffed the words. "If ever there was a *big* theory, this is it. But to answer your question, if we're right, yes, we could be in a helluva lot of trouble. But the beauty of the plan is this: hopefully they're not going to know it's us after them. Not only are we going to find out if they were involved, but we're going to do it in a way that leaves them wondering who's out there after them."

Now she was really confused.

He read her confusion and further explained the details.

She grew increasingly scared as she listened. And for good reason-- according to Drew, she would be doing all the hard stuff. Drew had the easy job. He just had to be himself, the innocent guy sitting across the table from Bob talking about book deals. She had the hard job, the one that required acting and quick thinking on her feet.

"I'm not sure I can do it," she said.

"Sure you can. You'll do great," Drew assured her. "You're a natural. You just need to find a black, Asian-looking wig; get some brown contacts; practice drawing out your eyes with mascara; spend an afternoon at Old Ebbit's and become familiar with the surroundings; get yourself one of their waitress uniforms; and practice what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. It'll be a piece of cake. Plus, I'm betting you've got a great Oriental accent. Say 'lots of luck.'"

She rolled her eyes. "Rots of ruck," she said with an exaggerated accent.

"See? I knew you could." He said it like Mister Rogers.

Mister Rogers wasn't exactly what she had in mind when she had told him to stop treating her like a daughter. Nonetheless, his confidence calmed her. *Perhaps she could do this*, she told

herself.

"Say something else Madame Butterfly," Drew commanded, playfully.

Not knowing what to say, a joke flashed in her head as she remembered the morning radio host who had camped outside the White House after the 1996 election. For nearly an hour he stood on Pennsylvania Avenue yelling out a phrase in a thick Chinese accent that would prove to be prophetic. She borrowed his line. "Congratulations on your huge erection, Bill Qwinton."

Drew laughed.

Yet behind the levity, Drew sensed Allie was struggling with the overwhelming concept that in less than 72 hours they might know whether the President and three of his top aides were involved in her mom's disappearance. He wondered if she realized the real fireworks would begin if they were right.

He wanted to say something calming. "No matter what happens, Allie, just remember, the pressure will be all on Bob. We've got nothing to lose, okay? So, no matter what, just stay relaxed and let him do all the sweating. We're not breaking any laws..."

She nodded. That was so true.

For the next hour they discussed the plan in more detail, discussing what Allie would say, even practicing. Just before midnight, a sobered Drew said, "Goodnight."

Allie responded with a hug and a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for everything, Drew," she said, as they stood together in the foyer.

He smiled. "You're welcome." Then he turned slowly and forced himself to leave.

As he walked to his Jeep, he wrestled with the feeling that it was almost impossible to leave her. Although ten years were between them, his life's clock seemed to be ticking at a rate double hers. Such was the love of an older man for a younger woman, he mused, as he hopped into the Jeep.

Standing at the front door, Allie watched him drive off. As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, she somehow knew her life would never be the same again. When she finally laid down in her big comfy bed, she was both numbed and tingly-- numbed thinking about Drew's theory and what lay ahead; and tingly thinking about how much she loved Drew and wished he had stayed.

SEVENTEEN

That's one of the greatest curses
of the human mind— memory.
--Joseph Lofton in *Citizen Kane*

As Drew and Allie were saying goodnight after discussing a crazy theory that implicated the President and three of his top aides in the disappearance of a 24 year-old girl exactly 36 years ago, some seven miles away, President Jack Kurtz sat naked, curled up in a fleshy, 175 pound ball on the leather Bentley recliner, looking out his White House bedroom window toward the south. In spite of the nearly full moon, the night was a deep, curious black, as if a purposeful reminder from God of that terrible dark night 36 years ago. Although the late-May breeze slipping through the Kevlar window screen was balmy, it felt cold to Jack, and he was shivering, just as he shivered 36 years before. Still, he refused to put on a robe. He wanted to shiver, to feel that chill. It reminded him to never forget. And that motivated him.

Over his drawn-up knees, Jack looked at the Washington Monument. Lit up brilliantly by spotlights, the 550 foot monument rose up, hard, firm, and strong-- the ultimate phallic symbol in Washington. Perhaps because of his own impotence, Jack could never look at it without feeling a sense of failure, regret, and torment.

Above the monument, Jack could make out the big dipper and the North Star. They were, he reminded himself, the same stars he'd looked up at 36 years ago when the dirty deed had happened, and among them, Jack could feel the presence of Melody Morgan. Everything about this night, it seemed, reminded him of that tragic night 36 years ago. Even the late-spring breeze was filled with a flowery scents like hers. It kissed his face and seemed to whisper out in her cute, dead voice-- 'murderer.' He loved that voice when she was alive and missed it after she was dead.

Sadly, sleep was no refuge from the shame or fears. In truth, sleep had become something of his personal prison, and Jack would wake almost nightly shaking and screaming for the torment to stop. This particular anniversary night had been the worst yet-- he had imagined himself to be suffocating under a pile of freshly dug clay and dirt, and when he awoke, he was gasping for air, his lips blue, the sweat streaming down his face.

Now, as he gazed out at the Monument and the stars, Jack thought back to the day that would forever divide his life...

... It was Saturday, May 22, 1988, the first day of 'June Week,' the five days of festivities during the last week of May actually-- and not June-- which culminated with graduation from the Naval Academy. For First Class Middies like Jack, it was the beginning of a week that most had only dreamed of. Final exams were over, pretty girls and flowers were in bloom, and friends and relatives were in town to celebrate the end of four long and, at times, nearly unbearable years. Life, it seemed, couldn't be better.

Like every day at Canoe U, the fateful day had started innocently enough in the wardroom.

"Can you believe we're outta here in four days?" big, burly Midshipman First Class Bob Grady remarked excitedly to one of his four roommates-- Tony Moretti-- as they made their way through the breakfast serving line.

"Four days and six hours," Tony responded in more exacting fashion. "I swear to God, I never thought I'd graduate."

"You still might not," an authoritative voice from behind chimed in. It was another of their roommates-- Jack Kurtz. He'd snuck up behind the two, cutting in front of several hungry, pissed-off second and third classmen. But rank had its privileges, and for first class Middies like Jack, that meant cuts to the head of the breakfast line. "I heard two Firsties in Commander Rafter's Statistics class failed the final and aren't going to graduate," he added.

A chill went through Tony, and although his heart rate jumped, the blood drained from his face. Going into the final with a borderline 'C', Statistics was his last remaining worry, the *only thing* that could keep him from graduating. Had he spoken too quickly? "Jesus. Are you serious Jack?"

Somber-faced, Jack looked his worried roomie squarely in the eyes, "No. But it was kind of fun hearing those gears grind in your head. I think I even saw a whiff of black smoke come out your ears." Jack was smiling now.

"You're a dickhead, Jack."

"Oh yeah? Well just remember that without this dickhead spoon-feeding you all the right gouge, you never would've made a 'B' on the final."

"A 'B'?" Tony responded with a lightened heart, a blood-filled face, and no more chills. It had been two years since he'd made a 'B' on a final.

"Yep. They posted grades about five minutes ago. I went and checked 'cause I knew you were still worried."

Tony let out a loud, exuberant whoop as he pushed his plate forward for a spoonful of the watery scrambled eggs he'd grown to love over the four years. He was going to graduate for sure! Nothing could stop that.

The middle-aged black woman with the black netting over her hair smiled as she served him, "Ain't never seen no one so excited about these eggs."

"I ain't never been so excited," Tony yelled back at her happily. "I'm gonna graduate!" Then he looked at Jack. "Jack, you dickhead, I love you."

"Are you sure? I haven't told you the bad news yet."

Tony's face fell a bit. "What bad news?"

"The 'B' in Stats moved you up two slots in class ranking. It looks like you're not going to be anchorman."

While that meant not getting a dollar from each classmate, Tony didn't care. He was graduating!

"I still love you Jack," he exclaimed as the three Middies made their way to Tony's favorite table. Although it was identical to the 400 other white-clothed tables that lined the T-shaped oak dining hall, Tony had dubbed this one 'theirs.' Because lunch and dinner were served at assigned company tables, breakfast was their only chance to choose where they sat.

"Save your love for the redhead with the big tits," Jack said, winking, as they sat down.

"No problem," Tony replied, as he thought about the scheme Jack had set up for later. It was going to be the best one ever.

Bob overheard. "You guys running a scam tonight?"

Jack responded. "Yeah, on Vic. Keep quiet and there's a five spot in it for you."

"Gotcha," Bob replied with a point of his index finger. "So what's up for today?" he asked, as he salted his eggs.

Jack had his day planned. "I'm packing up my stuff this morning and then heading into town. I'm gonna walk around the docks, get some crabs, and take in the sights. Oh, and I'll get us checked in at the Thrift Inn so our rooms aren't cancelled."

"We're going to watch Herndon, right?" Bob asked.

“Absolutely. And after that, we’ll go to Rip’s. It’s gonna be wild out there tonight.”

"Sounds good to me," Tony chimed in, knowing the dock area would be filled with all sorts of pretty girls in short shorts, minis, and halter tops. Most of Tony’s waking moments were spent thinking about girls... and specifically girls’ bodies. He especially loved the summertime, when clothing shrunk and bodies were exposed.

"What's Vic up to?"

"Yeah? Where is Vic?" Bob chimed in.

Jack looked up from his plate. "I don't know. Last I saw him was at McGarvey’s last night. He was trying to get in that brunette's pants."

"He must have been successful because he never made it back last night."

"Jesus," Tony responded, "if Vic scored, I guess June week must really be here. They say if you don't get laid this week you're either queer or can't get your dick in gear."

Bob and Jack laughed aloud, even though both were virgins. Bob was that way because his fiancé Molly told him he’d have to wait until after they were married. Jack had just never met the right girl. He’d know when the time was right...

Bob spoke out. "Can you believe it? In four days we're outta here. I never thought this day would ever come."

"I know. I can't wait to see Bancroft Hall in my rear view mirror. Good Bye U-S-N-A, Hello L-I-F-E," Tony chimed in. He pounded his fist on the white cotton tablecloth for extra emphasis. It didn't seem possible anything could keep them from graduating.

That afternoon Jack, Bob, Tony, and Vic, who had indeed scored with the brunette the night before, walked around the docks and took in the sights, sounds, and smells of the quaint Maryland capitol. After a stop at Fran O'Brien’s Irish Saloon for beers and crabs, they walked back to the Yard to watch Herndon, a wickedly entertaining event in which plebes scaled a polished 25 foot lard-covered granite monument. The goal, to see how fast they could replace the traditional plebe Dixie cup at the top with an Officer's cap, signified the teamwork and growth they'd attained during their freshman year.

As they walked through Gate 3 next to the chapel, Vic, the cockiest and most outspoken of the four friends, stated impulsively, "Hey Jack, I'll bet it takes 'em 2 hours to get up there. This is the dumbest class of plebes Canoe U has ever seen-- dumber than a bunch of Marines trying to figure out how a submarine works." He was relentless getting his digs in at Jack, the

Marine-to-be.

"That's probably what the Firsties said about us when we climbed Herndon," Jack replied. "But thanks to *The Few, The Proud, The Marines*, we did it in a record 34 minutes. Anyway, I'll bet this class gets it done before the first bell gongs."

"Less than half an hour?" Vic replied incredulously. "No way. You willing to back that up with a little bet, Jarhead?"

"Name your price Bubblehead."

"Loser buys drinks tonight."

Jack chuckled at the thought of spending Vic's submarine bonus to satisfy his thirst. It was going to be an expensive evening. "Sounds good to me Vic. The drinks always taste better when you buy. And remember, we're doing shots tonight... and not those cheap ones we usually get."

Vic nodded in agreement. "Cuervo Gold and Dewars, tonight." The two shook hands.

Across from the chapel, the crowd circled almost ten deep around the monument and buzzed with excitement. The four friends pushed their way to the Gazebo about 50 feet away and shimmied to the top. From here they would enjoy a spectacular view of the event. Almost as soon as they were atop the galvanized copper roof, a loud cannon boomed and a screaming throng of determined plebes raced from Bancroft Hall towards the monument. The clock was ticking.

"Wow, they look pretty determined, Vic," Jack remarked as the plebes began massing around the base of the obelisk. "Just like those Marines who took the beaches at Normandy and helped win World War II."

Vic was quick to reply, "Oh yeah, Jack, well unfortunately a lot of them ended up getting killed."

In a matter of minutes the plebes had shed their shirts, and some their pants, to aid in wiping the goo from the base of the obelisk. Then, forming an arm-linked chain around the muddied base of the monument, they began the methodical, dirty process of building a human pyramid toward the top. The second level climbed up, their globby feet supported by the arms, shoulders, and even heads of the largest plebes who formed the base level. As they wiped the goo from the next six feet of the monument, the tall, thin plebes who would form the third level of the pyramid started climbing up over the greasy, muddied backs of their classmates. With unbridled determination, the plebes were making outstanding progress.

Jack chuckled. "Wow, those plebes are lookin' pretty good, Vic."

Vic just grunted and checked his watch.

Several minutes later the third level of plebes was in place, their straining arms linked together in solidarity. With the top just seven feet higher, one more level would get them there. Only twelve minutes had elapsed as the final group began their ascent.

"Ain't nothing gonna stop these guys, Vic," Jack announced confidently as the human mass rose higher and the tallest plebe on the fourth level stretched upwards and swiped at the Dixie cup atop the monument. Steady cheers went up from the crowd as he swiped closer and closer.

"There gonna do it," Jack exclaimed. His sentence was punctuated by a deafening yell from the crowd as the tall plebe knocked the Dixie cup off and placed an officer's cover atop the monument.

"Eighteen minutes," Jack announced triumphantly. He winked at Vic. "Hey fellas, I don't know about y'all, but my throat's a bit parched. Anyone interested in a drink? I know a great place where the whiskeys gold and the girls aren't too old. Let's go do some drinking!"

No matter the lost bet, even Vic couldn't keep from letting loose a party scream. "Yeehaw," they whooped.

They drove in Tony's 'sin bin,' a 15 year-old, rusty red 1973 Volkswagen camper. Like a perverse boy scout aiming to be prepared for any potential sexual escapade, Tony had reconfigured the interior of the camper to accommodate a nearly full-sized bed, and over the course of four years had nearly worn out the back mattress. The two bumper stickers on back displayed Tony's most basic attitude:

DON'T LAUGH... YOU'RE DAUGHTER MAY BE IN THE BACK!
IF YOU SEE THIS VAN A ROCKIN', DON'T COME A KNOCKIN'!

Riding shotgun, Vic tried to understand the Herndon event, but for the life of him, couldn't. Perplexed, he looked back at Jack, who was sitting in the camper bed in the far back, behind the middle bench seat. "How the hell did you know they were gonna set a new record, Jack? Nobody in their right mind could have predicted that," Vic called back.

"A smart Marine could," Jack shot back.

Now Vic was even more confused. In his lexicon, 'smart' and 'Marine' didn't go together in the same sentence. If ever there was an oxymoron it was that. "Explain that one to me, oh great Jarhead."

"We trained the plebes, right Vic?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, if we did our job correctly-- as I think we did-- then it's only logical that they'd improve on our time. All they did was prove my point."

As usual, Vic marveled at Jack's ability to simplify something to the most basic, understandable level. "I guess that makes some sense Jack, but I still can't believe it." He paused, then looked Jack in the eye, "You're gonna be one helluva great Jarhead, Jack."

"Damn right. And don't you ever forget that, Bubblehead."

Although Jack didn't know exactly what the future held for the four, he somehow knew they were inextricably linked together, like fibers in a rope. Jack was the leader, in every sense of the word-- the company commander, the 3.95 grade point average, the four year starter on the varsity soccer team, and the perfect physical specimen with sandy hair that he parted on the right, and a perfectly symmetric face with light green eyes, a thin nose, and a strong chin. Topping it all off, he was mature and level-headed beyond his 22 years of age. About the only thing Jack didn't do well was hold liquor. In fact, when Jack drank he became almost like them... almost average. Worse, he became a tad belligerent and proud and cocky.

Vic was the leader-wannabe, a little less than Jack in just about every way-- the deputy company commander, 3.6 grade point average, an ordinary intramural athlete, and certainly not as good-looking as Jack. In fact, Vic was downright u-g-l-y, with a bulbous nose that would only get more bulbous every year, a pale complexion with the remnants of teenage acne pock marks on his cheeks, and jet black hair that always seemed a bit greasy. Adding insult was Vic's fiery temper and propensity for jealousy. Of course most of Vic's jealousy was directed at Jack. Deep down, he hated Jack and his perfection at seemingly everything.

Bob was the southern gentleman of the group, the largest physically but the softest spoken. A born-again Christian, he preferred listening to Christian music and reading his bible daily. Having known Jack since their kindergarten days back in Tyrone, Georgia, Bob allied with Jack at every turn, loving how well Jack represented both him and the Peach State. Bob was also the only one committed to a girl— his high school sweetheart, Molly.

Tony was the playboy, the stereotypical Jersey boy blessed with the perfect physique and cursed with the brains of a donkey. His hair was black, like Vic's, but silky and smooth, the kind girls wanted to run their fingers through. Recruited to play lacrosse at the Academy, he had a barbed wire tattoo on his right bicep and wore a red bandana around his head, ala his idol Bruce Springsteen, whenever he wore civvies.

Twenty minutes after leaving the Yard, the VW camper came to a loud stop in the gravel parking lot of the neon-lit Rip's Bar and Grill.

"Let's have some fun spending Vic's money," Jack called out with glee as he hopped off

the bed and reached to open the van's sliding side door. His happiness was quickly displaced by a loud cry of pain. "Owww. Shit."

Jack's scream startled the others. "What's the matter?" Bob called out as he looked back from the middle bench seat.

Jack was grabbing his right forearm with his left hand. "I just cut myself on this goddam window crank," he said, pointing to the sharp-edged metal protrusion near the door handle. He held his arm up to inspect the wound. It wasn't much-- only a three inch scrape-- but it was bleeding steadily. More than anything, Jack didn't want to get any blood on his new shirt. He glared at Tony in the front. "Hey Tony, when are you gonna get this fuckin' thing fixed? It's been like this for over a year."

Tony shrugged. "Sorry man. I told you my parents are getting me a new Mustang for graduation. Unless one of you guys want this rust bucket, I'm thinking of just trashing her."

Nobody spoke out.

"There's a roll of paper towels in the storage bin behind you Jack, behind the garbage bags."

Jack found the paper towels and quickly wrapped his cut.

Once the bleeding had subsided, the four Middies made their way to the front door of Rip's. With cheap beer and eats, and a wide assortment of women, the dive bar had become one of their main hang-outs, and as they stepped inside, each sensed an unforgettable night ahead. The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' blared from the jukebox, but was barely audible above the laughter and shouting inside the packed and lively bar. It seemed as if every mid, and every available girl within 50 miles of Annapolis, had come to the bar with the same idea-- to party hard. The four pushed their way through the masses, across the sticky, beer-covered floor, to the oak bar.

"Excellent atmosphere tonight, Jack," Tony shouted, as he scanned for the common-faced redhead with the uncommon curves he'd met the night before. He was anticipating a wild night ahead of him. "How's the cut?"

Jack held it up to show Tony. "It'll be alright once I get a couple beers in me," he said, smiling now.

The four friends ordered beers and quickly downed them. A shot of Dewars and another beer followed. Their pace was fierce, as if they knew a night like this only came around once in life, and they intended to make the most of it.

Tony slammed down his just-finished draft. "YaaaaaaaBa Daaaaaba Doooo!" he yelled out in his best Fred Flintstone imitation. "This is gonna be the best night of my life."

Vic handed out shots of Cuervo Gold to his three friends and put out his glass, "I'm never gonna forget how great this feels." Then he toasted, "Friends forever."

Their eyes met and the four clicked their glasses together. "Friends forever," they yelled back as they raised their glasses and then downed the rich, golden Tequila.

"Oooooooooow!" Bob howled like a dog. "I am getting completely f'ed up."

The other three laughed at their normally reserved classmate.

The mid-afternoon crabs did little to stop the alcohol from being quickly absorbed into their bloodstreams, which was what they wanted. They'd waited four years for this night and had no intention of holding anything back.

Jack laughed as he looked across the masses and found Tony, who was talking trash to the redhead with big tits. Once his eyes met Tony's, Jack gave the 'hi' sign.

Tony looked at his watch and returned the signal.

"Watch Tony," Jack said to Vic with a point, "I'll bet you a hundred bucks that redhead slaps him in less than 20 minutes."

"A hundred bucks? In 20 minutes? You're crazy Jack." It was a lot of money, and not a lot of time, even for Tony. Of course, Vic knew it was probably a set-up. But that was okay... playing along now would feed right into his even bigger set-up for later.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "It's a bet if you want to take it."

Vic checked his watch. "Okay, you're on. A hundred dollars. It's 7:10."

They focused in on Tony, who was talking with his hands, like they were jets, as all the Middies on their way to flight school did. Most likely Tony was explaining how dogfighting worked. And while the redhead appeared disinterested, that didn't seem to be fazing Tony. Instead, he'd use the talk of death and destruction to transition into discussions about the meaning of life, love, and the fleeting nature of existence. Babes like the redhead cared about those kind of things, Tony knew. Although not very bright, Tony could charm girls.

Indeed, by the time Tony finished his wild, animated, twisted tale of nuclear destruction, nuclear winter, and the post-nuclear-exchange earth, many a girl was left in a state of tears. Life was indeed short, they'd agree. So why not play hard? After all, their lives might end before they realized many of their dreams, including loving and being loved.

In the end, Tony would take their hands into his, look deeply into their eyes, and ask them if they wanted to go outside for a walk or a talk in his van, where it was quieter, where they could get to know each other and love each other. Most went. And on this night, the redhead joined the majority.

"There he goes," Jack announced, as Tony led the gullible redhead out the front door of Rips. The way she was nuzzling up to Tony, it was hard to believe she'd be slapping him in the next five minutes. As he watched, Vic even sensed victory.

"Five more minutes and you're cooked Jack." Vic laughed aloud.

Jack and Vic followed out the door and watched as Tony and the redhead disappeared into the VW camper. A minute later they heard a high-pitched shout from inside the van, "No. Stop it." Next, the side door slid open and the redhead was hastily making her way out. She was adjusting her shirt, as if Tony had tried to take it off.

Tony followed her quickly. "I'm sorry," he said to her back. "I thought you wanted me to."

The redhead turned around and glared at Tony. "Well you thought wrong." And with that, she slapped Tony across the cheek.

"God damn it," Vic shouted disgustingly as he watched from the bar entrance. But it was all an act, and once inside the bar, Vic was howling. He knew it was a set-up and he'd played along perfectly. That hundred bucks would pale compared to the trap he'd planned for later.

Jack walked up to Tony and the redhead. "Nice performance," Jack announced slyly as he handed each a \$20 bill. "But try not to cut it so close next time."

The redhead laughed at the easy money. She was glad she'd met Jack and Tony the night before.

Tony winked at his buddy. "Thanks a lot Jack-- love doing business with ya!" Then he took the redhead's hand and led her back into the camper van, to finish what he'd started.

Jack went back inside the Rips, searching out Bob and Vic.

For the next three hours, the four continued their balls-to-the-wall partying. Never before had they drunk so much, so quickly, and with so little inhibition. And they were feeling it. They were smart to have reserved two rooms at the Thrift Inn, about fifteen miles away, for the night. Going back to the Yard might have been a big mistake. Despite being First Class, and being treated almost like regular people, the Academy didn't tolerate drunken Middies. June week or no June week, they were always one wrong move from imprisonment in their Bancroft Hall

rooms. The Thrift Inn, therefore, was a good investment, especially for four smart young men with a golden path before them.

If only it had ended there, thought Jack, as he continued to stare out at the Washington Monument. It would have been one of the best nights of my life. If it ended then and there, maybe I'd still be married, maybe have kids, maybe even grandkids... and maybe I'd be happy...

One thing was sure, if it had ended right then, he wouldn't be thinking about pitting his co-conspirator classmates against each other... to kill one another.

Unfortunately, it hadn't ended there.

Jack closed his eyes and remembered the rest...

EIGHTEEN

You're about to bust a gut to
know what I done, ain't ye?
--Henry Fonda in The Grapes of Wrath

They left Rip's around 11:30 in no condition to drive, walk, or do anything... except probably sleep. Tony drove his camper, Vic rode shotgun, mellow Bob was in the middle bench seat, and Jack was in his preferred seat on the back bed.

"Hey Vic," Jack slobbered, his head swirling, "where's my 100 bucks?" Jack loved nothing more than to push Vic's buttons.

"Fuck off, peach-picker boy," Vic shot back. He wanted Jack to think he was really mad.

"What'd you call me?" Jack reacted, his tone angry.

"You heard me."

"Hey, speaking of names," Jack replied, "you ever wonder why your mama named you Victor? Seems like 'Loser' would have been a more appropriate name..." Being especially drunk, Jack was also especially belligerent.

"You better watch your mouth," Vic warned.

"Oh yeah? And why's that?"

"Because it's gonna be bleeding if you keep running it."

"Says who?"

"Says my fist, asshole." Vic was purposefully keeping the confrontation going, knowing that Jack was unknowingly playing right into Vic's trap.

"Oooooooh, I'm scared," Jack mocked.

From the middle seat, Bob held up his hand to keep Vic from moving to the back of the van. "Come on Vic, don't. It's not worth it."

Vic said, "Hey Jack, if you're so smart, how come you've never been laid? Huh, virgin boy? Hell, I'll bet you wouldn't know what to do with a girl if she were tied down and someone handed her to you."

Attacking one's name was one thing, but attacking one's manhood was taboo, and Jack made a move to crawl over the middle bench seat, ready to rock with Vic right then and there. Once again, though, Bob intervened.

"Come on you two, knock it off, alright? We're supposed to be out having a good time, remember?" Even drunk, Bob was the level-headed, peacemaker of the four. He was also the biggest, which explained why he always seemed to be in between Jack and Vic.

Vic was quick to bring Bob into the fray. "Go ahead Bob, stick up for Jack. You're a limp dick just like him."

The remark made even big Bob belligerent. "Go fuck yourself, Vic." It was one of the few times they'd ever heard Bob curse.

"At least I'd be able to. I bet you and Jack wouldn't know how to fuck yourself. Or maybe you would, because maybe you do. In fact, I'd be surprised if you two have fucked each other. *You two Georgia boys ain't queer are y'all?*" Vic said it with a thick Southern slang. He was closing in on his challenge.

Tony, the playboy, couldn't help but laugh to himself as he drove. He semi-enjoyed the verbal assaults between Jack and Vic after too many drinks. Theirs was a love-hate relationship, and while Tony often wondered why the two remained friends, he found it to be as entertaining as a good, slow train wreck.

Vic picked up on Tony's mood and enlisted him as an ally. "Besides me, Tony's the only other one of us that would even know what to do with a girl."

The gauntlet had been thrown and Jack wasn't about to back down. "You know, I've just about had it with your mouth, Vic."

"Oh yeah, and just what are you and your limp dick gonna do about it?" Vic said it daringly, hoping Jack would take the bait.

"I'll tell you what I'm gonna do," Jack said. He hesitated. "I'm gonna make you eat your words."

Vic jumped in quickly. "Oh, yeah? How you gonna do that?"

"I'll bet you I can get laid before you tonight," Jack blurted.

Cha-ching, thought Vic to himself as he grinned at Jack's words. He had pushed Jack hard, and by his own volition, Jack had fallen right into Vic's well-conceived trap. And there was no way Jack could back out. Not now.

Of course Vic had a secret weapon: his brunette from the night before was waiting at the Thrift Inn lounge. *That* was Vic's set-up. And after the chain-of-events from this day-- first Herndon and then the set-up with the redhead-- it would be Vic's turn to beat Jack. Vic laughed aloud, knowing he couldn't have scripted a better scenario.

"What's so funny?" Jack asked in a scornful tone as he wondered what Vic was up to.

"Nothing Jack. I was just thinking about the bet we just made."

"What about it?"

"Just remember Jackie, dear," Vic teased in his most motherly tone, "you're not allowed to have sex with Bob or any other boy. In order to win the bet, you must have sex with a girl. Okay?" Vic laid it on extra thick.

Jack wasn't amused. "Go to hell Vic. Of course with a girl. And I'll tell you what, in case you get desperate, we'll even include your mom and your sister in that category."

No matter the cut at his mom and sis, Vic was grinning, knowing it was going to be a night to remember. He was finally going to beat Jack. The only question was how much he would collect in the process. He broached that topic, "Alright Jack, so what do you want to bet?"

"Name it."

"How 'bout first month's paycheck?" Vic suggested.

"Fine by me," Jack replied.

Vic lit up. He'd be \$1,650 richer in just an hour or so.

Tony called out, "Alright boys, time's a wasting, where to?"

Vic didn't respond right away, so as to not tip his hand. Finally, as if he'd been considering various options, he called out. "How 'bout the lounge at the Thrift Inn."

"Okay with you, Jack?" Tony called back from the driver's seat.

"Fine by me," Jack responded. They were headed that way anyway, they had rooms there, and the lounge at the Inn was known for loose girls looking for a quickie with a Middie.

Five minutes later Tony turned off Route 50 and onto Collington Road, a back road shortcut that led to Rip's. As Jack was thinking about potential strategies for the Thrift Inn Lounge, the camper van began to slow.

"What's wrong Tony?" Bob called up as the camper eased over onto the gravel shoulder.

"There's someone up ahead on the shoulder flagging me down."

Bob and Jack each moved forward and looked ahead to see the headlights illuminating a white car with its hood propped up. Next to the car, was a long-haired girl waving for them to stop. Tony stopped behind the disabled car, leaving the VW's headlights on for illumination, and the four Middies hopped out and teetered forward, with Tony leading the way.

Against the backdrop of the headlights from the van, Melody Morgan sized up the four darkened figures teetering toward her. Although she couldn't make out their faces because of the glare from the van's headlights, by their unsteady walk and loudness, they didn't appear sober. But at 11:45 on Saturday night she wouldn't have expected much else.

"Hey, thanks for stopping," she called out in her friendliest voice as they approached.

"What's wrong?" Tony called out. They stopped a few feet in front of her.

"I don't know. First I smelled smoke, then the car started to jerk and stall out. That's when I pulled off 50 and onto this road. You were the first car that's come along in the last ten minutes." She could see their faces now. Short-hair, clean cut-- they didn't look like hoodlums or white trash rednecks. She was thankful for that. She was also glad to see four of them. Her biggest fear was that some low-life drifter would stop. She felt safer with four than one.

"Hey Tony, you got a flashlight in your van, right?" Vic asked.

"Yeah," Tony replied, as he did an unsteady about face and went off to retrieve it.

"You guys in the military?" she asked. She knew the Naval Academy wasn't too far away.

"Yes ma'am," replied Jack, trying to hide his drunkenness, but not succeeding. He was at once attracted to the saucy-looking girl wearing the faded, bell-bottomed blue jeans with the "Hell No We Won't Go" patch on the right thigh, the tie-died, psychedelic T-shirt, and dangly peace sign earrings. She definitely looked like she'd been around the block a few times, and notwithstanding the bet he'd just made, Jack couldn't help but think she might be his ticket to winning.

"I'm Jack. This is Vic and Bob," he added gesturing to his side. "Tony's the one getting the flashlight."

"I'm Melody," she said, as she held her hand up in a little wave. "I appreciate you stopping to help me."

Melody. She looked like a Melody... or a Sarah or a Jenny. Perhaps Melody's parents had pre-ordained her to life as a hippie by naming her Melody, Jack thought.

"No problem. That's one of the first things they teach you at the Naval Academy-- good looking girls in distress are never a bother." Normally reserved with girls, the 0.15 percent alcohol in Jack's blood was helping him charm.

Vic rolled his eyes. "Don't mind, Jack. We normally don't let him out of the Academy after dark. After two beers he gets a little messed up."

Tony returned with the flashlight, and Vic, the motor head of the four, took a quick peak under the hood while the others gathered around. He saw the problem quickly. "Oh, wow, it looks like your distributor is fried."

"What's that mean in plain English?" she asked, figuring it wasn't good.

"It means there's no way you can drive this car tonight. It'll take at least a day to fix."

She groaned at the news.

Vic continued, "But you are somewhat in luck... one of our classmates' uncle is the manager of the Phillips 66 not too far from here. I'm sure I can get him to help you out tomorrow." Vic, too, liked her. She made his brunette look like a mutt. "Where are you headed?" Vic tacked on.

"Up around Harrisburg."

Tony quickly chimed in. "We're on our way to a club down the road a ways. You can tag along with us if you want. There's a hotel there, too. Graduation's this week, so that's probably the only place you'll be able to find a room around here. Anyway, if you want, you can stay with us, and we'll take care of your car in the morning." Tony also liked the blonde hippie.

Given the situation, Melody was happy to be getting off the dark, lonely road. Plus, she really didn't have any other option. "Are you sure you won't mind?"

"No way. Anyway, that's the second thing they teach you at the Academy-- no matter the

circumstances or the personal sacrifices involved, always offer to share your bed with a good looking girl."

She giggled again and Tony was proud of his quick wit.

They piled into the van with Melody next to Bob on the middle bench seat and Jack once again in the far back on the camper bed.

Up front, Vic refocused his thoughts on the brunette waiting for him at the Thrift Inn. When he factored in the money he was going to win from Jack, he concluded she wasn't that bad looking.

"Hey Bob, grab a couple beers out of the fridge," Tony called back.

"Want a beer?" Bob asked Melody.

She didn't hesitate to answer. "Sure. I'm probably a few behind you'all, anyways." She grabbed the beer Bob opened for her and took a long pull on it. "Plus, since it looks like I'm not going anywhere tonight, I guess I might as well catch up." She took another long pull. "So where have you been?" she asked, even though the alcohol on their breath gave that away. Still, she figured it would keep the conversation moving.

Jack answered. "Out celebrating. In four days we're graduating." He said it proudly.

"Then what are you gonna do," she replied, "go to some foreign land and kill people?" She said it with disgust.

"Only if we have to," Vic responded.

There was a pregnant pause.

Jack broke the silence. "So what do you do?" he asked her.

"I advocate peace and love and beauty... and non-violence."

"What do you do for money?" Bob asked.

"Who needs money? God has given us everything we need right here on earth. If we could all just learn to live in love, we could cure all that ails the human race and the planet."

"You eat food, right?" Bob asked.

"Food that we grow," she responded. "Our commune is completely self-sufficient. We grow what we need to eat-- potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, lettuce. We have cows for milk and butter, and hens for eggs. And, we trade our extras with our neighbors for things like fabrics and

toilet paper and --."

Tony cut her off. "You live on a commune?"

"Un-huh. In southern Pennsylvania, just outside Harrisburg. There are about fifteen of us."

"And it's okay to have a car? You don't have anything against internal combustion engines, that kind of thing?"

She laughed. "We're hippies, not Amish. We don't have anything against technology, we just don't like when it's applied to the war machine that kills humans and scars the earth. The way to resolve differences is through peace, not war. And the way to peace is through love and tolerance." She paused, as if thinking of how to sum up her beliefs. "We believe in pleasure," she said finally, liking the way that sounded, so neat and tidy.

Tony was quick to take up on that line of thinking. "Pleasure! Well I do believe you and I may have a lot more in common than I thought. I am also a heavy believer in pleasure." He chuckled at himself.

"Then why do you want to kill people?" she asked. "What pleasure can there be in that?" She thought of the message she'd recently read in the Rainbow Report. "When will you realize we are all agents and witnesses of the dawning of a new age... the age of Aquarius... an age in which the warrior spirit that vaulted western man to the domination and possible destruction of creation, will be dissolved into the transcendence of the saint." She repeated it verbatim.

"Heavy," Vic repeated back, not even attempting to mask his sarcasm.

She didn't like Vic, his sarcasm, or the way he mocked her. She truly believe what she had said.

"It's all about love," she summed-up, "peace and love."

"Let's get back to pleasure," Tony called back from the driver's seat. "What's it like on the commune, you know, sexually speaking. Is it like some big orgy all the time?"

She finished chugging the beer. "It's just beautiful. There are no possessions, no hate, no vanity, no competition. There's just love. We share everything and do things to make each other happy. That's all God wants from us... to bring happiness and pleasure, not sadness and pain."

Vic jumped in. "Yeah, well there's a real world outside the commune, and somebody's got to keep the peace and stop the goddam Commies from taking over the world."

Melody thought of Vic as a little Napoleon and she despised him more with each passing minute.

Tony still didn't have his question answered. "So do you, like, switch partners all the time?" he asked, rephrasing it.

She couldn't help but smile. "There are no partners. We're free to love whomever we want, whenever we want."

It sounded like the place for Tony. He had a million more questions for her. "So have you ever had a threesome?"

She laughed at his naivety. "Threesomes? We have fifteen-somes." Then she turned to Bob, "Hey Bob, how 'bout another beer." She said it like they'd been friends for years rather than minutes.

"Prove it All Night" was playing in the background. She liked their music choices. Springsteen was one of her favorites. "Hey Tony, can you turn the music up back here?" she asked as she took the beer from Bob.

Not only was she uninhibited, Jack thought, but she had an amazing memory for names, too. From the bed in the back Jack watched her head bobbing as she sang along.

Everybody's got a hunger, a hunger they can't resist
There's so much that you want, you deserve much more than this
But if dreams came true, oh, wouldn't that be nice
But this ain't no dream we're living through tonight
Girl, you want it, you take it, you pay the price

Prove it all night
Prove it all night
Prove it all night girl and call the bluff...

She was so different from them, almost of a different world, and Jack liked her... a lot. She had an entrancing quality about her, as if she knew what was important, almost as if she had life figured out. That was attractive. As Middies, they were almost like robots. They didn't figure out life... instead, the military figured it out, and told them the answer. And they marched to the military's beat and did what they were told. Jack always hated that.

"Okay, you can turn it down Tony," she said as the song ended and she took another long swig of her beer. "So what were you'all out doing tonight?"

"Just out seeking pleasure," Tony replied, trying his best to be witty.

"Oh yeah? And what's your idea of pleasure?" Her tone was unmistakably teasing.

Jack tried to be witty and jumped into the conversation. "You know, go out and get some beers, do some shots, talk with girls, you know."

"Talking doesn't exactly sound like pleasure," she responded.

Vic called back, "That's Jack's idea of pleasure, Melody. He's kind of square."

She had a different idea of pleasure. "Do you'all ever smoke pot?"

Jack was quick to answer, "No. We're not allowed. We could get kicked out of the Academy for that."

Vic was howling to himself. The geekoid sounded like Mister Rogers. Melody must have thought Jack was a real loser.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked to no one in particular

Not wanting to be anywhere near anything like that four days from graduation, Jack wanted to say 'no.' At the same time, however, he didn't want her to think he really was a geek.

"I don't care," Tony answered nonchalantly. Nobody else objected either.

She took a plastic bag from her purse and lit one of the thin, three inch joints. Quickly a blue haze and the sweet, smoky smell filled the van.

"You grow that yourself?" Tony called back.

She smiled in the darkened van. "Un-huh. Our most important crop." She said it with a little laugh. "So how come you'all didn't pick up any girls tonight?" she asked before taking another deep toke.

"We were waiting 'til the right girl came along," Tony answered.

In the back, Jack coughed in the smoke like a dweeb.

"Oh yeah, and what's the right girl?"

"A tall blonde who smokes pot and advocates free love," Tony called back. In spite of his 2.01 grade point average, Tony was well above average when it came to hitting on females.

She laughed again. "You probably couldn't handle a girl like that."

"Oh yeah? How do you figure that?"

"Being all cooped-up at military school. You probably don't have any idea what real love is like these days." She laughed. "I kinda feel sorry for you'all. These are the best years of your life and you're missing them."

"I'll bet I could show you some things you've never seen before," Tony called back."

She laughed. "I'll bet you can't," she countered.

"Sounds like a bet I can't lose," Tony replied.

There was a pause.

"Speaking of bets," Tony called out, "hey Jack, did you tell Melody about the bet you and Vic made?"

"What bet?" she asked.

"Whoever gets laid first tonight wins a month pay from the other," Tony answered.

Vic chimed in. "And since Jack's afraid of girls, he's going to lose." Vic paused before adding, "Did you tell her you've never been laid before, Jack?"

"Shut up, Vic," Jack yelled up to the front where Vic and Tony were whispering and chuckling. Had Jack known Vic's intent to disgrace him would actually worked to Jack's advantage, he wouldn't have become angry.

There was an awkward silence in the back of the camper as Melody took a final draw on the joint and chased it with the last of her second beer. She let out a long, deep sigh, "Ummm." Her head was starting to swim. In fact, for a girl who'd been sitting in a broken down car in the middle of Hicksville just minutes before, she was beginning to feel fine... very fine. Perhaps breaking down was a sign from God? Maybe she was meant to be with them this night? Maybe she was meant to be a part of her future? Perhaps to teach them about love and not war? She remembered her horoscope from that morning: "New acquaintances will look to you for help. Befriend them, teach them, love them. Your life, and those of your new friends, will be changed forever."

She decided to follow the stars, to show them the way to peace through love.... to change their lives forever. Plus, she was attracted to Jack, not so much because of his looks, but because of what Vic said he was-- a virgin. To her, a virgin was a soul waiting to be saved. And souls of older virgins, like Jack, needed to be saved the most. She turned her head back and looked at him sitting on the bed and her mind kicked into high gear: growing up, he'd been taught probably, that sex without marriage was a mortal sin, and now, he was probably involved with one of those nice college girls saving herself 'til after her wedding.

But Melody cherished virgins for her own selfish reasons, too. A person's first sexual experience was unforgettable. All those other "firsts" in life-- first kiss, first date, first anything-- were insignificant compared to first sex. First sex was different. Everybody-- absolutely everybody- remembered who, when, and where they made love for the first time. Melody liked being 'the who.'

Now, to think that she had come upon a Naval Academy senior who'd never experienced the pleasures of sex made Melody more than just a little erotic. *What were his fantasies? Did he dream about a wild girl coming along out-of-the-blue and making wild love to him? What would he do? How would he react? How many nights did he go to bed wondering what it was like, then dreaming what it was like? How many countless hours did he wonder what being inside a woman was like?*

Like most guys, she figured his childhood was probably filled with sneak peaks at the Playboy magazines in woods with friends, glimpses through a cracked door of girls showering in a school locker room, camping out in the backyard with friends talking about what it must be like, the brush of a hand across a date's breast, or a quick feel at the movies or in the back of a car.

But knowing he'd never felt the inside of a girl-- the all-enveloping, completely-embracing fire and softness and warmth and wetness that could only be experienced from being inside a woman-- excited Melody. She squirmed as the fire burned hotter inside.

The fact that the arrogant little Napoleon was teasing Jack, and would lose a month's pay to him, made it even more desirable. She'd give Jack something special, something that Vic couldn't have: her.

She leaned back and turned to face Jack. "So, you've really never had sex?" she whispered, not giving away her delight.

Feeling small and embarrassed, Jack refused to acknowledge her question. He was boiling and wanted to twist Vic's head off.

Moments later, Melody whispered something to Bob and climbed over the middle bench seat and onto the back bed. Jack wondered what she was doing. A moment later he felt her hand on his thigh moving towards his crotch. Jack looked over to see her staring straight ahead, her mouth turned up in an ever so gentle smile. Jack's heart beat faster.

Melody looked out of the corner of her eye, wishing she could see his face better. That initial reaction-- of excitement, anticipation, and fear-- was as much fun as anything.

Jack swallowed hard as her hand found its mark and she began to rub him up and down.

Now Jack's heart seemed to explode in his chest and he could feel the blood being forced through his body in quick pulses. Quickly his penis stiffened like a hose from an opened spigot.

"Want to have some fun?" Melody whispered.

He managed a little nod.

Like a pickpocket, she skillfully unbuttoned the top button of his jeans and silently lowered his zipper. "Hey Tony, can you turn up the tunes again?" she called out again as a Rolling Stones song-- *Let's Spend the Night Together* -- came on.

The driving beat of the drums matched Jack's own heartbeat and he squirmed under her touch, his eyes closed, his head reeling. After a minute or so her hand was off him and she was moving on the darkened bed of the camper. He opened his eyes and looked down and saw her hunched between his legs. She smiled up at him mischievously.

He smiled back at his fantasy girl and as she took him into her mouth, Jack let out a muffled gasp and closed his eyes again. Jack eased back on the van bed, his soft moans muted by the hard driving music.

"Hey Melody," Tony called back over his shoulder, "do you ever, like, allow visitors at the commune. You know, just to try it out? That kind of thing?" He was picturing himself with 14 hippie chicks. That was his idea of a fifteen-some.

Silence.

Tony checked the rear view mirror but couldn't see anyone in the darkened rear of the camper. "Melody?" he called out.

Silence again.

"Jack?"

Jack was oblivious to words.

Bob turned in his seat and looked back. When he saw Melody hunched over Jack, his own heart began to race. Jesus! Quickly he moved forward, to the space between the driver and passenger seats. "You guys won't believe what's going on back there," he whispered excitedly.

"What?" Vic answered in a gruff tone.

"That hippie girl's giving Jack a blowjob."

"No way," Vic shot back incredulously.

"Go look for yourself," Bob responded.

Surreptitiously, Vic eased his way back and peeked over the bench seat and saw. His heart was also racing as he moved back up to the front of the van.

"Holy shit, I don't believe that," he declared. Then Vic thought about the bet. "That doesn't count as having sex, right? The bet was to have sex, right? A blowjob doesn't count." Next he was struck by the idea that it was just another one of Jack's scams. Could he have set up the whole thing? Was Jack that clever? Had Jack scammed Vic even now?

Vic whispered to Bob. "I tell you what Bob, we are all gonna have a piece of that little hippie girl tonight." He emphasized 'all.'

Bob was a martini of mixed up emotions-- aroused by what she was doing to Jack, worried by Vic's idea that they were all going to have her, and scared at the thought of losing his virginity.

"You think?"

"Hell, yeah, Bob. Think about it... that little flower child wants it. You heard the way she was talking about all free love crap and pleasure. She's probably been fantasizing about something like this her whole life: her and four guys she just met. You know how those hippie chicks are. They can't get enough."

"I'll bet she'll do all of us," Tony said, echoing Vic's words. He was thinking he could easily cross off at least a couple of the ten things that were on his list to do naked before he died.

"What if she doesn't want to?" Bob asked. He was scared.

"Of course she wants to," Vic shot back. "You saw her. You heard the way she talked."

Back in the camper bed, Melody had stripped off her clothes and was now kissing Jack. He kissed back, tasting the beer and the sweet smoke. High from the joints and aroused, the foreplay was over for her. "Are you okay?" she asked as she pulled her lips away.

"I'm great," he whispered shakily. He'd dreamed of this for as long as he could remember. He also thought he loved her, right then and there.

She reached forward, slid the curtain shut, maneuvered under him, and guided Jack into her. In spite of the close quarters, it was heaven to Jack, and he began to slowly rock up and down.

"What's going on back there?" Vic asked in the front of the van.

"I think Jack's having sex with her," Bob replied in a whisper.

Tony lowered the volume on the radio and the three listened to the banging and grunting from the back of the camper. A minute later, they heard Jack let out a hunk of air and 21 years of penned-up sexual energy and emotion. Vic shook his head as he thought of losing his first month's pay.

From the back of the camper, there were some whispers, then giggles, then the smell of another joint. A minute later the curtain slid open and a smiling Jack crawled over the bench seat and made his way to the front of the van. There was a new sense of confidence about him.

"How you doing, Vic?" Jack said, his voice flush with self-assurance.

"Dude, if you set this thing up, all I can say is... you are a friggin' genius. Touché'."

"I didn't set it up, Vic, I swear." Jack paused. "And you don't have to pay me either... man, that was so fun..."

That would have been a great ending to the night, thought Jack, as he continued to stare out at the Washington Monument. It would have been the best night of my life.

Jack closed his eyes and remembered the rest...

NINETEEN

The saddest moment in a person's life
comes but once.
--Anonymous

Jack grinned at Bob. "She said she wants you next," he said.

Bob's face fell. He looked sick... and scared. "M-me," he stammered. It was the first time he had stuttered in months.

Jack nodded. "She said she loves virgins. But be careful," he added.

"W-why?"

"Because I'm a tough act to follow." Jack winked. He felt like a real man.

With trepidation and the pressure of his peers, Bob climbed over the middle seat into the camper bed. Melody slid the curtain shut.

In the front of the van, Vic bottomed-up his beer and announced, "I'm next."

"I'm not so sure about that, Vic," Jack replied.

"Oh yeah. Why's that?"

"She said she only wanted me and Bob...the *virgins*." Jack said 'virgins' with glee.

"Bullshit," Vic replied.

"I'm serious, man. That's what she said."

We'll see about that, Vic thought. He wondered if Jack had cut some sort of a deal with her. Knowing Jack, the bastard had probably offered to pay for her car repairs in exchange for the cut at Vic. That's what it had to be, Vic figured. And Vic wasn't about to sit by passively

and let that hippie-chick get away without getting some himself.

“You’re full of shit, Jack,” Vic answered. “She wants all of us. And I’m next.”

Jack didn’t think so, but decided he’d let Melody tell Vic for herself. She wasn’t the type who needed someone to stick up for her.

“I’m with Vic,” Tony called out. He pulled over and stopped the van. You drive now,” he said to Jack.

Jack took the wheel and they continued to drive a roundabout way towards the Thrift Inn. Minutes later, they heard the same noises from the back as they’d heard 10 minutes earlier from Jack. Obviously, Bob was no longer a virgin, too.

As Bob returned to the front of the van, Vic made his way to the back, two beers in hand.

Melody was scrunched on the camper bed squirming back into her jeans.

“Is it my turn yet?” Vic asked nicely. He held the beer out in a peace offering.

She let out a little laugh and shook her head, “Sorry, charley. The party’s over.” She buttoned her jeans and took the beer.

“Oh come on,” Vic said, “Those two couldn’t have been anything but a warm-up for you. Don’t you want the main event?”

She smirked in the darkened rear of the camper. “Not with you.”

Her flippancy angered Vic. "What's the matter, I'm not good enough for you?"

She didn't like him and nothing he said would get him into her pants. She slipped on her t-shirt, ignoring Vic.

Vic flashed Melody a look of pout. “Please,” Vic begged in a whisper.

Melody shook her head. “No. I told you, I’m done. I just like virgins.”

“What if I told you I’m a virgin?”

“Then you’d be lying. And I don’t like liars.”

Vic felt rage. Obviously, this hippie bitch didn't know anything about respect. “Hey turn up the music,” Vic called out. Then he leaned towards her. “You’ll be done when I say so,” he said, his voice low, his body saturated with tequila, Dewars, beer, and anger.

She didn't like the look in his eyes or the sound of his voice. "Look, I don't want any trouble," she said as she attempted to push by Vic and crawl out of the camper bed and over the middle bench seat.

Vic grabbed her left arm and twisted it behind her back.

"Owww."

Vic smiled sinisterly. In his right hand was the small Swiss army knife attached to his key chain. It was small, but sharp. "I don't want any trouble, either," he whispered, showing her the glistening blade. "So just do as I say and don't embarrass me in front of my buddies. You got it?"

She felt caged. Should she scream out? Would the other three come to her aid? Or would that only enrage him? Now she was wishing she'd never started anything with Jack. She decided to play it cool. She nodded. "Okay, okay. But, just be cool, okay? Don't freak out on me."

Vic let go of her arm, but kept himself between her and the bench seat. "Now is it my turn?" he asked again, smiling like a dog in heat. He looked like he wouldn't take no for an answer.

She nodded, giving in to him. Hopefully, he would be quick. "Okay, whatever."

Vic unbuckled his pants. "Take your clothes back off," Vic ordered matter-of-factly as if he were at a drive-in. "And say something out loud so they hear you. Say that you want me."

"I want you," she repeated low and flat.

"Louder," Vic commanded as he grabbed her wrist. "With emotion."

"Ummm. I want you," she said loudly enough for the three up front to hear.

The three looked at each other. Hmmm, it was Vic's turn, they concluded. They heard the curtain slide shut.

"Now lay down," Vic ordered as he wriggled out of his pants. He was fully erect.

Melody complied, but with each passing minute, was hating him more.

In an instant he was on top of her and in her, humping like an animal, as if she didn't matter. This was not love, she told herself. This was rape. A rage swept over her.

Vic was thrusting harder and faster, with malice, and hurting her. In the dim light she could see his white teeth, half-smiling, half-inflamed, as if taking pleasure in pounding into her... as if teaching her he was the boss. Worse, he was showing no signs of being close to finishing.

"Owwww, please," she pleaded, short and pained. "Stop, you're hurting me."

Her pleas fell on deaf ears and Vic continued pounding her like an insignificant, stupid, irresponsible, unrespecting hippie bitch who deserved what she was getting. He'd stop when he was done.

In the front, Jack, Tony, and Bob had the music cranking and were oblivious to her cries.

The pain was getting to be too much and she finally decided to make him stop. Feeling around on the bed, her fingers touched the cold metal blade he'd laid down. Nervously, she grabbed it and moved her hand towards his back as Vic continued thrusting. As she looked into his eyes, she could almost read his mind: *Take that, you stupid hippie bitch. Take that.*

Vic was grunting now, sweating alcohol from every pore, building himself into a frenzy. He felt nothing for her, everything for himself.

That's when Melody decided she had enough. "Get off me," she said through tight jaws.

Instinctively, Vic reached down and grabbed her neck with his hands. "I'll get off you when I'm done," he said, his fingers pressing into her like ten vices.

Now even more enraged and scared, Melody did the only thing she could to make him stop-- she thrust the knife into his back as hard as he was thrusting into her, as hard as he was squeezing her throat. Then she ripped downward.

Take that, asshole, she thought maliciously. *How's it feel to have something you don't want jabbed into you and have it rip you up? Not fun is it?*

The searing pain and tearing of skin in his back caused Vic to yell out and instinctively he let go of her neck and reached back to feel the sticky stream of warm blood flowing from the wound in his back. He brought his hand around and saw his blood-soaked hand. "You fucking bitch," he screamed at her. "Shit. Owww. Fuck," he yelled.

Vic's scream caused the three up front to turn around and look towards the rear of the camper. Although the curtain was shut, they could make out a flurry of frantic movement. Tony and Bob froze as Jack slowed the camper down onto the shoulder of the road. What followed happened too fast for any of them to stop it.

During the downward rip, Melody had lost her grasp of the knife, and her only hope was that Vic was too hurt to fight back. Unfortunately, that was wishful thinking. Knowing she needed to do more, she dug her half-inch fingernails into his bloodied back, and yanked

downwards like a frightened cat. She felt his skin tear and fresh blood flow.

Wounded, Vic withdrew and steadied himself against the back of the middle seat. His back was on fire and only one thing mattered now-- revenge. Engulfed with wild animal rage, he drew his right arm back and slapped her. Swack. His open hand glanced off her cheek and Melody cried out more from fright than pain. And when his pulsing back screamed that one slap was not enough, Vic reached down, grabbed her blonde braids, and yanked her up from the camper bed. The last thing she saw was the hate in his eyes as he swung again. This time it was a punch, and it landed squarely on her left cheek, exploding the skin and snapping her head into the side of the van. With vicious force, the sharp-edged handle of the window crank was driven through the socket of her eye and into the frontal lobe of her brain like a pneumatic nail gun shooting through Jell-O, and the peace-loving flower child collapsed onto the camper bed.

Tony and Bob reached the rear of the camper and pulled the curtain open.

"Owwww. My back," Vic called out as he reached around and put a hand onto the gaping wound on his back. "That fucking bitch stabbed me."

Tony flipped the back camper light on and Bob saw a blanket of red as blood pulsed from the ripped skin in Vic's back. The wound was deep and gruesome and Bob could barely keep looking. Neither Tony nor Bob thought to check on Melody.

"Holy shit, Vic, she cut you real bad," Tony called out excitedly as he grabbed a wad of paper towels from the side storage cabinet and handed them to Bob. "I think you're gonna need stitches."

"Fuck me," yelled Vic at that news as Bob wiped the blood from his back. The bitch had just ruined the rest of his night. *How the fuck was he going to explain this to the doctor at sick bay?* And what if he had to go to the hospital at Bethesda? That would screw up the next day as well. Shit. Fucking hippie bitch.

As Bob pressed the paper towels against Vic's back, Tony finally looked down at Melody, sprawled out naked, face down on the camper bed. She wasn't moving. That didn't seem right, and instinctively, Tony leaned over the bench seat to get a closer look. That's when he saw the pool of blood on the bed beneath her head. That's when his heart began to double-time. That's when he knew something was wrong... very fucking wrong.... Jesus!

He took a deep breath and nervously reached out and grabbed her wrist to feel for her pulse. There was only one... and it was his. As the realization hit him, he felt his own blood pulse wildly and his chest constrict as he gulped for air. Then a deep chill swept over him-- worse than at breakfast when he thought he'd failed Statistics-- and the hairs on his neck stood on end.

"Jesus, you guys," Tony finally cried out, "There's something wrong with her." He hesitated before saying it aloud: "I, uh, I think she's dead."

The sound waves traveled in sickening slow motion through their ears and into their brains, and by the time that last word was understood, they were all shaking, as if chilled by the same queer air inside the camper van on that balmy May night.

'Dead?' Did Tony just say, 'dead'... as in 'not living'?

Jack's mind raced as the unthinkable words registered in his brain. Dead? Huh? She couldn't be dead. They had just been having fun with her... only minutes before. He'd lost his virginity to her. So had Bob. She couldn't be dead. Fun and dead didn't go together. Fun and laughter go together. Fun and life go together. Dead goes with dead... and dirt and worms and decay and cold and darkness and skeletons.

"Check again," Jack commanded, trying to cover his fear as he made his way to the back of the van. He was sucking air, his heart pounding, his breathing erratic.

Tony rechecked, and when he raised up the sunken, fearful expression on his face in the dimly lit van said it all. He shook his head slowly, unable to say the haunting words aloud again.

Jack moved around Tony and bent down to check for himself. He grabbed her wrist and felt... nothing. No fun, no laughter, no life.

Oh God, no, please.

Jack's mind was a jumbled fuzz. It had to be a dream. That, or he was so drunk he was just imagining it all. There hadn't been a girl giving him a blowjob in the back of Tony's van or a girl with whom they'd had sex. There hadn't been a fight. There wasn't blood all over Vic's back. And there certainly wasn't a dead hippie girl lying face down on the bed of Tony's camper in a pool of her own blood. It couldn't be happening. He was still a virgin. He was still going to graduate. Right?

A voice inside his head pleaded-- *Wake up! Wake up little peace-loving flower child! Wake up Melody! Please. Wake up.*

Jack thought quickly.

Maybe they could try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? Maybe they could breathe for her and restart her heart.

"Help me get her on her back," he commanded Tony. Shocked out of drunkenness, Jack was pumping with the adrenaline of hope, and somehow, somehow, he was sure they could still fix this.

Tony grabbed her mid-section and legs while Jack supported her neck and torso as they tried to flip her over on the camper bed. She was heavier than a skinny, 5' 8" girl should have been and they struggled to turn her on the close quarters of the bed. As she rolled over and her face came into the shadowy light they saw the horror-- her right eye was completely gone, a blackened, bloody, oozing dark hole left in its place. Thick, dark blood covered the rest of her expressionless face and Jack knew, right then, there would be no resuscitation. And with that realization, Jack's chest began to really heave as he began hyperventilating. *Oh my God! She really was dead. And she wasn't coming back.*

That's when time stopped.

Jack studied her blood-soaked blonde braids. She had put those braids in that morning, most likely. Yep, she had looked at herself in the mirror and braided her hair, neatly and tightly. And she had probably smiled at herself. Now... 18 hours later, she was just a heavy, lifeless, white expressionless mass, with just one eye left and those beautiful tight braids, never again to look into the mirror, never again to smile at herself or the world... no sir... no life remained of the peace-loving, fun-seeking Melody.

Like a sinkhole out of nowhere, the reality sunk in-- he wasn't a virgin anymore, he wasn't dreaming, he wasn't going to wake up... and neither was Melody. She was dead. Oh God! What had they done? How could they be sitting in a VW camper at 12:30 in the morning... with a dead hippie girl in the back... four days before graduation?

Jack took a deep pull on the air, but it only made his chest constrict. Was there any oxygen in the air? Was there any life left in the camper? Jack felt nauseous, as if the air in the camper were toxic with death.

The silence was maddening.

What to do? What to do? That was the question. It wasn't 'to be' or 'not to be.' They'd already decided that... at least for Melody. She was 'not to be.' And it was all their fault. *Oh God! What to do? What to do? That was the question.*

Jack closed his eyes as tightly as possible. *Stay calm. Everything will be okay. You'll figure something out. You always figure something out.* His breathing slowed a bit, but his heart didn't.

Jesus, just four days from graduating, four days away from completing the four-year journey that, at times, had seemed like a trip to hell and back... well, almost back-- and now this one last obstacle. Obstacle? No... a Statistics final was an obstacle... getting caught drunk and confined to your room was an obstacle... missing formation was an obstacle. But a dead girl? That was more than an obstacle. A dead girl was a graduation-stopper. A dead girl was a life-stopper.

Tony broke the silence, vocalizing the obvious question. "Jesus, you guys, what do we do?" His voice was cracking with nervousness.

Unfortunately, there was no obvious answer-- they didn't teach things like this at the Academy-- and the silence spoke volumes.

Finally Jack remembered something from junior year Leadership 101 class: *even if you can't be brave, pretend to be-- no one will be able to tell the difference.* He pretended. "There's two options," Jack announced nervously, but trying to sound like a leader, "one, we can go to the police, tell them what happened, and see what happens, or two, we..."

Bob interrupted him before he could identify the second option. "What d-d-d-do you think w-w-w-will happen if w-w-we d-d-do that?" He was stuttering like none of them had ever heard.

Jack hated questions that didn't have good answers. But they had to talk about it. "If we explain that it was an accident-- which it was-- and if we tell them she hit her head on the window crank-- which she did-- then, who knows, maybe we might be okay. You know, it's kind of like the situation where a little girl chases a ball into the road and you can't stop in time. People don't go to jail for that. It was an accident."

Bob, the future lawyer, nodded at what sounded like a reassuring legal analogy. His heart even slowed a bit.

Unfortunately, Jack knew the situation wasn't that simple. And anyone who wasn't scared out of their gourd, would have known this, too. Jack's spur-of-the-moment analogy-- of the little girl chasing the ball and getting hit by a car-- was grossly optimistic, grossly oversimplified, and grossly inappropriate. For openers, a little girl chasing a ball into the road doesn't have semen inside her from two of the guys who run over her. Plus, the driver of the car that runs her over doesn't have a gaping knife wound in his back or fingernail tracks gouged into his back from the dead girl. Those facts made more than a little bit of a difference.

"Do you think that'll work?" Tony asked hopefully. Either he didn't understand the magnitude of what they'd just done, or he was in shock, or he really was just plain stupid.

Jack knew it was probably a combination of all, but mostly the latter. Nonetheless, Jack couldn't lie. "No," he answered in a quick, almost angry tone that revealed his impatience for such a stupid question.

He paused to let that sink in before elaborating. "At best, even if the police believe us, we'll almost certainly get kicked out of the Academy for 'conduct unbecoming.' There's no way they'll graduate anyone involved in something like this. They'll do an autopsy on her... they'll find out Bob and I had sex with her." He took a deep breath. "That, by itself, looks pretty bad. The fact that Vic's got that huge wound in his back, along with her fingernail tracks, makes it

look even worse... like she was trying to fight him off."

"B-b-but she was the one who s-s-st-started it all. She c-c-consented." Minus the stuttering, now Bob sounded like the lawyer he would one day become.

"You know that and I know that," Jack responded. "The question is whether anyone else will believe it. The cut in Vic's back sure as hell doesn't look like consent."

Nobody disagreed with Jack's assessment.

"What if we go to the police without Vic?" Tony suggested. "You know, what if just you and Bob go to the police with her? You tell them you were having sex in the back and there was a sharp turn and she hit her head."

"So then Bob and I get kicked out?" Jack responded.

"Maybe not," Tony answered. "Maybe they'll believe that."

"I'm n-n-not g-getting k-k-k-kicked out," Bob injected. "I d-didn't do anything wr-wr-wrong."

"I didn't do anything wrong, either," Jack said. "Why don't you take her to the police, Tony?"

"Hey, my semen's not in her," he shot back. "Of all of us, I sure as hell didn't do anything wrong."

The dissension had already started and her body was still warm.

Jack spoke again, "You want truth? Here's truth-- the Academy won't care about any of that. Once word gets out that two Middies had sex with the same girl, and another Middie hit her and was knifed in the back, and drugs were found inside the van where it all took place, we might as well all just forget it. At best, they'll use us all as examples. There's no way they'll graduate any of us."

The reality descended upon them like a mushroom cloud. They had nuked themselves and it was too late to call back the weapon.

Worse, Jack wasn't even done yet. "And remember, that's the best case scenario. No matter what, we'll be humiliated, our families will be humiliated." Jack looked at Bob. "Molly will be humiliated. It'll follow us the rest of our lives."

"And that's the best case?" Tony asked incredulously. Now, even he was beginning to

understand the magnitude of what had just happened.

Jack replied. "That's what I think. If you think that's wrong then say so."

Once again, the silence spoke more than any words.

"If we go the police and that's the best case, what's the worst?" Tony asked. He'd worked too hard hunting down gouge to make it through the Academy, and his parents were too proud of him. Plus, he was going to be a Marine and a pilot.

"The worst case scenario is we'll be convicted of rape and murder," Jack responded bluntly. The two words-- rape and murder-- hung in the early morning air like the faces of the four Middies. "Face it, no matter what we all say, they're going to say we raped her. They'll see the wound on Vic's back and all his blood in the van, and say she didn't consent to sex. And once they conclude that, they'll say we forced her and killed her. It won't matter that it was an accident. About the only thing we can argue is that Vic hit her in self-defense. Four Middies and one dead hippie girl." Jack shook his head. "Self-defense? No way. We're completely fucked."

The four were almost shocked back to sobriety. Drunk or sober, none of them could disagree with how it looked... definitely like rape, maybe like murder.

"Jesus H. Christ, Jack, so what the fuck do we do?" Tony blurted out, knowing that the best case-- getting kicked out of the Academy-- was unacceptable. The worst case was unthinkable. "What's the option besides going to the police"?

The silence seemed to last a lifetime and, deep down, all four knew the answer.

It was nearing 1 am when Jack opened his eyes and gazed back out at the heavens above the Washington Monument. He didn't want to think about the rest of that horrible night. Although he wished he could turn back the clock literally hundreds of times, the hours that followed were the ones that bothered him most. After all, up to that point, he hadn't done anything 'so wrong.' Was his conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman? Probably. But even that was debatable. Yes, he had engaged in consensual sex with a beautiful 24 year-old girl in the secluded back bed of a VW camper van. Big whoop. In the Academy's 143 year existence, he was probably number 5,254 on the list of Middies who'd done something like that. Yes, she had smoked a joint and, yes, he was in the van when she smoked it; and yes, he drank a beer in a moving vehicle. So what? He hadn't raped or murdered or committed adultery or broken any other man-made or God-made law.

Really, up to that point, he hadn't done anything immoral, either. Jesus said 'love one another,' and that's exactly what he and Melody had done. Truth was, in the back of that camper bed, he was sure he had loved her. In fact, if Jesus had popped down out of the heavens and

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asked if he were willing to marry Melody, Jack would surely have said, 'Yes.' For in the back of that camper bed, he had loved her more than he had loved any other human in all his 22 years, and perhaps more sadly, more than he would love anyone since.

Had they done the right thing after that, and gone to the police, here's what surely would have happened: (1) they would not have graduated and likely would have served five years in the enlisted ranks of either the Navy or Marines; (2) Vic would have gone to jail for rape and manslaughter; and (3) Melody's relatives would have known what happened to their daughter, their sister, and their mother, and the beautiful hippie would have received a proper burial.

As for Jack specifically, not having the Academy degree would certainly have been a setback and it's very likely he never would have become an Admiral or the President. On the other side of the ledger, however, he might have been free to love and marry and father... and sleep without the horrible nightmares and terror attacks. Indeed, it's even possible that one day he could have looked in the mirror with pride... without self-hatred... and without fear of answering to God.

No doubt, the pros outweighed the cons. Such was hindsight...

This was the back drop as Jack contemplated what to do 36 years later. One thing was sure— this time, he would do the right thing... no matter how many classmates got hurt.

TWENTY

When you are courting a nice girl,
an hour seems like a second.
When you sit on a red-hot cinder,
a second seems like an hour.
That's relativity!
--Albert Einstein

It didn't seem normal that a man on his way to a private meeting with the President would be thinking about the tight ass and nice rack on a certain 22 year-old in the White House stenography office. 'Normal,' however, is the most relative of all words in the English language. As such, what most people considered normal wasn't necessarily normal to Chief-of-Staff Tony Moretti. After all, most people probably didn't consider it normal for the Chief-of-Staff to blackmail the President of the United States. Tony Moretti, however, wasn't one of those people. To him, such behavior was not only *normal*, it was *essential*. Such behavior made him the rich and famous man he was. Possessing the capability to bring down the most powerful man on the earth with just one phone call or e-mail, and knowing nothing could be done to stop him, gave Tony a different perspective, a different concept of normal. And that meant he could play by his own rules.

And so, as he walked down the thick beige carpet towards the curved stairs leading to Jack's private den, Chief-of-Staff Tony Moretti was indeed thinking about 22 year-old stenographer Jill Drain. He was even thinking of stopping in and seeing her after meeting with Jack. Hopefully, she'd be alone. If so, he'd be able to make his move on her without worry of it appearing in the Style section of the Post the next day. He envisioned the conversation they'd have...

... "Hi Jill," he'd say as he walked into the steno's suite to see her hunched over her keyboard.

Upon hearing his voice, the brown-eyed brunette would turn from her computer and look up at him.

"I think we met a month ago." He'd put out his hand. "Tony Moretti."

She'd be awestruck he was talking to her; and in disbelief and amazed that he remembered her name. Of course she remembered meeting him. He was like God. And he was

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even more handsome than the first time she'd seen him. "Hi, Mr. Moretti," she'd reply gleefully, unsure whether to stand or remain seated.

Tony would solve her dilemma by sitting down next to her desk. "So how do you like working here at the White House? Is everyone treating you well?"

"Thank you, yes, it's unbelievable. I can't believe how lucky I am to be here." She'd feel important talking face-to-face with the President's Chief-of-Staff. Then she'd think back to her high school Civics class, trying to remember if he were somewhere in line to succeed the President... like if six or seven other people died? She'd wish she had paid more attention in class.

Pompous Tony would sense her awe. He'd smile sweetly and nod. "Good. You just keep up the hard work and keep smiling. I've heard good things about you. You've got a lot of potential here at the White House."

Next to blackmail, flattery is what Tony did best. Flattery is also how he got the young, curvy girls with high ambitions to do what he wanted. No doubt about it, if men were pigs, Tony Moretti was a blue ribbon prize winner.

"Thanks," she'd respond modestly, surprised that anyone so high in the Administration noted her hard work. Transcribing the President's speeches for the official public record may not have been the most difficult job in the world, but she did, indeed, work hard. It galled her to think that Jan, the head of the steno's office, had told her she needed to improve her typing speed. Jill couldn't wait to tell her mom about the compliment from the Chief-of-Staff.

Tony would look at the picture on her desk. He'd pick it up and study it. "You like horses?" he'd ask as he handed it back to her.

She'd perk up even more. "I love 'em," she'd gush almost breathlessly. "That's mine there-- Camelot. My parents have a small farm outside of Utica. We've got three others."

"She's beautiful." Then Tony would act as if he'd just come up with a brilliant new thought. "Hey, you know if you're ever interested in riding sometime, I've got horses out at my place in Winchester. I'd be happy to have you out." You could ride my horse, and afterwards I'll saddle you up, Tony would think naughtily.

The invitation would leave her speechless. "Wow, that'd be great," she'd finally manage.

"Great. Well, what do you say we set something up, then?"

She'd look into his inviting eyes. My God, he's not just being polite, he's really serious. "Okay. Yeah. Neat!"

'Neat!' Tony would repeat back silently. He loved to hear words like 'awesome' and 'neat'... the timeless words used by the gullible, trusting girls that were, and always would be, Tony's favorite. "Great. It's a date then. I'll e-mail you directions. How's this Saturday sound? Twoish? We can grill some steaks afterwards and maybe get a movie or something."

Date? Like, wow, he considers this a date... me and the President's dreamy Chief-of-Staff. Oh my God! "Cool." She'd make a note to definitely not tell her mom about this. After the Monica fiasco she wouldn't want her to worry.

"Alright then, Saturday it is," he'd say as he looked at his watch. "Whoops. Looks like I better quit gabbing and get going. I'll be in touch."

She'd smile and wave as he turned to leave.

... Now back from the flashback, Tony pushed at his groin to maneuver his semi-hard erection. Saturday with Jill would be perfect-- a little ride, a lot of wine, some steaks, and a sweet 22 year-old for dessert. Oh! Life was good... so good! Tony walked on.

Deep down, Tony half-wished he could heed the stodgy advice of his friends to lay off the hard-bodied youngsters. "They'll be the death of you someday, Tony," even Jack had once said. But what the dark-haired, dimpled 58 year-old Jersey boy didn't lack in looks, he lacked in willpower. So he did what everyone else does when, deep down, they're too weak to stop: he rationalized: *there's nothing wrong with what I'm doing. Physical attraction doesn't have to change with age. I liked 22 year-olds when I was 22, why should I stop liking them just because I'm older? Hell, the truth is I like 'em even more now! The fact they find me attractive isn't my fault.*

As he came upon the secret service guard leading up the staircase, Tony was smiling like a man without a care. "Mornin' Terry. The boss in?"

"Yes, sir. He's expecting you."

Tony climbed the curved staircase, went down the hall, and rapped loudly on the partially-open six-panel door with his diamond-studded Academy ring. The fact it marred the glossy white paint, and someone would have to touch it up that weekend, mattered little to Tony. After all, people who didn't know big, damaging secrets about the President were supposed to do work like that. In Tony's mind, those people should be thanking him for contributing to their livelihood and continued employment.

Tony stuck his head around the opening to the study as Jack looked up from a small pile of papers on his desk.

"Jack?" he called out, as he stepped inside the dimly-lit room.

Upon seeing Tony, Jack pulled off his reading glasses and motioned for his Chief-of-Staff to enter. "Come on in Tony." There was a genuine sincerity to Jack's tone, as if he were truly glad to be meeting with Tony. While it wasn't normal for Jack to feel that way towards his blackmailing classmate, today wasn't normal for Jack either. Today, Jack was setting in motion the plan to free himself from the sticky tangled web. Time was of the essence, Jack knew. From the surveillance tapes Donno had provided the day before, Jack knew Drew Matthews had his own plan in motion, and Jack needed to get his own plan in synch.

Tony sat down in one of the leather chairs facing Jack's desk.

"You wanted to see me?" Tony said, the disdain in his voice unmistakable. While Jack may have been happy to meet with Tony, Tony obviously wasn't. As far as he was concerned, no good ever came out of private meetings with Jack. After all, their private relationship was about as warm and trusting as US- Soviet relations during the Cold War.

Outwardly, however, their relationship seemed almost idyllic, and certainly no different than the traditional relationship between most any President and his Chief-of-Staff. At staff meetings, they two would put on masks and treat each other with unbridled professionalism and courtesy, just as one would expect. And while it was obviously their own sick, private joke, both had concluded long before that such behavior was in each of their best interests. For Jack, the masked behavior hid any notion of bad blood between the two. For Tony, it ensured the world saw him as the consummate Chief-of-Staff and loyal confidante and valued member of the President's inner circle. Of course, what they felt inwardly, and how they interacted privately, were completely different stories.

Jack leaned forward in his chair as if to create a sense of sanctity. "I did," Jack replied to Tony's question. "And I'll cut right to the chase."

As his eyes met Jack's, Tony expected combative words to follow. That was the normal course of their private, mask-free conversations.

"Tony," Jack stated, "I want to change our relationship. I want us to be friends again--real friends, not superficial friends like we put on in public."

Jack's out-of-the-blue announcement caught Tony by surprise. *What kind of a trick was this?*

Before he could respond, Jack was speaking again. "I know you're probably skeptical, Tony. You're probably telling yourself to watch your back, right?"

"Let's just say I'm cautiously pessimistic. With all the bad blood between us, it's hard to believe you really want us to be friends."

Jack smiled. He had expected Tony to say something like that. "Maybe you're underestimating me?"

"If there's one thing I've learned, Jack, it's to never underestimate you. You're the one man on the earth who shouldn't be underestimated. That's why I have to be careful about everything you say or do."

"I guess there's a compliment in there somewhere," Jack responded deliberately. "So why do you doubt that I'd like for us to bury the hatchet and become friends again?"

"I never said I doubted that. I just find it hard to believe you'd want that."

"Why?"

Tony wondered whether Jack was somehow trying to get him to admit he'd been blackmailing Jack for decades. Perhaps it was a trap, perhaps Jack had a tape recorder going. Of course, none of that really mattered. Tony had the goods on Jack and could take him down whenever he choose. Sure, Tony might go down too, but Jack had a lot further to go down. That's what made blackmail so effective. And if push came to shove, Tony was sure he could cut a deal with DOJ.

"Why would you want to be friends with someone who's used you?"

"Why not?" Jack responded aloud.

"Because that's not how normal people are."

"Normal's a relative term. And *you* know that as well as anyone. But you're also forgetting I'm not like other people. Remember? I'm the guy who shouldn't be underestimated. Perhaps you should judge me a little differently than all the other so-called *normal people*?" This time, Jack made the quotes sign when he said 'normal.'

Tony shook his head. "You may be different, Jack, but you're still human. And you can't tell me here and now that a part of you doesn't hate me."

"Sure I can, Tony. The fact is I don't hate you... not now at least. Years ago, I did... I'll admit that. I hated being forced to go out on a limb for you and do things that weren't always, shall I say, ethical. That would make anyone-- normal or abnormal-- mad. I don't dispute that. But at the same time, a part of me can understand why you did it. I know you were desperate after Okinawa and you needed help. You did what you thought you had to do to survive." Jack paused to set off his summary conclusion. "In looking back, I've come to the conclusion you acted like the thief who steals to feed his family. It may not be right, but it's understandable."

Jack paused, allowing his words to be heard. And while they didn't describe the rage and gall he really felt towards Tony, they served his purpose. No doubt Tony was playing them over

in his head. Before Tony could respond, Jack was talking again. He had a lot more for Tony to hear.

"That said, Tony, I have to look at the bigger picture and the end results. I may not have liked what you did, but I can't really say I've been harmed by it, either. Right?" Jack paused to let those words sink in.

Jack continued, "The past is the past, and no matter what happened between us, look at me today-- I'm at the pinnacle of my life, the most successful President in American history, according to some, my approval rating over 80 percent, my place in history secure. The bottom line is this-- I'm on top of the world and happier than I've ever been in my life. How much anger can I really have towards you or anyone for that matter? I know this may sound corny, but the fact is I don't have room to hate you. Not anymore. Maybe I'd feel differently if you'd brought me down, but I can't say I'm any worse for the wear, can I? In truth, I think what happened between us made me a stronger person. It taught me to be more careful, to measure people up a little more. And that's served me well. I've learned to limit my vulnerabilities. Who knows, maybe I wouldn't be where I'm at if it weren't for the things that happened between us. Maybe I would have opened up to the wrong person at the wrong time... who's to say?"

Tony nodded, still uncomfortable. Although Tony didn't want to let his guard down, he had to admit Jack's words made some sense. Why would Jack be mad at him now? But Tony needed to hear more. *Why now?*

"I hear you, Jack. But the fact is, regardless of whether I was desperate, or didn't hurt you, it has to bother you. I'm certainly not proud of what I did."

Tony's words were more than Jack had hoped to hear. The fact Tony was admitting fault was a move in the right direction-- in the direction Jack wanted to steer the conversation.

Jack responded quickly. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Tony, because one of the first steps toward us regaining trust is to acknowledge our mistakes. And I'll admit I've made my share. Up to now I've done nothing to bring us back together, and for that, I've been wrong. I should have approached you long before." Jack hung his head slightly, moving his eyes downward. It was all he could do to keep Tony from seeing the lying in his eyes.

Jack continued. "Look, simply put, I want to put everything behind us... to move on. There's no reason we have to keep playing games in public. We can wipe the slate clean and start fresh. What do you say?"

"Like I said, Jack, I'm cautiously pessimistic. After all, you've got everything to gain and I've got everything to lose."

"You really believe that?"

Tony nodded.

"Then you're being pretty short-sighted."

"Oh yeah? Well then, humor me, Jack. Tell me what's in it for me."

"For openers, a much better place in American politics and history." Jack paused and looked hard at Tony. He sensed Tony weighing the words. "Would you like me to elaborate?"

"I'm all ears."

"Don't you think you'd be better off if you had my genuine support rather than the make-believe support you've got now?"

"If you're support we're really genuine, sure. But having you-- and your make-believe support-- hasn't been all that bad." Tony smirked that smirk that Jack hated, a smirk of control. "Plus, maybe I like the idea that I have control over you, Jack. It helps me sleep well at night, knowing that you, and that make-believe support of yours, will always be there for me."

The arrogance made Jack wish he'd have given Donno the go-ahead to blow up Tony and his fancy Porsche. What an ass.

"And you're satisfied with that?" Jack replied in a measured tone.

"Why wouldn't I be? It's gotten me where I am today. Plus, there's no reason to think it won't get me even more in the future. Right? Face it, Jack, I've got you by the balls and you know it. Why would I ever want to give that up?"

"You don't have me by the balls," Jack scoffed. "In fact, in the blink of an eye I'd be happy to show you just how little you really have."

Tony didn't like the confidence in Jack's voice. Nor did he like being forced into a corner. At the same time, though, he had to find out what Jack meant. "Go ahead," he said, daring the President.

Jack smiled at Tony as he opened the middle drawer of his desk and pulled out a manila folder. It was the information Donno had given Jack just days before. Jack pushed the quarter-inch manila folder towards Tony.

"What's that?"

"Open it up and see."

TWENTY ONE

The very essence of leadership is
that you have to have a vision.
--Theodore Hesburgh

Tony opened the folder and studied the pages carefully. As he did, his face seemed to droop with each page. The entire contents of his safe-deposit box-- his will and all of the information that formed Tony's golden parachute-- was there in his hands, staring back at him. The information was supposed to be safely locked away, with instructions to his lawyer that it be released to the police and every major media source in the U.S. if anything ever happened to Tony. It disclosed the exact location of the body as well as other physical evidence Tony had saved from that night 36 years ago. Without the security of this in safe-deposit, Tony's golden parachute wouldn't deploy and he had nothing on Jack, no control over him.

Jack remained quiet as Tony absorbed it all. Finally Tony spoke out. "How did you get this?"

"Does it really matter? The fact is, I did get it. More importantly, I didn't have to tell you I had it. I could very easily have let you go on thinking nothing was wrong."

"I'd have found out soon enough. I check that safe deposit box weekly."

Jack smiled. "I know how often you check it, Tony. But you're missing my point. The fact is, this information's been in my hands the past three days and you didn't know that. And during those three days you've been living without the protection of your golden parachute. Do you have any idea how easily I could have done away with you once and for all during that time?"

Jack paused to allow that question to set in.

"You could have been killed by a trigger-happy burglar at your Winchester estate Sunday night after you returned from the Oriole's game, or kidnapped on Monday night after you left Clyde's. Hell, some radical terrorist could have wired a bomb to your Porsche ignition when you left for work this morning. And you know what, nobody would ever have known who was behind it. Nobody. Ever." There was an iciness to Jack's voice.

“And your point is that you didn’t do any of those things?”

“Exactly, Tony. The opportunity was there and so were the means. You know as well as I do I could have erased you like an errant scribble... and Donno would have loved doing it.” Jack smiled wide to set off that thought. “And a problem that’s plagued me for over 25 years could have been erased forever... just like that...” Now Jack snapped his fingers for effect.

“So I guess should be grateful I’m still alive?” Tony replied sarcastically.

“No. But you should acknowledge the fact you *are* still alive. More importantly, you should acknowledge that I didn’t do anything. That’s my point. I wanted to show you that my intentions are true... that my actions speak louder than any words possibly could.”

Jack rose from the desk and walked over to Tony. As Jack approached, Tony stood and the two men looked each other in the eye.

“Tony, listen to me. What happened in the past is the past. I don’t hold any hard feelings against you anymore. I truly want us to have a normal relationship, one that doesn’t hinge on secrets. You’ve relied on that crutch for so long I think you’ve shortchanged your own abilities. And at the same time, I think I’ve let our relationship cloud my judgement of you. And that’s a shame, because I think we’re both better than that. And I think you know it, too.” Jack’s voice was sincere.

Tony closed his eyes in concentration. He couldn’t disagree with Jack’s reasoning. In the depth of his soul, he did hate being a scavenger. It cheapened him. He really was better than that.

Still, Tony wasn’t ready to embrace Jack’s proposal. Important questions remained to be answered. “Okay, Jack, but before we go any further, answer two questions for me: one, why are you doing this now; and two, what specifically is in it for you and me.” Tony liked his questions. They were both straightforward and fundamental, and Jack would have to provide good answers to them if Jack wanted to advance his concept of a renewed friendship.

“I’m doing it now because I’m sick of playing these games with you. Neither of us needs this. That’s it, plain and simple. And what’s in it for me is also simple— once we end all the secrets and the game-playing, I can continue on as President without worrying whether I’m going to do something that might piss you off enough that you’d blow everything for the both of us.”

Jack kept silent about the real reasons. If he would have told Tony the truth it would have sounded something like this: *When I’m choking up at your funeral, I want everyone to remember our relationship and feel sorry that I lost such a close friend. And I want it to be very clear that I couldn’t have had anything to do with your death... after all, what kind of President would set up a plan to allow his Vice President-select to die?*

Tony nodded at the answer he heard. Of course that's what Jack had to gain. But as far as Tony was concerned, Jack had not yet answered the most important answer.

Jack looked him dead in the eyes, knowing that the only real answer that mattered to Tony was the forthcoming one. The suspense was perfect.

"What's in it for you," Jack said directly, "is the VP slot."

Tony's eyes widened. Had he heard correctly? If it were a trick, he missed the sleight of hand. "You're serious?"

"It's no secret you want it, Tony. And I want to put you in the slot because I think it would be best for both of us. That way, you get what you want, and I get what I want-- no more blackmail. You'll have just as much to lose as me."

Jack stopped short of weeping, knowing that would have been overly dramatic. One thing was sure: if Jack wasn't the greatest President in American history then perhaps he had surpassed Reagan as the greatest Presidential actor.

Tony was in disbelief, speechless at the idea of becoming VP, numbed by the fact it was happening by Jack's own free will! After nearly 25 years of civil war between the two classmates, Jack was extending an olive branch. Tony couldn't have written a better script for himself.

Freed from the conflict and hate, Tony felt the need to bear his soul, as Jack had. He began slowly, his voice low and deeply sincere. "Jack, I respect everything you've said, and I respect you for saying it. And I'd be less than a man if I didn't take blame for some of our differences. I'm not proud of the things I've done, and I want you to know how truly sorry I am. I know I can't change the past, but I promise the future will be different. I promise to serve you and support you like no man ever has. I can't tell you how much becoming your VP means to me." Tony was beaming.

Although Jack nodded sincerely, he was less than touched by Tony's words. After all, it was easy to be so humble and contrite given the circumstance. Any man worth half his salt would have said what Tony had. Hell, Jack had essentially handed him the keys to the country. *This man should prostrate himself before me, kiss my shoes, lick my butt, and thank me... for not only keeping him alive, but offering him a life that men would kill to have.*

That last thought stuck in Jack's head... indeed, one man would kill to be in Tony's position. That was the beauty of it all. In tapping Tony for the VP slot, Jack was also putting a big red bullseye on Tony's back.

Outwardly, Jack smiled warm and genuine. "I wish we'd talked sooner."

"Me too, Jack. Me too."

Jack laughed to himself at Tony's interesting choice of words: *Me, too*. Tony was 180 degrees out of synch with the 'Me Too' movement as any man alive.

"Well, as they say, it's never too late to start a new friendship." Jack extended his hand. "To new friendship, new respect, and a new and better future."

Tony shook his hand firmly and clasped Jack's shoulder. "To a new and better future."

The two men continued talking, and Jack explained that no official announcement would be made regarding the VP slot for at least another two weeks, maybe even a month. "If I announce a replacement for Mac too quickly," Jack said, "I guarantee people will say I'm insensitive. And I don't want that. Americans like decisive leaders, but they hate insensitive ones."

Tony nodded.

"In the meantime," Jack continued, "I want you to keep this to yourself. I've still got a lot of groundwork to do to smooth this thing out and set it in motion, and I don't want it to leak out until that's done."

Tony agreed.

As Tony walked out of Jack's den he could scarcely believe his good fortune. He was as close to the Presidency as any man in America, save Jack himself. And he hadn't even needed to play his trump card! Indeed, as he left the den, Tony was so giddy he had all but forgotten about Jill Drain in the steno's shop.

Left behind in the den, Jack could only smile-- Tony had bought it, just as Jack knew he would. Next he would break the tragic news to Vic Graves and set in motion the jealousy and rage of a man spurned.

Jack punched out Vic's personal number.

TWENTY TWO

A truth that's told with bad intent
beats all the lies you can invent.
--William Blake

Having been summoned by the President, the black stretch Lincoln slowly maneuvered around the maze of concrete barriers surrounding the west side entrance of the White House. The barriers, strategically installed in 1983 after a yellow Mercedes truck and its smiling young suicidal Shiite driver had roared past a single Marine Guard and blown up 265 Marines in Beirut, were intended to stop a similar attack against the President. Seated in the back, Vic Graves always laughed to himself at the fallacy of such logic. A similar ground attack, he knew, would never be made against the President. The terrorists had become much too sophisticated for that. Any attack made on the White House would come via the air. And no maze of concrete barriers would be able to stop that.

The scenario was simple. A member of some fanatical group would take-off from a small private airport in Manassas or Fredericksburg, with a flight plan filed with Washington controllers to travel north to Pennsylvania or somewhere else north of D.C. The Cessna would be filled to the brim, like a coffee cup, with high explosives, diesel fuel, and fertilizer... an Oklahoma City bomb with wings.

Although airspace restrictions would keep the pilot at least ten miles away from the White House, once the pilot reached this closest point, he'd radio the controllers at Reagan National Airport, frantic about some sort of problem-- a loss of hydraulic pressure, a malfunctioning rudder, or something of that nature. Under standard procedures, the controllers would grant the pilot permission to make an emergency landing at National, thus allowing the plane to approach within two air miles of the White House. And that's when the fun would begin.

As they watched their radar screens, the controllers at National would see, at the last possible moment, the pilot inexplicably deviate from the approach. He'd turn north, his destination 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And at a speed of 250 knots, in less than a minute-- barely enough time for the kamikaze to offer up a final prayer to Allah-- he'd make a special delivery to the President.

And there was no way to stop it. Andrews couldn't scramble a jet in under forty-five seconds, and even then, it'd take at least another 3 minutes for an F-anything to reach the intercept point. By that time, the White House would be the Black House, spewing smoke into the air as shocked tourists looked on in horror. The White House anti-air battery, which was installed in 2004 after 9-11, was more for show than striking blows, and would almost certainly be ineffective. The plane would be an unannounced, unexpected arrival to see the President...

As an added insult, a member of the fanatical terrorist group, looking like any ordinary tourist with a video camera, would be at the top of the Washington Monument filming the entire event. Move over Mr. Zapruder, there's a new assassination film-meister in town! How much would that tape be worth to one of the networks? Ten million? Twenty? However much, it would certainly be enough to buy another plane, and more diesel, fertilizer and explosives, for the next show: a drop in on Congress, a nuclear weapon's plant, or Disneyland? The possibilities were endless.

Vic knew the scenario could happen any day somebody wanted it to happen. And with Jack Kurtz in the White House, the only thing surprising was that it hadn't happened yet.

But Vic knew the window of opportunity for the terrorists would not stay open for long. Indeed, once he became VP, one of his first major acts would be to strengthen the security of the White House against potential terrorist attacks such as this. While never so pressing before, once he became VP, there would be more than enough incentive to make the place as safe as possible, at any cost.

Now past the guard shack, the Lincoln stopped, and Vic stepped out. Although as tall as the average American male-- 5'10"-- Vic always appeared short. This was primarily because his torso was actually exceedingly short relative to his overall height. Consequently, he always looked like one of those old men who pulled their pants up too high. With his thick, black eyebrows, prominent pocked nose, and broad lips, Vic had a thick, Neanderthal look about him. Indeed, if a man's features reflected the manner in which he'd been conceived, then Vic's parents had done it doggy style. In anyone's book, Vic was not a good looking man.

His other physical features-- pasty white and hairy-- had a lot to do with why he'd never been popular in the appearance-minded public eye. His name didn't help either-- Victor Marcus Graves. In its own right, it was harsh, almost evil sounding-- the name of an undertaker or a villain in a spy movie. Clearly it didn't sound trusting, and he still bristled with anger whenever someone call him by his full name. He hated his doggy-style copulating parents for the legacy.

Vic made his way inside the White House, up to Jack's private den. It had been a week since Vic had last met with Jack in private, and at that meeting, Jack had all but told Vic the VP job was his. Now, Vic was expecting Jack to make it official. Jack had all but said so on the phone: "Vic, come on over, it's about the VP slot." There was no hint of anything wrong.

Entering the den, Jack was in his usual place, seated behind the desk, his nose buried in

the fed's latest economic report. Jack rose when Vic entered and Vic shook Jack's extended hand. That's when he noticed Jack's somber, almost uneasy look. It seemed to indicate something was wrong... very wrong. This wasn't the atmosphere Vic was expecting as he sat, facing Jack's desk.

As if to confirm Vic's fears, Jack skipped any pleasantries. "Vic, there's something you need to hear, and you're not going to like it."

Vic's inched forward, inwardly bracing himself for bad news while outwardly trying to remain calm. Of course nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to hear-- one cannot prepare for the unthinkable.

"This morning I met with Tony and offered him the VP slot," Jack said point blank.

Jack's words surpassed the unthinkable... they were the impossible. Vic's face dropped. Tony? As in Tony Moretti? *Imfuckingpossible*. Tony? How? Why? Was this Jack's idea of a sick, perverse joke? Was Jack going to break out into a huge grin and yell 'gotcha?'

Vic sat speechless in semi-shock.

Fortunately, Jack didn't need to hear any words to understand Vic's reaction. Of course Vic was shocked. He was supposed to be. That was a key part of the whole plan. The unthinkable idea of Tony as VP would give credibility to the forthcoming explanation that Jack had been forced into it.

"I know it's a shock, but it's what I have to do," Jack added.

"What do you mean *it's what you have to do*? It's crazy, Jack, that's what it is? Tony?"

"Crazy to you, maybe. But necessary for me."

"I don't understand, Jack. Last week you said the job was all but mine..." Vic looked into Jack's eyes. "What happened to change your mind?"

"Something you're not going to believe."

"It can't be more unbelievable than what you just told me."

"Don't bet on it."

"Alright. Jesus, tell me."

"For the past 25 years, Tony's been blackmailing me, threatening to tell the world what

happened to us right before graduation."

Vic's face dropped. Blackmail! While Vic had always suspected something fishy about Jack and Tony's relationship-- Jack always seemed to treat Tony with kid gloves and avoided all confrontations with Tony-- he had no idea it was this. He became lost in thought as he considered Jack's charge. As he did, it became clear that Jack was speaking the truth, as it explained everything about Jack and Tony over the years.

Jack continued. "Tony was willing to bring me down, if it came to that. Of course, I could never allow that to happen. So anyway, to make a long story short, I gave in to him. This morning he and I reached a mutual agreement-- I make him VP, and the blackmailing stops... forever. That's it plain and simple."

Vic's head was spinning. "My God, Jack! You're really serious?"

"As serious as a dead girl on the floor of a camper van," Jack shot back, purposefully reminding Vic this was all because Vic had killed the innocent hippie 36 years ago. If not for that, they wouldn't have buried her body or shared the deep, dark secret Tony was using to blackmail Jack.

The image of the dead hippie girl flashed in Vic's mind but didn't stay there long. It was replaced by two questions that chugged in Vic's head like runaway locomotives. First and foremost was this question: *how* Tony could blackmail Jack? After all, Tony was just as involved in what had happened as any of them. How could a co-conspirator blackmail another co-conspirator? The other question which was just as troubling: *why* was Jack telling him all of this? And why *now*?

Jack anticipated Vic's first question. "You're probably wondering how Tony's been able to blackmail me, right? After all, we were all involved."

Vic nodded. He'd never stop marveling at Jack's uncanny ability to sense what others were thinking.

"It's actually been pretty simple. And as far-fetched as this is going to sound, it's actually been pretty effective, too."

Vic's eyes seemed to be searching the air for answers. How could it be both simple and far-fetched? "I don't see how," he responded. "He's as guilty as anyone."

Not as guilty as you, you sonofabitch. You were the one who forced yourself on her... the one who hit her. If you hadn't done any of that, she wouldn't be dead. The only mistake Bob and Tony and I made was to cover up the mess you got us into.

Jack's blood pulsed through his tense body and he reminded himself to control his emotions. Jack responded, sticking to the script he'd practiced while waiting for Vic to arrive.

"Say what you want about Tony, but he was cunning enough to recognize he had both the leverage and the nothing-to-lose circumstance every successful blackmailer needs."

"What do you mean leverage? We were all there."

"Something happened when we buried her, Vic. Something I can't tell you, and neither can Bob or Tony. It's what binds Bob and Tony and me... and it's a secret the three of us will take to our graves."

By the wonderment in Vic's eyes, Jack knew he'd hooked Vic. It was a truth told with bad intent, and it beat any lie Jack could invent. Best of all, Jack knew Vic would do just about anything to learn what that secret was... and Jack knew it would ultimately be Vic's undoing.

"I don't understand--"

"You had to be there, Vic... when we buried her. All I can say is the three of us did something that bound us to each other... forever."

The mystery had Vic wondering, but he couldn't understand what on earth could have happened. Nonetheless, it was obvious Jack was done talking about it.

Jack continued, "Anyway, early on Tony correctly decided I could help him the most because I had the most to lose if this thing ever got out."

That made sense to Vic. As the frontrunner, Jack always had the most to lose. "But if he went to the police, he'd have gone down, too," Vic chimed in. "It would have been his word against the three of us."

"Tony knew that. But remember, when all this started, he was a desperate, broke, disgraced Marine Corps reject who couldn't find a decent job. For him, going down wouldn't have been such a big deal, it would have been a short fall, so to speak. Plus, he believed-- and I think he was probably right-- he could have received limited immunity, if not complete immunity, in exchange for testimony leading to our conviction. I'm convinced he could have cut himself a deal and gotten off Scott-free. Then, after everything was said and done, he'd have been free to write a book about the whole thing. With us in jail, the world would have been his canvass, and I'm sure he would have painted a picture showing us as the instigators and the ones who covered it up. He'd say he was the one who wanted to do the right thing."

"That'd be a bunch of crap."

"You know that and I know that, but the one painting the picture is usually the one whose interpretation means the most."

Vic shrugged agreement. He felt two emotions-- jealousy that Tony had thought of the scheme and pulled it off; and anger that he was being victimized by it.

Jack continued. "The savvy thing was knowing he had nothing to lose and that I would do just about anything to keep the secret."

Vic nodded. "It's almost as sick as it is ingenious."

"You're preaching to the choir."

"But what about now?" Vic asked. "Tony got a helluva lot to lose now."

"True. But I've got even more to lose, so relatively speaking, nothing's changed. He could probably still cut himself a deal if it came to that. I can't take the chance of that, so I've decided to put an end to all his blackmailing bullshit once and for all. Making Tony VP changes the equation."

Vic couldn't disagree with Jack's logic. The problem for Vic was this-- he was supposed to be the successor... not Tony.

The second train of thought chugging through Vic's mind earlier finally reached the station. Vic verbalized it. "So why are you telling all this to me Jack? And why now? How come you never told me about Tony before?"

Jack was prepared for Vic's obvious question. There were two answers-- both truthful, but one more truthful. In Jack's mind, the most truthful answer streamed: *Because I need you to take care of Tony for me, once-and-for-all. By telling you all this, I'm giving you the motive. You're going to leave this meeting racking your brain for a solution to this mess, wondering how to turn this situation around and use it to your advantage. You're going to figure out how to stop Tony so you can be my VP. And you're going to conclude that you need to eliminate Tony in order for that to happen. As for me, I can live with myself for telling you this. After all, I'm not the one suggesting that you kill Tony; I'm not the one who blackmailed anyone. All I'm doing is telling you the facts.*

Jack verbalized the less truthful answer. "I'm telling you because I want you to know why I can't select you as VP. I don't want you to hold any hard feelings. And I don't want you to think there was anything you did wrong. It's just the way it has to be. It's the only way to make sure our secret stays secret."

Vic and Jack talked for a few minutes more, during which Vic tried to convince Jack not to give in to Tony. It was clear, however, that Jack's mind was already mind up. Finally, Jack ushered Vic to the door. "I'm sorry, Vic. I guess it just wasn't meant to be."

But, of course, Jack wasn't sorry. Jack could never be sorry about anything with Vic... except Vic hadn't died that terrible night.

Vic barely managed a nod as he walked out of the den. He was preoccupied thinking about another way to stop Tony's blackmail, a more effective way. Not only do dead men tell no lies, but they tell no secrets, either.

TWENTY THREE

The victor will never be asked
if he told the truth.
—Adolph Hitler

It's said unfulfilled expectations are the root of all disappointment. And the greater the unfulfilled expectation, the greater the disappointment. It's also said a disappointed man is a dangerous man. And the more disappointed the man, the more dangerous the man.

Less than a mile east of the White House, down Pennsylvania Avenue in the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Vic Graves was experiencing the disappointment brought about by great expectations unfulfilled. Not being offered the V.P. slot was understandably disappointing, but what he couldn't accept was Jack's rationale-- *stop blackmailing me, Tony, and I'll make you VP.* That was nothing short of criminal. What about principle? What about right and wrong? Tony Moretti didn't deserve to be V.P. He deserved to be in jail for blackmail.

With these thoughts boiling in his head, Vic Graves felt his blood heating up. As it did, his face tightened, his nerves tensed, his hands clenched, and his blood pressure rose like a human pressure vessel being heated by the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations. And if he didn't relieve himself soon, he'd surely burst, plastering the walls and ceiling with blood and skin and internal body parts. Afterwards, when the investigators collected the mess that had once been the FBI Director, they'd reconstruct him and conclude that he'd died from an internal explosion... the first ever case on record.

As his internal pressure continued to rise, Vic screamed out uncontrollably at the top of his lungs. "Aaaaaaaaah!" Then he pounded his fist on the leather inlay of his desk, envisioning it to be Tony Moretti's face.

His venting now complete, Vic took ten quick, deep breaths. *Don't have an aneurism over this. You'll figure something out. The battle's just begun.*

Then Vic's mind took off. He wasn't the only one unhappy about Tony becoming VP. Jack was unhappy about it, too. He'd said as much himself. If Jack had any balls, he would stand up to Tony... or do away with the problem once and for all. Instead, Jack was willing to bargain, tantamount to negotiating with a terrorist. Was the Wizard of Washington so

powerless?

Vic didn't believe that for a second.

Deep down, Jack had told him about Tony for a reason. And Vic thought he knew that reason-- Vic was the only one who could take care of the 'Tony problem.' After all, Jack could very well tell someone else about Tony's blackmailing. No, sir, Jack had to tell someone who already knew the secret. And Jack surely had to know Vic had another solution-- a solution as legal as blackmail, only deadlier.

Vic's mind was in high gear now.

So why hadn't Jack just come straight out and told Vic what he wanted? Why had he danced around it? Why hadn't Jack just said, "Vic, Tony's blackmailing me. I need you to take care of him"?

Why? Because the born-again weakling didn't want anything on his conscience. This way was cleaner to Jack... more Christ-like... and when it was all over, Jack could rationalize that it was all Vic's doing.

Vic was almost laughing to himself now. *Of course that was it.* That Jack was cunning... even if he were a born-again Christian with a conscience.

Now Vic's mind flew. He knew it could be done... and fairly easily, as well. And once Tony was out of the way, Jack would be happy and the VP slot would be all his. Win-win. Of course. It made perfect sense now.

Vic thought about the predicament-- how should the FBI Director go about getting rid of the President's Chief-of-Staff?

Hah. That was easy.

The key to it all, he knew, was picking the right man to carry it out-- someone bright yet gullible; loyal yet selfish; ambitious yet frustrated; and most of all, someone who couldn't afford to say 'no' to the FBI Director. Thankfully, Vic knew just the man. He punched out the five digit extension on his phone.

"Internal Affairs. McGovern," answered the voice on the other line.

Bingo. "McGovern. Director Graves here. Come up and see me. It's urgent."

"Yes, sir." Click. *Shit,* thought Jay McGovern.

Vic set the receiver down and leaned back in his chair, his hands interlocked behind his head, his feet resting on his desk corner. A dry smile had come across his thick, pursed lips. Everything happening was for the best. In the end, all this business with Tony Moretti would be a blessing in disguise that would springboard him into the Presidency even quicker than he'd dreamed. Three minutes later, when the three knocks sounded on his door, Vic's mood had improved remarkably.

"Come," Vic answered.

Wearing one of those ubiquitous dark suits, lanky Jay McGovern stepped into the Director's office, his stride and expression both trepid. During the elevator ride up from the basement, he concluded that he was finally being indicted and terminated. Why else would the Director himself have summoned him? And all this because he'd been caught with his pants down, with the wrong girl, by the wrong man. What a crock of shit life could be for a man with a fetish for young girls. Not even Don Meacham could save him from a criminal indictment.

And it wasn't even his fault...

... it was Al Gore's fault. If not for the internet, Jay McGovern would never have been tempted to meet those young girls. Unfortunately, in wiring the world, Al had also wired in sexual predators. The internet was just too tantalizing, like offering free drinks to attend AA meetings, or a free carton of cigarettes with every purchase of Nicorette gum. For sexual predators like McGovern, the internet made it too easy to get inside those high school chat rooms and become one of them. And once in the door, it was virtually impossible to not stay. And then, well, one thing invariably led to another, and the next thing you knew...

The Director motioned for McGovern to sit. "Scotch?" Vic asked.

Although the offer surprised McGovern, he managed a nod. He also managed to relax a bit. An offer of scotch didn't normally accompany notice of termination. Perhaps it was something else.

Vic handed him the drink. "Cheers," Vic said as he put out his own glass.

"Cheers," McGovern parroted, now even more at ease. Nobody toasted a man before firing him.

"Staying out of trouble and away from cameras?" the Director asked in a not-so-subtle tone. It was Vic's way of reminding McGovern that Vic owned him.

If you're asking, have I learned not to get caught with my pants down in my car after dark with a 15 year-old high school cheerleader, then the answer is, yes. I'm much more discrete these days. Now I ask to see a driver's license to make sure they're over 16. That way I don't have to worry about statutory rape, or wonder whether my boss is having me followed and photographed. Why do you ask? Do you want to add some more photos to the photo album you

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keep locked in your safe? Don't you have enough on me already?

“Yes, sir,” McGovern answered. He didn't need to be reminded.

“Good.”

There was a pregnant pause. Hard as it was, McGovern tried to put out of his mind the hatred he felt towards Vic Graves. He focused, instead, on why he'd been summoned. If this wasn't about termination, then what? Was it possible that Vic Graves was going to offer him the opportunity to get his ass back?

“Jay, you know as well as I do, it would be bad for both of us if that little incident of yours last month ever became public, right?”

McGovern was surprised to hear the Director call him by his first name. He nodded, knowing nobody's best interest would be served if his indiscretion ever became public. He'd lose his wife for sure, and probably end up in jail. And for the agency, having one of its agents convicted of statutory rape, would surely lead to a black mark with the press and the public. It was as lose-lose as child molestation.

“And it's no secret you would like to have those pictures. Right again?”

Duh. “Yes, sir.” He wondered what the Director had in mind.

“Well, if you're up to it, there's a way to make that happen.”

What do I have to do, get one of my little girls to blow you, you ugly shit? McGovern didn't like the way the meeting had started out.

“We've got a serious problem,” Vic added, his tone serious, almost somber.

McGovern remained skeptical.

“But before I tell you what this is all about, there's a couple questions I need to ask you.”

McGovern refocused. Despite the bullshit reference to the photographs, he sensed an important moment in his life at hand. In fact, if he looked past all the bullshit reference to the photos, the meeting was starting out like something he'd always dreamed-- a cryptic call from the Director; a serious problem; a scotch to set the tone; a somber Director; and finally a request for Jay to ‘work the problem.’ That's why he'd joined the agency.

He perked up in the leather chair. “Yes, sir,” McGovern answered equally as somber. For the moment, he put out of his mind the fact the Director was a sonofabitch who used people

like Kleenex tissues. He focused, instead, on other facts concerning Vic Graves. Vic was also ruthless, clever, well-connected, and a man of considerable accomplishment. And when Vic Graves wanted something to happen, it happened. People were used, and abused, and thrown away because it was sometimes necessary to use, and abuse, and throw away people. That was the nature of the intelligence and counter-intelligence business. In that vein, Vic was the consummate Director.

Vic continued. “When you took your FBI oath down at Quantico, you swore to defend the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, correct?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“When you took that oath, did you ever consider what kind of domestic enemy you might come up against?”

McGovern shook his head. Then he managed a little smile. “Sir, I was only 22 at the time. I was prepared to defend the country against anyone my superiors said was the enemy.”

Vic smiled back. *‘I’ve been there, too.’* All things aside, he liked McGovern.

McGovern was not yet at ease.

“How about now?” Vic further pursued. “What would you consider a domestic enemy?”

You mean besides a FBI Director who sets out agents to follow other agents looking for indiscretions? McGovern rattled off his answer. “Any sort of thing. Terrorists, right wing paramilitary groups, certain religious fanatics, overzealous radicals... basically anyone within our borders who threatens the well-being of the nation or our fabric of law and order.”

“So, you would include a person blackmailing a government leader as a domestic enemy?”

McGovern nodded slowly. “Of course.” His mind engaged. *Perhaps the Director was being blackmailed and needed help? Perhaps he’d been caught with his pants down at the wrong time? Wouldn’t that be sweet poetic justice!*

Vic continued. “And so, to defend against a threat such as that, what kind of measures would you consider appropriate?”

“I’m not sure I can answer that without knowing the specifics, sir. I think it would be fact-specific.”

Vic nodded. Everything in life was fact-specific. You wouldn’t assassinate everyone blackmailing a government official. Some you would, some you wouldn’t. “What if somebody were blackmailing the President?” Vic clarified, providing a sliver of fact.

McGovern's eyes widened at the hint that this was no longer a theoretical, abstract, 'what if' session. This was really happening, he sensed, and he became even more serious. Those feelings of hate and disdain for the Director were completely out of his mind now. His big moment demanded his undivided attention.

"I'm not sure. It would depend on the magnitude of the threat to the President... and the nation. On one hand, I could see where we might just arrest the person and try them in a court of law-- that is, if we could do it in a way that wouldn't damage the presidency, or disclose whatever is need to be kept secret. On the other, it might be appropriate to eradicate the threat immediately, using-- shall I say-- more definitive means." McGovern's eyes twinkled. He was now liking this meeting, the questions, and most of all, his answers. It felt very FBI-ish.

Vic was hearing what he wanted. "What if the person blackmailing the President were threatening to take over control of the Executive Branch at the same time?"

The plot thickened and McGovern quickly envisioned the scenario-- not only was someone out there blackmailing the President, but somehow, someway, they were trying to take control of his power, too. His mind took off-- *how could someone take control of the President's power?* It was as egregious a situation as he could imagine and his heart rate picked up.

"That would be unacceptable," McGovern answered. "The blackmailer would have to be dealt with quickly and directly. National security demands nothing less."

Vic took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and stared into space-- the standard physical movements of a man appearing distressed. "Well, as bad as that sounds, that's the situation we've got," Vic said with resignation and a sense of gloom. Vic knew nothing else pulled an agent in so well.

Thinking about such a scenario was one thing, hearing the Director say it was something else, and the hair on McGovern's neck stood on end. "Who and how?" he asked point-blank.

Vic looked him squarely in the eyes. "I can't tell you the details unless I have your sworn assurance that it will never be repeated... never." Vic didn't have to add what would happen if that ever happened. His tone and eyes made it clear that McGovern would become one of the 'throwaways.'

McGovern had arrived wondering whether he'd still have a job. Now, he not only had a job... he had *the* job. Life could twist and turn like a snake in the grass. Finally, it seemed, he'd do something that really mattered, something he could look back on in old age and say to himself, 'I did that' or 'if I hadn't done that, the world would have gone to shit in a handbasket.' After 15 years of seemingly endless bureaucracy and paper pushing, his moment of glory seemed at hand and he could almost envision the President and the Director discussing him in whispered

tones in the White House: *He's the best man I've got, Jack, don't you worry, McGovern will take care of this.* Afterwards, the President would even call and offer his personal thanks, perhaps even an invite to dinner at the White House. That there would be no public recognition didn't even bother him. He would know, the Director would know, and the President would know. That was enough.

Caught up in the excitement of his own mind, McGovern seemed to have forgotten the Director was awaiting his response. Vic spoke out again. "Do I have your sworn assurance?"

McGovern startled. "Um, yes, sir. Of course, sir."

"And if you accept the mission, you'll use any and all means to erase the threat?" In FBI vernacular, 'erase' meant one thing-- to wipe away without a trace.

"Yes, sir."

Vic locked onto McGovern's eyes. "The President is being blackmailed by Tony Moretti, his Chief-of-Staff," Vic announced point blank.

Tony Moretti? The name almost caused McGovern to drop the scotch and fall out of the chair. He had expected to hear some obscure name, some low-life scoundrel from Jack's past who'd resurfaced like bad acne. Making some low-life disappear would have been so much easier, so much more cut and dry. But the current Chief-of-Staff? That wouldn't be so easy. He'd be sophisticated, alert, and aware. And if he were blackmailing the President, he'd almost certainly have a defense mechanism in place-- a bodyguard at the least. At once, more than a million thoughts and questions seemed to explode in McGovern's mind. The most important question was this: why would the Chief-of-Staff blackmail the President?

"This isn't a joke, right?" McGovern asked.

"You think I'd joke about something as important as this?" Vic shot back.

"No sir."

"This is potentially the most serious threat our government has, or ever will, face. We've got all the makings of a coup right here in our hands-- a silent coup. And only four people in the world know about it-- the President, Tony Moretti, me, and now you." Vic paused to let that sink in. There was nothing like the sanctity of a secret, and the inclusion in a small, select group, to win over loyalty and trust.

"So, now that I've told you the basic scenario, I'm sure you've got some questions for me, right?"

About a million. McGovern ticked off that most important one first. "Why would Moretti want to blackmail the President?"

“Tony Moretti wants to be the VP. And he’s forcing Jack to select him.”

McGovern thought back to Mac’s retirement ceremony. He remembered seeing Tony Moretti in some of the photo ops, smiling almost ear-to-ear, like a man envisioning how his furniture would fit within the VP’s residency on the Naval Observatory on Mass Ave.

“How is it that Tony Moretti’s able to blackmail the President?” It was the second most important question that McGovern could think of.

“All I can tell you is what the President told me: there’s a skeleton in Jack’s closet that Tony knows, something Jack says he can’t allow to become public. I’m not privy to what that is and I didn’t press the President any further about it.” Vic paused to hone in on McGovern’s eyes even deeper, as if to signify that trust was essential. “One thing I’ve learned around Jack is this-- if he wants you to know something, he’ll tell you. The bottom line is Tony will cut a deal with DOJ and disclose the secret if he’s not made VP. And if that happens, according to Jack, *it’ll be the end of his presidency*. Those were his exact words.”

No matter Vic’s forcefulness, or his reference to a personal conversation with the president, McGovern didn’t like his answer. There was no meat in it, nothing to sink his teeth into, nothing to chew on and taste. Here he was, listening to the Director spin a tale that sounded, all at once, both unbelievable and plausible. “How can I corroborate this?” he asked, knowing it would be a touchy question.

Vic’s face took on a new look— a harder, colder, ‘how-dare-you-ask-that-question-after-all-that-I’ve-told-you-already’ look. Indeed, Vic was personally offended at the thought, much less the verbalization, of such a question.

“You don’t,” Vic answered straight, leaving no room for maneuvering. “Jack made it very clear to me that whoever carries out this task, must never know the truth behind Tony’s blackmail-- what, why, or how. As far as you’re concerned, that’s irrelevant. Obviously it’s not something you can ask Moretti about. And the President has made it clear to me there will be no further contact with him about this matter. If anything were to go wrong, if this were ever to get out to the public, the White House and I will vehemently deny this whole idea as preposterous. Like I told you, you are *never* to discuss this in any way shape or form... not now, not ever, not with anybody.”

Vic stared into McGovern’s eyes as if searching for his soul. He spoke solemnly, “This is a secret you will take to your grave. The only people who will ever know you were the one who prevented this silent coup will be you and me. Jack Kurtz doesn’t even want to know any of the details. All he told me was this-- take care of the problem, take care of Tony Moretti. End of story. That’s the situation. It’s ours, and ours alone, to win or lose. You’re either in or you’re out, on my word. But if I don’t have your absolute trust, I don’t have you, and I don’t want you.”

McGovern's eyes seemed glazed over at the realization he was stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place. But he shouldn't have been surprised-- his only alternative was up to 20 years in prison for statutory rape. And prison was no place for a child molester.

"Do you understand?" Vic asked.

McGovern was understanding all too well. It was like one of those ethical dilemmas he remembered discussing at training sessions at Camp Perry. A Los Alamos nuclear weapons expert with relatives in China is given two choices: give the Chinese the design information for the W80 neutron generator system or watch your relatives slowly, but surely, disappear.

Vic read McGovern's face. "What's the matter? You look lost."

"I'm just trying to absorb it all, that's all, sir."

Vic nodded. He wondered if this middle manager-- this insignificant bureaucrat with the insatiable sexual appetite for high school girls-- would ask the obvious question as to why Vic had selected him for what seemed like the most important assignment in FBI history.

As if queued, McGovern did. "If I may, sir, why did you tap me for this assignment? It's not as though I'm a rising star around here."

Bingo again. "You're right. And that's one of the primary reasons I tapped you. In fact, some would say you're the last man I would tap for something like this. The truth of the matter is, your status as a disgruntled bureaucrat with a chip on his shoulder is your best trait... and mine."

McGovern looked at Vic curiously.

Vic explained. "If this blows up in our faces, I need to be able to deny this and you. That's easier to do with you than someone else. Plus, if somehow you fail, those photos I've got of you and your cheerleader give me a ready-made answer to counter anything you might try and pull. Sounds like hardball, doesn't it?"

McGovern nodded, not liking Vic's explanation.

"It sounds like hardball because that's what it is," Vic continued. "This assignment is just too important to the President and me to send someone that I can't control."

Although McGovern didn't like the explanation, he knew it was true. And now he knew how that Los Alamos nuclear weapons expert felt.

Vic spoke out again. "On the other hand, I tapped you because I know your very good at

your job... some would say, you're the best. So, if this thing works out, you will not be forgotten. That's the way it works-- risk and reward go hand-in-hand. And where Jack and I go, you will follow. This is your opportunity to attach yourself to the stars." As grandiose as it sounded, that, too, was potentially true. Sadly, true too, was an accident that would wipe Jay McGovern from the earth and send him to the stars before he could attach himself to Jack or Vic.

"You're asking me to erase the President's Chief-of-Staff based on your word and your word only. There's nothing else, no other corroboration."

"That's the essence of trust," Vic responded, not wanting to flash another how-dare-you-look. This man was hooked and just needed to be eased towards the boat. "But don't think you're the first agent who's ever had to do something based on one man's orders. I've got a file full of similar examples right behind me in the Director's safe."

There was no doubt about that. "What if I don't want to do this?"

Vic's brow furled. "Obviously that's your choice to make." He said it with seemingly flat indifference. "All I can say is this-- someone is going to carry out this Presidential order. If not you, then so be it. You'll return to internal affairs as if this talk never happened-- no retribution, no hard feelings, and no mark against you."

Hah. Vic wondered if McGovern really believed that. In truth, if he turned down the assignment, he'd likely end up dead... probably a hit and run victim, maybe an unfortunate victim of a botched robbery at his house. But then again, even if he took the assignment and completed it perfectly, that's what might happen. Unfortunately, the Jay McGovern's of the world were indeed as expendable as tissues. "But whatever you decide, you've got to decide now. This is not like buying a house. There's no time to get an inspection and mull it over. Either you're in or you're out. It's that simple."

"What's the timetable for carrying this out?"

"Within the next month. Perhaps as soon as two weeks. The President wants to announce his running mate by mid-July. If Moretti's still with us then, the President's choice will be made for him. If Moretti's gone, the President will be able to choose his own man."

"And is there any preference for how the task is carried out?"

Vic nodded. "As you know, an accident is always preferable. But the details of how and when will be up to you." Vic paused. "Because... once you leave my office... you're on your own."

McGovern took a long last pull on his scotch. It was the best assignment... and the worst. If everything were as the Director said, he'd be doing the most important thing he could

imagine-- protecting the President and the nation. But what if things weren't as the Director said? Was it possible he was being conned into the biggest hit-man role ever? But why? McGovern felt his stomach twist.

Only one thing was clear to McGovern-- it wasn't an assignment one just walked away from casually. Either you took it and carried it out to a 'T,' trusting the Director and your judgment, or you ran away from it like death. And if you ran away, you needed to disappear like the wind. Unfortunately, with a wife and two teenagers, one just didn't run away and disappear from the FBI. Maybe that's why the Director had selected him... maybe the Director knew he had no choice but to take the assignment.

No matter all this, Jay McGovern's decision was clear. Just like all those ethical dilemmas from Camp Perry, the path of self-preservation was usually the path chosen.

"I'm in," he said simply but confidently. He couldn't fathom this could be anything but real, because if it weren't, the Director was nothing more than a common murderer. And why would the Director want to murder the President's Chief-of-Staff, one of his Academy classmates?

The Director nodded. "Good. Keep me informed directly, daily. And remember, even though you'll be on your own on this one, both Jack and I will be watching you."

While it sounded like a warning, it was really just a reminder of the importance of the task.

As Jay McGovern left the Director's office, he knew one thing: he needed to talk to Don Meacham, his other boss. If anyone could validate the wild tale, it was he. At least he could trust Donno.

TWENTY FOUR

A memory may be a paradise
from which we cannot be driven,
it may also be a hell
from which we cannot escape.
-- John Lancaster Spalding

At 6'3" and 275 pounds, Bob Grady didn't normally *glide* down stairwells, he *guided* down stairwells. Each step of his size 13's was carefully placed, almost timid, as if he wanted to be certain his big frame was adequately supported. But today, there was a fresh agility to Bob's movement and he all but floated down the curved marble staircase of the southern wing of the Old Executive Office Building. Once past the security guards and outside, he found himself on the sidewalk that ran alongside Madison Avenue. Crossing Madison, he walked south, towards the ellipse, his step springy. It was a great day... and soon to be greater!

The morning rain had ended a few hours earlier, and the late May air was filled with a thousand fragrances-- late-blooming tulips, daffodils, and freshly-cut grass. The smells would have probably overloaded someone else's olfactory nerves, but not Bob's. The gardener-at-heart loved each and every one of these smells of late springtime/early summer. Truly, these were the smells of life! And Bob could scarcely wait for the day when he would spend his time in his greenhouse rather than the nuthouse known as the White House.

It was 11:30, 30 minutes before his lunch date with Drew Matthews, and Bob had decided to spend the time outside, away from the phones, e-mail, fax machines, and beepers. He intended to sit on a bench on the ellipse, reflecting ala Forrest Gump, on three-and-a-half incredible years... years he was happy to have been part of, but even happier to have behind him.

As senior legal advisor to the President, Bob's job sounded exciting and important. And, it was, if you liked the power, control, and "insider" label that went along with it. Unfortunately for Bob, he really didn't like any of those things. He longed, instead, for the simple Southern life: big family dinners, evenings spent on the porch swing with Molly or one of the grandkids listening to the crickets and watching the fireflies, Fourth of July barbecues, church picnics, and clients who appreciated his honesty and integrity. In Washington, honesty and integrity were almost regarded as weaknesses. Deception and manipulation were the qualities that most strived for in the cutthroat atmosphere inside the beltway. That's what power did to people.

Where there was power, there were power-seekers. And where there were power-seekers there was back-stabbing, finger-pointing, and deal-making. It was as much a fact of human nature as the need to love and be loved, and Bob was left forever wondering what it must have been like for the senior staffers in the failed administrations that they'd succeeded. No wonder one of his predecessors-- Vince Foster-- had put a gun to his head and taken his life decades before.

But deep down, Bob knew that coming to D.C. had been a necessary move. If he hadn't, his practice down in Atlanta would surely have gone bankrupt, and today he'd have been lucky writing wills and doing real estate closings.

And so, just days after the 2020 election, when President-elect Jack Kurtz, his life-long friend and Academy roommate, had asked Bob to serve with him, offering a key role in one of the greatest turn-arounds in American history, Bob had jumped at the opportunity.

While tense and scary, especially in those early days, it was also exciting and challenging, with long, demanding hours, constant scrutiny from the press, and the normal political BS. Bob's goal was simple: to serve Jack as best he could; to survive the long, demanding hours; and to one day cash in on the experience.

Thankfully, things had worked out better than he could have ever imagined, and that day to cash-in was nearly at hand.

He'd stay on through the election, heading Jack's re-election team, but after certain victory in November, he'd bow out gracefully, return to Atlanta, and write an insider book about the most successful Administration in American politics. In fact, he already had the title, "Resurrecting America... an Inside Look at Jack Kurtz's Administration," and a first draft of the first six chapters. Within six months he'd complete the entire book. After some talk shows and the requisite whirlwind book signing tour, he'd be set for life financially, free to live a comfortable life of gardening, coaching little league, travelling with Molly, and enjoying the grandkids.

As he strolled along the curved walk of the oak-lined ellipse, Bob held his head high and his chest out. He was swelling with pride and good fortune. God was great and his life was too. Nothing could stop him.

A group of colorfully clad tourists approached, and as he came upon them Bob was able to make out one middle aged woman's whisper-- "Martha. Look. Isn't that Bob Grady?"

For the man whose picture had been on every major newspaper and magazine at one time or another during the past three-and-a-half years, being recognized wasn't uncommon. And his face-- broad and thick-boned, with jowls like Winston Churchill and a patches of white hair on the sides-- was hard to mistake. As he passed by, Bob smiled at the woman.

On one hand, Bob liked the recognition. It was indelible testimony to the significant role he'd played in the most successful Administration in the history of America. In baseball, people remembered the Yankees. In football, the Patriots. And in Presidencies, they'd remember the Jack Kurtz Administration.

And so, Bob felt like a man who'd just won the World Series or Super Bowl-- and nobody could ever take that feeling away from him. His kids, his grandkids, their kids, and their grandkids, and so on, and so on, would look at pictures of him in the White House with the President and read about his involvement in helping turn around the country during the 21st Century Great Depression. The story of Bob Grady would be told at family reunions and holiday gatherings for generations to come, and pride would forever swell in the Grady family... all because of him.

On the other hand, however, Bob hated the recognition because it went against his quiet, simple nature. That's all he really wanted-- a quiet, simple life back home in Atlanta.

As he sat on his favorite bench under the tallest of the oaks, Bob watched the woman and the tourist group make their way north, towards the White House. Undoubtedly they were on their way for the noon tour, to see where it all happened, maybe even to catch a glimpse of Jack.

Bob watched as two squirrels darted about, playfully chasing each other up one tree before jumping to an adjacent tree. Through the trees, Bob could make out the faint tinges of a rainbow arching in the now deep-blue, cloudless sky. The image conjured up a fitting metaphor-- the rain and dreariness were behind him now; ahead, were playful days and rainbows in the sky. All Bob had to do was get Jack re-elected and sew up his book deal. And the election, he knew, would take care of itself. His job was to make the book deal happen. He looked at his watch: 11:45. In fifteen minutes, he'd take care of that.

The time flew by as quickly as the running squirrels, and Bob made his way to the Old Ebbitt's Grill, to his awaiting destiny. Upon entering Old Ebbitt's Grill, he quickly spotted Drew in a corner booth, waved acknowledgment, and made his way over.

"Good to see ya, Bob," Drew said, as he rose and extended his hand.

Bob shook it. "You too, Drew. What's it been, three months?"

"Un-huh. We both spoke at that government relation's panel at GW law school. Remember?"

Bob laughed aloud. "Remember? How could I forget? You spent an entire hour espousing the values of the independent counsel legislation. You must have touched on every scandal in American politics. All those lawyers-to-be loved it. I was left trying to defend the politicians, and trying to explain why the independent counsel law should be shelved."

Now Drew laughed aloud. Indeed, Bob had been cast into an untenable situation-- trying to persuade a bunch of lawyers-to-be that a law which benefitted lawyers more than anyone, should not be re-authorized.

"Those law students aren't dumb," Drew responded. "They love the independent counsel law because they know it means jobs for them. It should be renamed the full employment act for lawyers... after all, they're the ones who investigate, prosecute, defend, and provide all the public relations. No matter how you cut it, nobody profits from it more than the lawyers."

"True," Bob responded. "Unfortunately, that's why we're up to our eyeballs in shit right now, trying to persuade Congress not to re-authorize it. There's too many lawyers contributing to the Congressional coffers who want to keep it on the books."

Drew carefully steered the conversation to a new topic. "Hey, speaking of independent counsels, what's going on with the case against Richardson? I heard they found some evidence he took money from several lobbyists?" Drew was referring to an investigation into a former cabinet official who had an independent council sniffing up his butt. And while Drew really didn't care about the case in particular, there was a reason for his question. But Bob would not understand that reason until a later day.

Bob responded. "It's all circumstantial evidence. Nothing concrete. I think he'll survive it."

Drew nodded at the sensible answer. It was about what he expected. But as he thought ahead, he couldn't help but chuckle to himself. Bob's answer was sensible, alright. Yet at the same time, it had the potential to be explosive. One just had to pose a different question. As the miniature tape recorder in his pocket turned, Drew was thinking how it might go:

Authoritative Voice: Bob, we know you guys were involved in Melody Morgan's disappearance. And we've got evidence-- tire prints, an eyewitness who saw you there, and a doctor who will testify about the wounds Vic received.

Bob: It's all circumstantial evidence.

And from one of Bob's earlier answers:

Authoritative Voice. Bob, we've got enough evidence to go to a Grand Jury. That means discovery, depositions, and almost certainly a hearing. We're also going to ask for an independent counsel investigation. To make a long story short, we're confident we can get one or more indictments-- kidnaping, maybe even murder. And we intend to prosecute those indictments to the fullest extent possible. Do you understand what that means?"

Bob: We're up to our eyeballs in shit.

Drew smiled to himself. He couldn't wait 'til the real fireworks began. He glanced across the restaurant and smiled at a black-haired Asian woman. *Relax*, his eyes said to her. *Let me get Bob loosened up, then he's all yours.*

Allie smiled back.

A tall strawberry-blonde waitress appeared and took their orders. The pause in the conversation provided a perfect transition for Bob. He didn't care about the GW law students, the independent counsel law, Richardson, or circumstantial evidence. He cared about his book deal. The lunch was supposed to be about Drew *showing him the money.*

“Okay, politics aside,” Bob said as the waitress left, “let’s talk about books. You mentioned on the phone the other day that your publisher was interested in a book from me.”

Drew told Bob what he wanted to hear-- Little Brown Jug was interested in a tell-all book about the inner workings of the Jack Kurtz Administration; they wanted Bob Grady to write it; and the sooner they could nail down a contract with him, the better. Indeed, by the time the waitress had brought their order, Bob was feeling on top of the world. After the book, his major concerns would be azaleas and little leaguers.

Between bites of his BLT, Bob asked, “So what kind of advance do you think we're talking about?”

Drew cocked his head. “Two, maybe three million.”

Bob almost choked on his BLT as he thought about how much bacon two million dollars would bring home! The thought of becoming an instant millionaire danced in his head. Now he knew how a power-hitter in baseball's free-agency market felt.

"That much?" He had expected to hear something like a million, tops.

Drew chuckled to himself. He was already having fun at Bob’s expense. And this was just the beginning. The fireworks were still to come. He had purposefully inflated the estimate to put Bob at ease, to make him feel on top of the world. That way, when they lowered the boom, the bust would be loud and hard. And so would be the fall.

“Plus five percent of sales. So the more you tell, the more you make.” Drew raised his eyebrows. “Tell about what happens behind closed doors, reveal some of the skeletons in the closet, and you’re almost assured of hitting a million copies. The juicier the book, the greater the number of zeros in your bank account Hell, even George Stephananoplis made a cool two million with his self-serving gobbledygook about Slick Willie.”

As the waitress took their plates, and brought coffee, Bob was even higher in the clouds

with joy. He and Molly would be set for life. "Can you help me get a deal?"

"No problem. My publisher asked if I would act as their agent in getting this thing done. I'll put the basic framework of the contract together for you to look at. Once we nail down the major issues, we'll get together with the publishers and hammer out a final deal. I'm betting it shouldn't take more than a week."

"That soon?" The thought adding a bunch of zeros to the end of his bank account that quickly made Bob beam.

"Hey, Bob, get it while the getting's good. Your timing's perfect."

Drew sipped his coffee. With lunch almost over, his mood shifted to nervousness. The moment of truth had arrived. Hopefully, his logic was right.

Drew looked to his left, again towards the Asian-looking woman seated alone on the other side of the restaurant. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. That was Allie's signal.

TWENTY FIVE

Conscience is the chamber of justice.
--Origen

Nodding her understanding at Drew's signal, Allie took one last look into the small make-up mirror in her hand and adjusted her wig. You can do this, she told herself in an Asian voice. Then she surreptitiously shed her raincoat, revealing khaki pants and a short-sleeve teal green polo shirt with "OLD EBBIT'S GRILL" embroidered above the breast pocket. It was, of course, the same outfit worn by all the waitresses in the restaurant. The 'Asian waitress' took a deep breath, walked over to the coffee butler, and grabbed a pot of coffee. Although her heart was racing, she walked confidently towards their table.

Out of the corner of his eye Drew saw Allie about four steps away from their table. He pointed out the window towards the south, drawing Bob's attention away from Allie. "When are they supposed to start the reconstruction of the ellipse?" he asked Bob, as if Drew really cared.

Bob looked out to where Drew was pointed. "Next month I think. Parking's going to be a bear."

By this time Allie was standing at their table, holding the coffee pot.

Bob felt her presence and glanced up at her.

Allie bent down towards Bob's right ear. "Murderer," she whispered in a nonchalant, but icy tone.

With his own heart beating furiously, Drew could barely hear what she'd said, but there was no doubt Bob had heard her. He startled noticeably. Expecting to be asked if he wanted 'more coffee,' it sounded like she'd just called him a 'murderer.' That didn't make any sense. Had he heard right? Bob looked back up at her.

"Excuse me, Miss?" He studied her face, trying to remember if she'd been their waitress for the entire meal or was just a coffee-server. He didn't think their waitress had been of Asian descent... or short. Their waitress had been light-haired... a strawberry-blonde... and tall.

Allie concentrated, trying to remember everything she'd practiced. Practicing with Drew had been one thing, but this was the real thing. And unlike the practice sessions, her heart was pounding fiercely now and she felt light-headed. She took a deeper than normal breath and reminded herself of Drew's words: 'the pressure's on Bob, not you.' Her heart slowed as her eyes met Bob's and she stared deeply, as if trying to pierce his brain.

"You hear me," she said firmly. Her accent was firmly Asian, and perhaps a bit too exaggerated. "I say 'murderer.'" This time she said the word loud enough that even Drew heard it plainly. And she said it with biting contempt, without fear, and with a confidence that seemed to say *'I know all about you.'* A part of her wanted to look over at Drew, as if to say *'how was that?'* but she maintained her composure and toughness, and kept her eyes firmly on Bob's.

But Bob's eyes didn't remain focused on her. In fact, they strayed as he tried to figure out what the Asian waitress was talking about. His initial thought was she was a pro-lifer, but if that were the case, she should have known he was pro-life too. So was Jack Kurtz. That was no secret. He thought again. Perhaps she was confusing him with someone else, perhaps a pro-choicer from the Hill? After all, it was a frequent lunch spot for many on the Hill. That had to be it, he figured.

"Listen, Miss, I think you must be mistaking me for someone else. I --"

She cut him off, shaking her head to the side quickly. "I no mistake you. You are Bob Grady, Jack Kurtz advisor. You are murderer and so is he." She stood her ground firmly, a coffee pot in one hand and an imaginary Asian dagger in the other, thrusting it into him.

From across the table, Drew watched Allie press the middle-aged lawyer. He studied Bob's face and noted the increasingly bother. For a split-second, Drew thought about speaking out and coming to Bob's support, like a friend would do in such a situation. But, of course, Drew was not Bob's friend... not today at least. And with the moment of truth coming, Drew sat in silence and watched the dramatic event play out. Soon, they might know whether Bob had been involved in a long-forgotten crime.

Bothered by her unnerving attitude of certainty, and the scorn in her voice, Bob racked his brain trying to understand the waitress. By now, he'd concluded it had to be something other than abortion. There wasn't a soul in America who didn't know Jack Kurtz's stance against abortion.

Despite the cool air forced down by the ceiling fan above the table, Bob began to sweat noticeably. Perhaps she was talking about the accidental sinking of an Asian fishing boat by an American submarine in Manilla the week before? That had caused quite a stir and protest in the Asian community.

Bob spoke. "Listen, if you're talking about what happened last week in Manilla, I can assure you it was a freak accident....an unfortunate, unavoidable accident." He tried to sound

political, to maintain his cool. The last thing he wanted was to create a scene. "I'm afraid you're making a big mistake."

"I no mistake," Allie repeated back with disgust, "you the one make big mistake. I not talking about Manilla."

The perspiration was seeping onto Bob's shirt beneath his arms and he decided it was time for him to ask the questions. "Alright then, just what exactly are you talking about?"

"I talking about something that happen a long time ago... a very long time ago."

The words 'a very long time ago' ran through Bob's brain like a mantra. He racked his memory, searching... Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Korean War, Vietnam?—they all pre-dated him. He responded, "Look, Miss, I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I know one thing-- I'm not a murderer, so don't call me one. I'm afraid you don't know what you're talking about."

Allie reacted with a pleasant smile that carried an eerie confidence. That wasn't what Bob expected. Then, with her eyes still locked on his, she spoke out, "Oh come now, Mr. Grady. You think back... back before you graduate. Before you Ensign Grady." She overemphasized the word 'Ensign' with an eerie haunting tone. "Remember when you Midshipman Grady? Remember before you graduate? Remember Saturday night, May 22th, 1988? You know exactly what I'm talking about, you murderer. Remember Melody Morgan?"

Just hearing that name sent a chill through Bob's spine and the blood drained noticeably from Bob's face, as if someone had opened a spigot in Bob's neck.

On the other side of the table, Drew sat wide-eyed. Indeed, Bob's face was as white as the tablecloth, and his mouth drooped in grotesque horror. Even after a double take, Drew noted the horror in Bob's expression... and the even bigger horror in his eyes. They glazed over, like a spoiled tuna.

Bob was lost in a sea of upsetting memories. It had been more than 30 years since he'd heard the name Melody Morgan spoken. About a year after it had happened, the four Middies had stopped talking about it— out-of-sight, out-of-mind. And for Bob, that had worked. That terrible night became filed away, deep in the recesses of his mind, where he didn't have to remember. But now, it was back, front and center, and 36 year-old memory flooded his senses. He remembered it as if it were yesterday...

...he was looking down on her in the camper bed, and although most of her face was covered in shadows, he could see the sparkle of her eyes and a soft smile on her lips. She was so beautiful. The Beatles 'Let It Be' was booming from the speakers above them and she pulled him down and kissed him, hard and full. Her mouth was smoky from the joints, yet sweet from the beer, and he would never forget that taste.

"So, you're a virgin, too?" she asked softly as she drew her mouth an inch away from his. Almost tasting her breath, he was petrified by what was happening. He managed a nod. There was another long, hard kiss, her tongue deep in his mouth, probing. Molly never kissed him so hard or so erotically. Then he felt her fingers undoing his belt and zipper. Molly never did that, either. It was always 'wait until after we're married.' Not knowing what the proper etiquette was in such a situation, Bob reached down and fumbled to help. An instant later, he found himself squirming out of his pants and boxers in the tight quarters of the camper bed. When he was naked, she reached down and found him. "Um, someone's excited," she said as she pulled him down on the camper bed next to her.

His hands found her breasts and he squeezed them gently. They were bigger than Molly's, and she was, again, more generous to share than Molly ever was. By now she had maneuvered under him and guided him into her. A flash of guilt came over him as he thought of Molly-- you should stop, he told himself, you should save yourself for Molly. He was shaking, his chest heaving, as her softness and warmth engulfed him like a steamy, wet, wool blanket. It was a feeling beyond any imagination, beyond any dream, and once in her, Molly was out of his head. He felt her legs wrap around the small of his back and Bob began to thrust into her, then up, and back down. 'Let It Be,' his penis sang out with glee.

His pace got harder and faster and he finally exploded, gulping for air to keep from blacking out. After collapsing atop her, he managed to kiss her in thanks, then wrestled his clothes on and returned to the front of the camper as Vic slid by on his way back. Seated in the front passenger seat, Bob peered out at the dark, shadowy road as he realized he was no longer a virgin. Jesus. What would he tell Molly? Should he tell her? They had no secrets. Could he tell her? Could he look her in the eye again? He was wrestling with these thoughts when he heard some shouting and a scream from the back of the camper. An enraged voice yelled out, "You bitch." That was followed by the sound of a fist smacking flesh and bone, a final cry of pain, and the thump against the van wall. He turned and looked back, and after a deadly silence, he heard Tony's voice say the words that nearly stopped his heart: "Jesus, you guys, I, uh, I think she'd dead."

Although the memory lasted only seconds, it seemed like a lifetime to Bob, and back at the Old Ebbit's Grill, he felt weak and dizzy. He looked up at the Asian waitress and struggled to respond. "I, uh, I'm afraid I d-don't know what you're t-talking about," he stammered, tripping up on the difficult words that begin with 'd' and 't.' They were the kind of words that everyone who's ever stuttered fears when scared. And make no doubt about it, Bob Grady was scared... to death by the mere mention of Melody Morgan. He was as scared as he was on that terrible night 36 years before.

Each stutter sent a chill through Drew and Allie— there was no mistake, the unbelievable was true!

The facial reaction had been an indicator, but the stuttering was an unmistakable sign. Indeed, Bob could just as easily have stuck a flashing neon 'GUILTY' sign on his forehead! He

was involved! While Drew and Allie had hoped for some sort of guilty reaction, what they'd just witnessed went light years beyond that. They'd received a wild, vile reaction— indeed, this man was scared to the bone by the mere mention of the name Melody Morgan.

With Allie on her own now, Drew hoped she wouldn't press anymore, fearful of any slip-up that might somehow give them away.

"You a liar, too," Allie improvised, her tone icier than before.

Then, before Bob could respond, she turned and walked away, disappearing through the swinging double doors leading to the kitchen. Within seconds she was running out the back service door, through the alley, across 14th Street, and down the escalator at Metro Center. As she swiped her Metro card, her head was spinning as she thought about the wild exchange and the unbelievable reality.

Once safely aboard the Metro, she caught her breath and looked around. No doubt every person on that train possessed secrets about something... but only one passenger possessed the world's biggest secret. Two stops later, at Farragut West, Allie exited the Metro and made her way back to the DUMP office with the world's biggest secret still spinning in her head.

Back at the Old Ebbit's Grill, Drew was the first to speak out after the stunning chain-of-events with the waitress. "What was that all about?" he asked, naively. There was more curiosity than concern in Drew's voice.

Still shook, Bob didn't respond right away. "I d-don't know," he finally managed, again tripping up. "There's so many crazy people in this world... it's scary. That was the most bizarre thing I've ever heard." Bob was able to control his stuttering this time.

Drew tried to reassure Bob. "She was off center, no doubt. She must have had you confused with someone else or something." Outwardly, Drew tried to sound sincere, but inside, he was gloating. His plan had worked better than his wildest dreams... better than Bob's worst nightmare.

"Um, look, Drew," Bob said as he looked at his watch, "I've got to be getting back to the office. But I'll call you to talk more about this book thing, okay?"

"Sure thing, Bob. I'll get the check." *Because you're going to need every dime you've got for lawyers and appeals... and snacks from the prison commissary. And while you're at it, you might want to stock up on soap-on-a-rope. Ha Ha!!!*

As Bob walked out the door, Drew watched in awe. *A penny for your thoughts, Bob*, he thought sarcastically to himself. But Drew knew what Bob was thinking— he was scared and confused, his world crashing down all around.

TWENTY SIX

Life changes in the instant.
You sit down to dinner and
life as you know it ends.
--Joan Didion

Fleeing the Old Ebbit's Grill, Bob Grady was a frantic, nervous wreck. He didn't know what, exactly, had happened inside both the restaurant and his head, but one thing was sure: he felt like a criminal leaving the scene of a crime. His heart and mind raced in panic at the realization that his entire life-- and everything that seemed so perfect before lunch-- had been turned upside down, shaken, and completely messed up... all in a span of less than 5 minutes.

His stride back to the office was fast and furious, but no match for the fury taking place inside his head as he played over the out-of-the-blue exchange with the Asian waitress. So dizzying was this, that by the time he reached 12th Street three minutes later, Bob had worked himself into quite a frenzy, his mind swirling with a flurry of troubling questions. Just who was that waitress? And exactly what did she know? Or did she know anything, really? Or had it all just been a well-conceived bluff to see how he'd react?

As he crossed 12th Street, that last question tormented him the most. And for good reason. Deep down, he knew the answer: he reacted like a guilty man. And unfortunately, nothing could have prevented that. From the moment he heard the name Melody Morgan, the blood drained from his face as if sucked down by some strong alien gravity. At the same time, his heart quickened, his nerves tensed, and guilt saturated his every thought.

Bob knew these feelings all too well. They were the same feelings he carried around for months and months after they buried the girl who'd taken his virginity. Back then, every bush was a cop, every knock on his door his impending arrest, and every siren his signal to hide or run. On one occasion, driving home to Atlanta just after graduation, a cop in North Carolina had come up quickly behind Bob, his lights flashing, his siren wailing. Bob broke into an instant sweat, convinced he was being arrested for murder. After a fleeting thought to punch the accelerator and outrun the cop, Bob pulled over. Deep down, he knew the jig was up, and in the darkened car, sweat streamed down Bob's body like a fat man in a sauna. As tears welled in his eyes, a plethora of questions ticked through his head-- how would he explain it to his parents and

Molly? Had Jack and Vic and Tony been arrested already? Could he cut a deal and testify against them?

The officer approached, his flashlight leading the way. Rolling down his window, Bob braced as he awaited the words he knew were coming: "You're under arrest for the murder of Melody Morgan," the officer would surely say. Then he'd order Bob out of the car and apply the steel cuffs. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything..."

The officer stopped and leaned down.

Here it comes, Bob thought, my life is over. He almost blurted out that he was sorry, that it had been an accident, that they didn't mean to kill the hippie girl, but the officer spoke first. "Son, you know one of your tail lights is out?"

The pressure within Bob vented as if someone had opened a relief valve. "MM-My tail light? Uh. Um. N-No sir. I, uh, just graduated from the Naval Academy and was on my way back home to Atlanta. I'll, uh, make sure I get it fixed right away, sir."

"The Naval Academy, huh?" the officer said, taking a good look at the sweating officer.

"Yes sir."

"Well good for you son. I wish to hell I could get my boy interested in something like that. All he cares about is that damn rap music." The officer sighed. "Okay, then. Just make sure you get that fixed when you get back home. I'll note that on this warning. If you get pulled over down the road, just show 'em this and they'll let you go."

If another cop pulls me over, Bob thought to himself, I won't need that warning. I'll be dead of a heart attack. "Thank you, sir," he verbalized. And that was that.

Now, 36 long years later, those feelings of guilt and paranoia were back. Whoever the waitress was, she was clever-- she had blitzed perfectly and blindsided him. Sack. As the ramifications swept over him like indigestion, Bob began to feel nauseous as the grease from his BLT made love to the acid in his stomach. Had he blown the book deal and the relaxing life back in Atlanta with his flowers and Little Leaguers and Molly? What would they say at family reunions and holiday gatherings now? Would they talk of him as the first Presidential legal advisor ever to be convicted of rape and murder? Or would they just never talk about him?

His stomach gurgled worse.

Entering the OEB, he climbed the stairs to his second floor corner office. With each ten-inch step, his stomach worsened, and by the time he reached the second floor landing, it was heaving. He rushed around the corner to the men's room. With his hand against his mouth

trying to contain the pressure within, he chopped to the first stall as his stomach uncoiled. The foamy gravity-defying puke burst out, against his hand, splattering out. Most hit the tile floor with a splat; what didn't ricocheted from his hand onto his tie and jacket. *Shit*. Combined with the lingering gases from the person who'd been in the stall just minutes before, the potpourri of smells overloaded his olfactory senses. And inside that stall, it wasn't anything like the flowers and fresh cut grass on the ellipse just an hour or so before, when everything in Bob's world was so perfect. Indeed, the smells of a public toilet and puke were also the smells of life.

Bob leaned down toward the commode as a second brown-green wave erupted. And while he managed to hit the water this time, some of the toilet water rebounded and hit him in the face. Weakened, his knees buckled and he found himself on them, his arms hugging the porcelain bowl. Closing his mouth, he tried to breathe through his nose but that only made the smell worse. His stomach heaved again. After a final wet heave, followed by a dry one, Bob leaned over the puke-filled bowl to make sure he was done.

Finally calm, Bob flushed away his horror and rinsed his mouth at the sink. Looking at the mirror, he saw a terror-stricken, guilty face staring back. It was like a cruel, cruel trick, and he couldn't believe the turn his life had taken.

Once in the reception area of his office, he tore by his secretary with a quick wave, hoping she wouldn't notice either the puke stains on his tie and jacket or the smell. Safely behind his closed office door, he tore off his clothes and threw them into the empty bottom drawer of his file cabinet. He was lucky to have a change of clothes in his office. He was unlucky to need them because of the events that had transpired.

The fresh clothes made him feel better and he sat down in his leather chair to collect his thoughts. The incident hadn't just happened by chance, he concluded. Nor had the waitress acted alone-- Drew Matthews had been there purposefully and Bob was sure-- somehow, someway-- he was involved. With that realization, a new wave of terror rolled through Bob's body. If Drew were involved, the stakes were even higher— no longer was it just some floozy waitress with a floozy theory! That's when Bob knew he had to call Jack. With trepidation, he picked up the secure phone and punched out the number to Jack's private secure line.

Jack was waiting for the call and picked up on the second ring. "Jack Kurtz."

"Jack. It's B-Bob Grady."

From that one slight stutter, Jack sensed the unmistakable terror in Bob's voice. Of course Jack already knew what had happened. The daily tapes Donno provided, of every conversation from inside the DUMP office and Drew's and Allie's houses, assured that. In fact, Jack had spent much of his lunch hour wondering how the sneak attack at The Old Ebbit's Grill had gone. Now, hearing Bob so distraught, Jack knew it had gone better than Drew and Allie could have ever imagined. It served Bob right and Jack even managed to chuckle to himself.

"What's the matter, Bob?"

"Ss-something just happened that I think you have tt-t-to hear," Bob stammered, now worse. "Ss-s-somebody knows about us and th-that M-Melody girl."

Jack remained calm and advised his stuttering legal advisor to do the same.

"I c-can't."

"Yes you can," Jack assured him. "Take some deep breaths."

Jack heard venting on the other end of the line. "You okay?"

Bob replied, "Un-uh."

Bob sounded part zombie, part lawyer and Jack didn't know what his grunt meant. "Okay," Jack instructed, "here's what I want you to do, Bob. Walk down the stairs and take the tunnel over here. Come right up to my study. I'll let security know to expect you. Okay?"

"Un-huh," the legal zombie responded again. He hung up.

As he waited, Jack reflected on Bob's call. The day of reckoning was fast approaching, he knew. But unlike Bob, Jack welcomed it.

TWENTY SEVEN

Above all else,
to thine own self be true.
--William Shakespeare

A timid knock on the door to Jack's private study signaled Bob's arrival.

Noting Bob's sick look, Jack ushered in his childhood friend and Academy classmate and quickly closed the door. "You okay?"

Bob shrugged.

Jack led Bob to the leather chair in front of his desk, "Okay, I want you to just relax and tell me what happened. Take your time. No pressure."

Seeing Jack so calm helped steady Bob. He took a few deep breaths and recounted the Old Ebbitt's Grill incident, and for the most part, did so without stuttering or breaking down.

Jack listened to every word closely. The devil was in the details, he knew... and so, too, was the salvation. "That's it?" Jack asked when Bob had finished. He said it as if he expected something worse.

"Isn't that enough," Bob responded, unable to understand Jack's measured reaction. While Bob's entire world was collapsing, Jack acted like it was just some tangential obstacle. "How can you sit there so calmly?"

"Because whatever happened means nothing in-and-of-itself." Jack's tone was cool, almost a-matter-of-fact. "It's obvious Drew Matthews and his waitress-friend came up with some wild-ass theory that you might have been involved in that girl's disappearance. Not knowing what else to do, they blindsided you, hoping for corroboration."

Well, they sure got corroboration, thought Bob. He'd done everything but tell them they were the ones who made Melody disappear.

Although Jack referred to her as a 'waitress-friend' of Drew's, Jack knew fully well who

the waitress was. "I'll bet they don't have anything else," Jack tacked on.

"So what happened doesn't surprise you? Or worry you?" Bob asked quickly, hopeful.

"The only thing that surprises me is that something like this never happened before. As for being worried, what happened just proves they must have nothing else. Because if they had anything else, they wouldn't have done what they did, right?"

Jack's circular talk had Bob too confused to answer. He knew just one thing: he was scared. Still, as he let Jack's words soak in, he started thinking perhaps he was being too hard on himself, thinking the worst. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought. He put himself in Jack's shoes. Maybe Jack was right? Maybe they didn't know anything else? Maybe the secret would remain safe? And for a brief moment, Bob felt the tension in his chest ease. Unfortunately, as soon as he put himself back into his own shoes, his pessimistic mind countered those thoughts. Maybe Jack was underestimating the whole thing? Would Jack feel the same way if he had been there and saw Bob flip and flop like a fish out of water as the waitress grilled him? Could the secret be kept safe now that Bob had corroborated their crazy theory? With these conflicting thoughts and emotions bouncing around in his head, Bob didn't know up from down. He felt punch-drunk.

Finally Bob managed to respond. "Like I told you, Jack, there wasn't much I could do to hide my reaction. Even if it was just some wild-ass theory of theirs before, it's not anymore. They've got to know there's something more to it, now."

"Yeah. So?" Jack shrugged.

"So aren't you worried what might to happen next?"

"Yes and no."

"What's that mean?"

Jack elaborated. "It means I really don't know how to feel. On one hand, I'm a little nervous... sure. I sure as hell don't want this thing to come out in public. But on the other hand, it's way overdue. Maybe this is what's meant to be. Maybe we're finally going to have to answer for what we did..."

Jack's answer shocked Bob. "It almost sounds like you don't want to fight this? Like whatever happens... will happen."

"Fight what?" Jack reacted. "The fact that we did what they're trying to prove? The fact is, *we did do it*, Bob. Nobody else...you, me, Tony, and especially Vic. And for 36 years we've been free as birds, doing whatever we want." Then Jack turned philosophical. "Have you paid

any price for what happened? Has Tony? Or Vic? What about consequences? Shouldn't there be some price to pay? Shouldn't there be accountability?"

Jack would have made a no-nonsense, pragmatic God... and Bob hated Jack at that moment. Moreover, Jack's words left Bob even more dumbfounded. Jack seem willing to roll over, unwilling to fight for their continued freedom... *for Bob's book deal and his life of leisure*. What about Jack's legacy? What kind of friend was Jack?

Before Bob could respond, Jack continued on. "Do you feel right about what happened? Do you feel right about yourself?" Jack eyed Bob hard.

Jack's seriousness shocked Bob. He had come to Jack for comfort and help, yet was getting grilled instead.

"Or have you just forgotten the whole thing or pretend like it never happened?" Jack flamed on. "How about when you and Molly are in bed together-- when you're making love-- do you ever think about Melody?" Jack made it sound like they deserved whatever might happen to them, almost like he was willing to let fate take its course, without any interference.

This wasn't why Bob had come to Jack. He wanted to hear Jack explain how they were going to defend themselves, how they were going to get this waitress and Drew Matthews before they got them. Not knowing how to respond to the grilling, Bob turned the questions around on Jack. "What about you, Jack? What price have you paid?"

"What price have I paid?" Jack repeated back, his voice rising, his anger visible. "I'll tell you what price I've paid— I haven't been able to love because of that night."

The blank look of confusion on Bob's face said a lot, and Jack knew he needed to fill in the details.

"A marriage can't survive a complete lack of intimacy between a husband and wife," he added.

Bob still didn't understand. "What are you saying, Jack?"

Jack laid his eyes squarely on Bob's. "I'm saying that ever since that night, I've been unable to"-- Jack hesitated, thinking about what words to use-- "to get an erection. That's why Annie and I ended up getting divorced two months after we got married."

For a millisecond, Bob forgot his own problems. "Jesus Jack, I didn't know. God, I'm sorry." He meant it as sincerely as a true friend could only mean it.

Jack shrugged, almost relieved to have finally told someone about his impotency. It was one less secret to carry around. "I was just never been able to get past what happened," Jack mused. "I read books, I saw doctors, I prayed. But none of it ever helped. Not even Viagra

helped," Jack added. "Sex is 95 percent mental. And ever since that night, when I think of sex, the only thing I see is Melody Morgan's body, naked and not moving, on the bed in Tony's camper."

Bob closed his eyes, remembering that terrible image for the second time in less than an hour.

"That's been a terrible punishment in and of itself," Jack added. "No wife to love, no kids, no grandkids..."

"I can imagine."

"And that's not all, either," Jack said solemnly. "To this day, I have nightmares every night about what happened. Sometimes they're so bad I'm too scared to close my eyes at night. I just keep remembering, every detail, every word, her scream, that terrible thud, and Tony saying she's dead, and then digging that deep hole and throwing dirt on her."

Bob felt a pang of guilt. He'd been able to put the whole incident in the recesses of his mind and go on with his life, like indeed, nothing had happened.

Jack continued bearing his soul. "And you know something else?"

Bob wasn't sure he wanted to hear another bombshell from Jack.

But Jack didn't wait for an answer. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd do everything completely different. If we'd gone to the police and come clean, maybe the last 36 years wouldn't have been such a living hell."

About that, Bob disagreed completely. If they'd gone to the police, they wouldn't have graduated, he wouldn't have married Molly, and he wouldn't have his family. He might have even gone to jail. There was no telling where he'd be today. He certainly wouldn't be the senior legal advisor to the President or the source of pride for generation after generation of Grady's. And worst of all, perhaps, he wouldn't be ready to sign a seven figure book deal. That is, as long as they could just weather the storm that was descending upon them.

The issue wasn't what they should have done 36 years ago, the issue was what they should do *now*.

Bob responded to Jack. "Well, we didn't Jack. And we can't change that now. You know that. What we need to do is figure out what to do *now*, with the cards we've dealt ourselves. Right?" For a man scared out of his gourd, Bob actually sounded rational.

"Maybe," Jack half-conceded. "But one thing I'm not going to do is make the same

mistake I made back in 1988."

"Which mistake?" Bob asked, unsure whether Jack was referring to the events leading to the killing or the events afterwards.

"This time, I won't break any laws and I won't do anything that goes against my conscience," Jack clarified. "I'm willing to protect myself, but I won't do anything illegal or immoral."

Almost immediately, Bob knew he didn't like Jack's strategy. It sounded passive, like failure just waiting to happen. If ever there were a time to pull out all the stops, this was it. He was too close to the seven figure book deal to think differently. Legality and morality could wait 'til another day.

"So you're willing to just sit back and let whatever happens, happen?"

"I didn't say that. I said I won't do anything illegal or anything that goes against my conscience." Jack emphasized 'I.' "If what we did comes out, then so be it."

"You're scaring me Jack. It's almost as if you don't care what happens."

"Listen Bob. Just because I'm telling you there's a limit as to how far I'm willing to go, doesn't mean I don't care. Of course I care. I know we can't change what happened and I know we have to play the cards we dealt ourselves. I also know we've got a lot to lose. But things are different now. Back when we were 21, everything was in front of us. None of us wanted to do anything to mess that up. Now, most everything I ever thought about, is behind me. I guess, in a weird sense, I feel like I've got less to lose now. That's a different perspective for me. For the past 36 years I probably would have done anything to keep this from ever getting out... all because I thought I had so much to lose. But you know what? When I look back now, I realize I've already lost everything that's really important. I lost love... and a wife and a chance for a family and grandkids-- everything. And now? Now what do I have? I've got a career, a reputation, maybe a legacy. You and Molly have kids, grandkids, family reunions, graduations, holidays. Hell, even Vic and Tony have what matters most to them-- Vic's got power, and Tony's got money and all the women he can handle. Maybe that's why I don't feel the sense of urgency you do," Jack admitted.

"Come on, Jack. You make it sound as if your life's been a complete failure. You're an American hero, the real deal. Nobody and nothing can take that away from you... unless you let them. And history will never forget everything you did. Don't underestimate your legacy. Surely you don't want to throw that away."

"I don't want to throw anything away. But I can't hug a legacy at night. And I can't bounce it on my knee, teach it to play golf, or take it to see a ballgame," Jack responded bluntly. "I realize now all I ever really wanted was a family."

"Jack, so many people owe so much to you. Including me. You know that. Without you there's no telling where the country would be today. You're the one who's responsible for what we have today. Don't forget that. And I'm sure there's a lot more for you to accomplish. The world is your oyster, Jack. You can do just about anything you want."

"It's not as great as you make it out to be, Bob. I'm alone. I'll never have a family."

If we roll over, you still won't have a family, Bob thought to himself. But he didn't verbalize that. Instead, he changed the subject, hoping to move Jack away from morose pondering of the past, to crafty planning for the future. You saved America, Jack. Surely, you can save us, too. Please.

Bob spoke. "So what are we supposed to do? What's our next step?"

"What do you mean our next step?" Jack repeated back, semi-disgusted that Bob hadn't understood a word he'd said. "I told you, Bob, it isn't our game... it's Drew's and his 'waitress' friend.' They're going to make the moves. About all we can do is try and anticipate what they're going to do and defend ourselves as best we can."

Again, Bob didn't like Jack's passiveness. "What about Tony and Vic? Should we tell them what happened?"

Jack shrugged as if he didn't know. "What do you think?" he responded naively.

"Jesus Jack. If you don't know, how the hell am I supposed to know? All I know is that two hours ago I was the happiest man in the world. And now I might be the most scared. And you're not helping things. All I want is to get out of here and get back down to Atlanta with my family and my honor."

"And your book deal and the secret intact. Face it, Bob, you don't want to lose what you have and what you want to get. That's why you're so scared. You still don't want to pay for what happened." Jack's tone was biting.

"God Almighty Jack, I wish you'd stop with this *laisse faire* attitude. What am I supposed to want? Punishment?"

Jack shook his head. "How about restitution?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means a little girl was left without a mom because of what we did. Don't you feel any sense of responsibility for that? What if your mom had been the one killed?"

"Jesus, Jack, we've been through this already. I can't change what happened."

"Yeah, but you can do something to make it up to that little girl."

"That little girl is over 36 years old now, Jack."

"That little girl was *your waitress*," Jack said point-blank. He'd thought long and hard whether to disclose this fact to Bob. After all, it would put Allie and Drew in the crosshairs. But at the same time, Jack wanted it to be perfectly clear he'd drawn a line in the sand that he would never cross. It was too much that they'd buried Allie's mom. Now, Jack wanted Bob to know he wouldn't participate in anything that might result in burying her daughter, Allie.

For the second time in less than two hours, the blood was sucked from Bob's face and the hair on his neck and arms stood on end. "How do you know?" the ashen lawyer asked.

"I don't know... not for sure at least. But when I put two and two together, that's the only thing that makes sense. I bet she's trying to find out what happened to her mom." Of course Jack knew for sure. He'd listened to the tapes Donno had provided of Drew and Allie as they planned the sneak attack on Bob. But Jack wasn't about to let Bob know that. Knowledge was power. And Bob didn't deserve any power.

"That's a pretty big jump from 2 plus 2," Bob commented.

"Not as big as you think?"

"How come?"

"Lots of reasons. First, who would care about a woman whose been missing for 36 years? Answer, someone related to the missing woman. More specifically, the woman's daughter. Second, why was Drew Matthews at the scene with the waitress? Answer, because Allie Morgan works for Drew Matthews. He was there helping her. Conclusion-- the two of them blind-siding you at lunch is the only thing that makes logical sense."

"How do you know all this, Jack?"

"About Allie and Drew?"

Bob nodded.

"I've made it a point to keep Allie Morgan in my sights," Jack answered. "Notre Dame undergrad, Georgetown Law School, legislative director for two different congressmen, and now Drew Matthew's right hand assistant. She's quite a girl-- smart and lots of spunk."

"You sound like you admire her."

Jack didn't like the disdain in Bob's voice. "Why wouldn't I? I've got nothing against her. In fact, if I ever had a daughter, I'd be proud if she grew up to be like Allie." Jack shrugged as a thought crossed his mind. He verbalized it. "And that may be a bit of the reason why I'm *laisse faire*-- to use your words-- about this whole thing. It's hard not to admire her for wanting to know what happened to her mom."

"And if we weren't the ones in her sights, I'd be heart-warmed, too, Jack. But unfortunately, we are. And we can't just sit back and do nothing while she comes after us."

"Why not?" Jack enjoyed playing the devil's advocate with this scared, selfish soul before him.

"What if she succeeds?" Bob said, the terror running through his mind like a rat in a maze. "What if she's as successful as she was today?"

"Then we're all screwed, Bob. And each of us will have to answer for what happened that night. Boo fucking hoo."

Bob couldn't believe Jack's flippancy. Jack wasn't going to help save them!

Jack continued. "What happened to you today was easy. All they did was follow the trail we left behind."

"What trail?" Bob asked. He was feeling queasy again.

"The trail from the Doctor who stitched up Vic-- that's Drew Matthew's father."

This was also news to Bob. "How is it that you know everything about everything, Jack?"

"It's what people with too much time on their hands do... people who don't have families. You take your grandkids to the park and the movies. I spend my time learning as much as I can about anyone and anything that might affect me. Allie Morgan and Drew Matthews fit into that category. So does Captain Jake Matthews, U.S. Navy, Retired."

"So you think Drew's Dad told them about Vic's stitches and they came up with the rest of this on their own?"

"Something like that. They probably didn't have any other leads, and this was something... a longshot at best. So they took a chance with it." Jack paused. "And you have to give 'em credit for the way they played it out today... going after the unsuspecting nervous one with the propensity to stutter."

Although Bob didn't like the way Jack characterized him, he couldn't argue with its accuracy.

"So, assuming you're right-- that it was just a lucky shot in the dark-- what do you think they're going to do next?"

Jack was in the midst of developing several theories about that. But he wasn't about to let Bob in on any of them. Not yet at least. Most likely never. Jack didn't like Bob's selfish, above-the-law attitude; in that same vein, Jack didn't like Tony and Vic's unquenchable thirst for power. All three were still unworthy to wear their Academy rings.

Jack turned the question back on Bob. "I don't know, Bob. What would you do?"

Bob was beginning to think like a lawyer again, which wasn't necessarily more clearly. "Well, they still don't have any hard evidence. And without evidence, all they can do is try and smoke us out, maybe with a public accusation and whatever circumstantial evidence they might be able to piece together."

Jack replied, "Un-huh. Talk is cheap. The only thing cheaper is an unsupported accusation. But you're right, that's all they've got-- a theory, with no hard evidence. And if they try to do something with just that, they have to know we'd circle up the wagons and stand firm. It'd be our word against theirs. With you and Vic and Tony denying all the accusations, we'd win that easily." Jack had purposefully not included himself in the list of deniers. He wouldn't even lie if it came to that.

Jack kept speaking. "Hell, even the hillbilly from Arkansas accomplished that much. And if a dumb shit like him could do it, I'm sure you'all could manage well enough."

Bob didn't miss the fact that Jack had not included himself in the list. "What about you, Jack? Are you inferring that you wouldn't lie if you were confronted?"

Bingo, Bob. You win the cell with the big fat man who likes lawyers. "Like I said, Bob, I won't encourage or discourage Drew and Allie, and I won't comment on any of this, unless I'm under court order to do so. That's my position."

Jack reiterated his bright line in the sand. Lawyers hated bright lines.

"You're scaring me, Jack," Bob announced.

"Sorry, Bob. But I've got to be true to myself and that's that."

"So, do you think we have anything to worry about?"

TWENTY EIGHT

Fear follows crime...
and is its punishment.
-- Voltaire

... anything to worry about?

The words danced in Jack's mind. *Hell ya, Bob... you have everything to worry about... you should be especially worried about Vic and Tony...*

It was obvious that Bob was hoping to hear a comforting response, and Jack smiled. They had helluva lot to worry about, he knew. They had each other. And at least two of them were capable of carrying out any, if not all, of the seven deadly sins to protect themselves and the secret.

"The only thing we have to fear is ourselves," Jack replied simply, liking the way his words paralleled Churchill's.

"What's that supposed to mean, Jack?" Bob had no idea how much, or even why, he should fear his Academy classmates.

"It means what it means... the only way we can ever get hurt is if we turn on each other."

"I think we should let Vic and Tony know what's going on so they won't be blindsided," Bob said. It was a lawyerly, reasonable suggestion, and it seemed to track with Jack's idea that the four needed to be allies.

Jack shot it down like a duck over a pond. "I think that would be a mistake,"

"Why?"

"Because I don't trust those two."

Now Bob felt like he'd wandered onto the set of a Stephen King movie. Was it getting chillier in here or was the chill just inside him? "What are you talking about? You don't trust

Tony and Vic?"

"Not one bit."

"Why?"

"That's personal... between me and them," Jack shot back. "And if you want to know, go ahead and ask them. Maybe they'll tell you. But if you do ask them, you better be careful."

Jesus Christ. Whose side was Jack on anyways? He didn't seem like the kid next door anymore. Bob tried a new tact. "Okay. But regardless of your personal relationship with Tony and Vic, why shouldn't we tell them what happened? If we don't tell them, they may be the next ones to be blindsided. I don't see how they could make things worse." Bob's response was again reasonable.

Unfortunately, Bob's reasonableness was predicated on him being a simpleton who didn't know all the relevant facts. For openers, Bob didn't know that Tony had been blackmailing Jack for 25 years. Nor did Bob know that underneath his ugly exterior, Vic was an ugly serpent who would kill two of his classmates if it meant achieving his own selfish goals. Plus, unlike Bob, Jack envisioned several ways Vic and Tony could make things worse. No doubt they would go after Allie and Drew. And if they were successful, two more innocent people would be dead. If Tony and Vic didn't go after Drew and Allie, they might turn their attention inward, to silencing anyone who had knowledge of the secret. Jack decided to enlighten poor, poor Bob.

"How do you think Vic and Tony will react if you tell them what happened to you today?" Jack asked.

Bob was thinking.

"I'll tell you," Jack jumped in. "First, they'd probably jump all over you for not seeing this coming, for getting caught in that situation, and for not being able to control your stuttering."

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it, Jack? I mean, come on, I was blindsided. After 36 years, nobody could have anticipated something like this happening. You're being unreasonable."

Unreasonable. The word echoed in Jack's head. While it a great word in a legal brief or in a court room, unfortunately for Bob, that wasn't their situation. This was about two greedy men who would do anything to keep a 36 year-old murder a secret. And legal words weren't part of that equation. "You and I might think it's unreasonable," Jack agreed, "but this isn't about us or what we think. It's about Tony and Vic. And those two see things differently. They put on their blinders and see thing in terms of their own interests. So then, after they got through ripping you, what do you think they'd do?"

Bob shrugged.

Jack continued on. "I'll tell you. They'll do something about Drew and Allie, and do whatever it takes to make sure the secret stays secret."

Bob was deep in thought. "What exactly are you saying, Jack?" Although he had his own idea, Bob wanted to hear Jack's.

"I'm saying Vic and Tony would kill if they had to."

The words sent a chill through Bob's spine. That wasn't what he was thinking at all. "Kill who?"

"Anyone they had to... including a nervous classmate with a propensity to stutter." Jack's tone was low, almost sinister.

"Come on Jack. You don't really believe that, do you? Anyone?"

"I believe that as much as I believe anything. Those two only care about themselves. If it meant saving their own skins, I think they'd kill their own mothers. They wouldn't give you or Drew or Allie a second chance."

Bob's head was swimming. As if the incident at Old Ebbit's wasn't enough, now Jack was telling Bob that he was a potential lethal target, and his own classmates might be the ones looking through the scope. He rubbed his eyes. "I'm beginning to think I'm in the middle of a bad dream."

"Welcome to my 36 year-old nightmare," Jack sang out. He felt like Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*... only worse. Raskolnikov only had to carry around his guilt of killing that old lady for a few weeks before he cracked up. Jack had been carrying it around for 36 years.

His head in his hands, Bob felt every throb of his head. How quickly everything could change... in just the blink of an eye. That's how long it had taken for the four of them to go from loving Melody to burying her. That's also how long it had taken for him to go from feeling like a top-of-the-world, million dollar winner to a commode-hugging, puke-sick loser. And the way Jack was talking, that's how long it might take for one of his classmates to put a bullet in his head or have him run down as he crossed Constitution Avenue.

"What's the matter?" Jack asked.

"I just can't believe all this is happening. It seems like everything's falling apart." Bob's voice was cracking.

"Don't get too down, Bob. Not yet at least. It's still early. There's a lot of ball left to

play."

Bob wasn't sure if that was good or bad-- the game could get worse.

As Bob considered his predicament, he soon concluded that something didn't seem right... something Jack had said about Tony and Vic. Sure, the two of them were self-centered and egotistical, but so were a lot of people. But in saying they would kill a classmate if it came down to it, Jack had drawn and crossed a line Bob just couldn't understand. What could have happened between Jack and them to spawn such an extreme conclusion? Or was Jack just exaggerating?

Bob decided he needed to hear Jack's answer. "Look Jack, what you said about Tony and Vic just a minute ago-- that they would kill anyone they had to, to keep the secret-- what made you say that?"

Jack sized up Bob. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Bob. But once I tell you, there's no give-backs." Jack purposefully used the same phrase the two used over five decades back, in their kindergarten days. It signified that Jack still felt a special bond for Bob, even though he was disgusted by his selfishness.

Bob nodded, as if he understood the significance of Jack's words.

As Jack explained Tony's blackmailing, Bob listened, amazed and shocked. When Jack told him that Tony was all but forcing himself into the VP position, Bob felt naive and completely disengaged. No wonder Jack didn't trust Tony. But what about Vic?

Jack seemed to read Bob's mind, and he quickly shifted the talk to Vic. "As you can imagine, Vic's not too happy about all this either. He thinks *he* should be my VP. Plus, he's upset Tony outwitted him. Can you believe that? Vic's mad because he didn't think to blackmail me first. Talk about two pieces of shit: one's a blackmailer, the other-- the one who got us in all this mess in the first place-- wishes he were."

"Jesus Jack. Is this really all true?"

"No", Jack replied with an exaggerated, stupid grin and roll of his eyes, "I'm making it all up for a book I'm writing. Unfortunately, no editor will ever believe it." Jack let out a long sigh and rubbed his eyes. "I shouldn't have to deal with this kind of shit. Those two should be happy enough with everything they've got. And because of them, this whole thing may fall apart in our faces and we may all lose everything. Fire and anger aren't the devil's best friend... greed and ego are."

A million questions plagued Bob. He asked the more troubling one: "So what makes you

think Tony or Vic would kill to keep the secret intact?"

"Because I consider myself to be a pretty good judge of character. And knowing how selfish and ambitious and greedy the two of them are, I think that's a reasonable conclusion. But... time will tell."

Bob weighed Jack's logic. He agreed Tony and Vic weren't likely to sit passively, letting Drew and Allie continue on with their quest to uncover the secret. But he couldn't believe *he* was in danger. They were classmates and roommates after all-- that was a strong bond. "I think you're being a little paranoid, Jack," Bob said, not mincing words.

"One classmate's been blackmailing me for the past 25 years and another wishes he were... and you're calling me paranoid?" Jack scoffed the words.

"I can't believe Tony's been blackmailing you for over 25 years."

"If you want to verify it, go right ahead. Ask him. But afterwards, you better watch your back. Because anyone who knows about that is in as much danger as anyone who knows about Melody Morgan."

Jack's passive approach was still bothering Bob. "It seems like there should be more that we could do to defend ourselves."

"Like what, Bob?" Jack snarled angrily. "Short of killing them, what would you have me do? Sick the IRS on them? Maybe they didn't file their taxes. Or maybe we should get Vic's FBI boys after them? We could arrest them for conspiring to bring down the President and three of his trusted advisors with the goddamn awful truth. Or for scaring the shit out of the President's legal advisor. I signed that into law last year, didn't I?"

Bob wasn't amused by Jack's flippancy. "You really believe you've got nothing to lose, don't you, Jack?"

"Let me be clear about one thing," Jack replied, his tone firm and serious. "The only thing I have to lose is my honor and self-respect. I've spent the last 36 years of my life trying to regain those two things, and now today, when I feel like I've finally earned a modicum of my honor and self-respect back again, I won't-- let me repeat... I won't-- do anything to lose them. Not again. That's where I'm coming from. You may not like that, and that's fine with me if you don't."

While Bob understood Jack's position, for him, honor and self-respect were a distant second to the financial security and tranquil lifestyle. "Okay then, Jack. Answer me this. If you were Drew and Allie, what would you do next?"

"I really don't know. But I know one thing-- if it's anything like what they did to you today, it should be interesting."

"You almost sound like you're looking forward to all this."

"I don't know if I'm looking forward to it, per se. But I do know this whole sad affair has been over my head for so long, that I guess I wouldn't mind some sense of closure, one way or another."

"Even if the closure meant full disclosure?"

Jack shrugged. "That might not be as bad as it sounds. Americans are a very forgiving bunch. Plus, there are lots of mitigating factors-- what happened took place a long, long time ago; we were just kids; and it was an accident. You and I and Tony didn't intend to hurt that girl. If the truth came out today, I think people would understand all those things and we'd come out of it okay."

Something didn't make sense to Bob. "If that's the case, Jack, then why have you allowed Tony to blackmail you all this time? Why don't you just call his bluff and tell him to go ahead and tell the world our secret?"

"I should have. But it's too late now." Jack hesitated, as if he had more to say. "Plus, in the end, I'm confident good will triumph over evil."

Bob didn't believe Jack's simpleton answer. Jack was hiding something.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Bob asked. He was inclined to go see Vic. Vic could solve a nasty problem like this. This was right up Vic's alley. He wouldn't sit back passively waiting for them to get caught.

"Do whatever you want Bob."

Bob couldn't believe how little everything seemed to mean to Jack.

"Okay Jack," Bob replied, rising from his chair, sure the meeting was over. "Thanks." *Thanks for nothing.*

As Bob left, Jack was pleased with how he'd handled Bob. And why not? After all, Jack had told the complete, unabridged truth. It was up to Bob to decide for himself whose side to take: good or evil. Unfortunately for Bob, Jack knew that answer, and somehow, someway, Jack knew he'd never see his kindergarten friend alive again. But that was Bob's problem... and choice.

Jack had more pressing worries. He needed to increase surveillance of Drew and Allie. He punched out Donno's number.

TWENTY NINE

Skinny people are easier to kidnap.
Stay safe, eat cake.
--Anonymous

Jack Kurtz's private study wasn't the only place in Washington D.C. where the incident at the Old Ebbitt's Grill was being discussed. In the corner office seven stories above K- and 15th streets, Drew and Allie were also recounting the stunning event.

"You were unbelievable," Drew said as he mixed two gin and tonics.

"I had a good coach," Allie said excitedly from the leather couch. Her eyes were alive and her face was flushed with excitement, making her prettier than usual.

"What you did couldn't be coached. It was all you." He handed her the drink.

"You promise to remember that when bonus time comes around?"

Drew laughed. "You just brought the President's senior legal advisor to his stuttering knees and you're worried about a bonus?"

"I guess it's easier to worry about that, then what just happened. My head's still spinning."

"If your head's spinning, just think how Bob Grady's must feel. His must be ready to come off its axis. I'll never forget that look on his face when you said your mom's name. It looked like someone had painted his face with white-out." The excitement in Drew's voice was high. What had been the mere seed of speculation had sprouted into something more than real... it was like a miracle beanstalk leading right to four killers.

"Yeah. You could almost hear the sweat pumps going. And then all that stuttering. I'd give anything to know what he must have been thinking."

"I told you he wouldn't be able to hide the truth if we surprised him."

"You really are a genius." A feeling of invincibility came over her. She shook her head back and forth and let out a lung full of air. "This is so incredible, Drew," she called out excitedly. "God I can't believe it."

"Whoa... slow down, Allie. This is just the start. There's a long way to go."

"I know. But I feel so alive right now. I feel like we're going to do the impossible. And nothing can stop us." The adrenalin in her voice was unmistakable.

"We still don't have any proof. All we've done is prove to ourselves that this theory probably isn't as crazy as it once sounded. Now comes the hard part."

"How so?" she asked.

"Because the element of surprise is gone. Remember what happened to the Japanese after Pearl Harbor? They were dominated the rest of the war. They didn't have any more surprises. Now that they know someone's out there after them, we've got to be smarter than before."

He did more than bring her down. He deflated her as well. Noting that, Drew held up his glass in a toast. "But I do believe a toast is in order. To Melody Morgan," he called out, "may we bring her peace and justice."

Allie's eyes filled with tears and she clicked Drew's glass.

Then Allie held up her glass. "To the best boss I've ever had," she called out. "May you always remember you're only as old as the one curled up next to you in bed."

"Well then, depending upon whether you're counting dog years or human years, I'm either a teenager or a very old man," Drew responded as he clicked her glass. "Because I curl up to a 13 year-old golden retriever named Jack."

She laughed. "And either way, you're gay and into bestiality."

He looked at her sternly. "Jack is no beast."

"Jack the dog or Jack the President?"

"I can only speak for Jack the dog. We're going to find out about Jack the President." He smiled. "The question is how?"

"I thought you had a plan?"

"I do. But first I want to hear what you think."

Ughh! She hated when he did this to her. Undoubtedly Drew had spent countless hours contemplating their next step, yet expected a point-blank, real-time response from her. It made her feel stupid.

He knew what she was thinking. "Okay," Drew continued, "now that we know they were involved in your mom's disappearance, the question is how do we go about proving it?"

Duh? Of course that was the question. She concentrated, trying to think in logical, sequential steps like Drew did. But Drew had been thinking about it for days no doubt. Step one, she asked herself, 'what would prove their involvement?' The answer was easy: physical evidence or a confession. She took a step forward towards the answer. 'Of those two, which could they get?' She used the process of elimination, and immediately dismissed the idea of any physical evidence. Her reasoning was simple: the crime had occurred 36 years ago and there was no new evidence. Drew had said that much the night he broached the no-longer bizarre theory. That left the idea of getting a confession.

Instantly, Allie racked her brain thinking about confessions. Thoughts of priests, dark confessionals, and Hail Mary's from Catholic grade school filled her head. However, that wasn't the kind of confession they needed... this was a legal issue. Transformed back to Georgetown Law School, she found herself in Criminal Procedure class. It was a snowy February afternoon and Professor Keyes was droning on about the rule of heresy while Allie dreamed about life in the Bahamas. With the image of the turquoise blue water and white sand in her head, Professor Keyes was explaining, in that irritating nasal voice of his, why one defendant's confession was inadmissible against another defendant because the police had tricked him by lying to him-- telling him the other defendant had already given them a confession. At the time, it was almost as confusing to understand as it was to take down in her notes. In fact, to make it more understandable, she remembered drawing a picture to illustrate it. Now, she was remembering that situation and the picture in her notebook.

As she thought about that case, a trigger went off in her head-- that particular case had also involved multiple individuals and a murder. *Conspiracy!* her mind yelled out. *Conspiracy!* That was the situation in the law school case, and that was the situation with Jack, Vic, Bob and Tony. She and Drew could try and work a deal with one of them-- lenient treatment, perhaps full immunity even, in exchange for testimony against the others. Those kind of deals happened all the time in conspiracy cases. They would play one against the others. Even Professor Keyes droned as much. Her face brightened. "I got it," she announced excitedly. Then she began to explain her answer to Drew.

He listened with little outward emotion. She was saying about what he had expected from her. Still, he allowed her to finish, which she did with an optimistic conclusion: "we cut a deal with one of them to testify against the other three, and we'll have them." She looked proud.

Drew looked less than impressed. "Allie, you need to break out of that law school mentality. Any crap you may have learned back at Georgetown is useless for what we need to do."

She felt herself shrinking as he continued. "What you just said might work if we were dealing with a bunch of unsophisticated criminal thugs who robbed a bank or were involved in a drive-by shooting. You might be able to cut a deal with one of them. But the President, his Chief-of-Staff, his senior legal advisor, and the head of the FBI don't exactly fit into that category. They'll stick together like white on rice and I guarantee we won't be able to play one of them against the others. The stakes are too high, and they're a lot smarter than that. They'll figure out we don't have any physical evidence, and they won't cave in. Face it, the only reason we were able to get that reaction out of Bob Grady was because we surprised him the way we did. It was a perfect sneak attack on an unsuspecting enemy-- our 21st Century version of Pearl Harbor. But it was a one-time shot. They'll be prepared next time."

She hoped he was finished lecturing.

"You need to start thinking in more practical terms," he concluded.

Fuck you, Drew, she seethed to her herself. Let me ask some hard questions for you to answer on-the-spot. What's the square root of 642 times 38? Come on, smart guy, what is it? And after you get done with that one, reconcile Adam and Eve with the theory of evolution? How could man have evolved from the apes when God created man in His own image? And then explain to me how internet stock valuation works, okay?

If she didn't love him so much, she could have hated him.

He saw the anger in her eyes. "But you're on the right track," he said, as if trying to build her back up.

It did. But it also made her feel like a yo-yo being pulled up and down by him, and she wondered if he realized how much that hurt her. She figured he didn't. He was just too calculating much of the time, too-far removed from her emotional side. He still thought of her as his young employee, not as an equal, not as a woman. That's when she told herself that when she made love to him someday, she'd do it like nobody ever had or ever could. And then, after she showed him the depth and passion of her love for him, he'd be less calculating, less business-like, less father-daughterish. Once in-tune with her emotionally, he'd think before he spoke, and he'd never say anything, even accidentally, that might bring her down.

"What do you mean I'm on the right track?" she asked.

"You're right that we need to go after one of them, isolate him from the others, and get a confession. But we're not going to be able to do it by cutting a deal."

"Why not?"

Drew responded, "Because we don't have any leverage, and we can't offer them anything more than what they have without us."

She considered his answer.

As she did, Drew elaborated. "Deals only work when criminals think they're going to lose anyway. That means the cops have to have enough leverage-- enough evidence-- to convince the criminal to cut his losses. Unfortunately, that isn't the case here. These four guys know we don't have any real evidence. All we've got is a theory and some stuttering corroboration from Bob that it's not so crazy. But that's it. Plus, what really can we offer these guys? They're pretty much on top of the world already. As long as they stick together, they'll win, and we'll lose."

After listening to Drew's elaboration, she no longer felt like she'd been on the right track. "First you said I was right about isolating one of them and getting a confession. Then you said that we don't have any leverage and we don't have anything to offer to get a confession? Where does that leave us?"

"It leaves us with one ultimate question: how do you get someone to confess to something they don't want to confess to?"

Her mind engaged. Without anything to offer in exchange, and without any leverage, she didn't know. Plus she was tired, and didn't want to go through another logic network-- especially about a question that seemed harder than the last one. She just shrugged.

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"No. I'm just tired. You tell me."

Drew laughed. "Okay. What we have to do is create leverage."

Create leverage? Huh? "How do we do that?"

"We take something that's worth so much to one of them, that they'll have no choice but to confess. After they do, we'll give them back what we took."

She wasn't exactly sure what he was saying, but something told her that she didn't like it. It didn't sound legal.

"What do we get and how do we get it?" she asked.

He answered the first part of her question. "We get something that means more to them

than what they might lose by confessing."

She could think of only a few things that fell into that category. And the thought of taking any of those things struck her as too drastic. The euphoria she'd felt when they toasted glasses was completely gone. Now she felt scared and unsure where this was heading. "I almost don't want to hear what you're going to tell me," she said.

"Then maybe we should just stop here," he replied quickly and professionally. "Maybe some answers in life really aren't worth knowing. It's up to you, Allie. She was your mom, not mine. I never said this would be easy. And I never said it would be painless or without risk. You just say the word and we'll stop right now. And I'll never think less of you for doing that, either. But if we keep going, you need to deal with the fact that innocent people could get hurt in the process... including us." Drew paused to let that sink in.

"So, what are you suggesting we take?" she asked. She was fearful that he was going to say one of Bob's grandkids.

"One of them," he said plainly, his eyes dead serious.

She felt a chill. "You want to kidnap one of them?" Her voice rose with each word.

"Actually, I was thinking of just *borrowing* one of them for a little while. Kidnaping sounds too criminal."

"I'm still not following you, Drew. And like I said before, I'm not sure I want to, either. So, after we take one of them, then what?"

"We'll ask them some questions," Drew replied nonchalantly, "like what happened that night, and what did they do to your mom?"

"And they'll tell us all the answers we want to hear," Allie replied sarcastically, her voice almost sing-song-like.

A dry smile came over Drew. "Eventually."

Eventually? "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the body can only take so much pain before the mind gives in."

Pain? Her mind was racing. "I'm not sure exactly what you're talking about, but none of it sound legal."

"Killing someone and covering it up isn't legal either," he countered.

"So we're going to torture one of them?"

Drew shook his head. "Don't say torture, Allie. That sounds worse than kidnaping. Let's just say we're going to help them remember a memory they may be repressing. All they have to do is tell us what they know-- just the truth. We're not asking them to do anything illegal, we're not forcing them to lie. We just want to know what happened to your mom on May 22, 1988. Is that such a bad thing?" Then he explained more of the details of his plan to her.

When he'd finished, she was dazed and had to pinch herself to see if it was all some weird dream. It hurt. It was real. "You're really serious aren't you?"

"Unfortunately."

"Have you really thought this thing out? I mean, what if we get caught? What would happen to us then?"

"What do you think would happen to us?" Drew asked, turning the question back to her. Then he answered it. "Kidnapping, conspiracy to kidnap, extortion, false imprisonment, assault, battery, maybe blackmail. Take your pick. We'd probably be charged with at least a couple of those, if not all of them. And after they convicted us, we'd go to jail for a long time... maybe the rest of our lives."

Spending the rest of her life in jail wasn't part of her life's plan. What she really wanted more than anything was a family. But now, it seemed, she was faced with balancing the risk of not having a family against the risk of not finding out what happened to the family she'd never known. The euphoria of nabbing Bob Grady at the Old Ebbitt's Grill had been replaced by a feeling of emptiness, worry, and doubt. "Do you really think it's worth the risk?" she asked.

"Don't you?"

She shook her head in desperation. "I don't know. I mean, sure I'd like to know what happened to my mom. But I don't know if I want to risk the rest of my life just to know. After all, it really won't change anything... she'd still be gone."

"With that kind of logic the police would never investigate any crimes, would they? What about punishment? What about right and wrong?"

She answered, "You're missing my point, Drew. The police don't break laws when they go after the criminals. That's the difference. If we could go after them without breaking any laws, I'd be the first in line to say 'let's go.' But I've got to balance the risks of getting caught-- of giving up the rest of my life--against the reward of finding out what happened to my mom 36 years ago. What we did with Bob this afternoon at lunch was great. We didn't break any laws and we still accomplished what we set out to do."

"What we did to Bob was a one-shot deal. Like I said, the stakes are higher now. Now that we're really going after them, the bar's been raised."

"Well, I still think breaking the law is going too far."

"Hey, I'm all ears if you've got a better idea. But I've thought this thing out long and hard, and have tried to think of every imaginable way to get at them within the bounds of the law. Unfortunately, there are none."

"Have you ever thought that maybe we should just ask them, straight out, what happened?" Allie suggested.

"The thought's crossed my mind. Sure. But why would they ever tell us?"

"Out of decency."

"Risk everything they have out of decency? Fat chance."

"No. I mean with no risk to them. I'm talking about entering into an agreement with them... like a contract. They agree to tell us what happened and we agree not to pursue the matter any further-- nothing they say could or would ever be used against them in any way, shape, or form-- not in court, not in public, no disclosure. Like I told you before, Drew, I just want to know what happened and why. Once they tell us that, I'll agree to go away once and for all."

He thought she was being naïve. "So without even knowing the details of what happened that night, you'd be willing to give up any future recourse? What if they did something horrible to your mom? What if they really did rape and murder her?"

"I don't know. But at least I would know. And I wouldn't risk going to jail and having a family of my own." She had a nagging thought to tell him she loved him... that they could stop now, before they did anything illegal. She could be happy never knowing what happened to her mom... as long as she were with him.

"I hear you, Allie. And believe me, I wish you didn't have to make that difficult choice. I wish there was another way. But I don't know of one. We either go ahead with this or drop the whole thing. At least that's how I see it."

Allie thought of the movies they'd watched just a week earlier-- her mother crawling around on the floor with her and laughing with friends at the Halloween party. Her mom never got to see her baby grow up, nor was she ever able to laugh at another Halloween party. Her life was stopped cold, and most probably by these four guys. Allie felt the rage return. But it still wasn't enough to convince herself to do what Drew was suggesting.

"So you think kidnaping one of them is justified?" she asked, continuing to probe for

answers that might make her decision easier.

"As long as we don't get caught it is. But, like I said, if you want to quit, just say the word and that's what we'll do."

"You'd really just quit if I said that's what I wanted?"

Drew shrugged. "Hey, I'm not all that crazy about breaking laws either, Allie. I've got a pretty good life going right now..." *Except I'm lonely as hell.* "But I'd be lying if I said I'm not completely intrigued by this whole turn of events. I'd sure as hell like to know what happened that night."

"And you really think the likelihood of us getting caught is small?"

Drew nodded. "Very small. We're going to be smart about it. The dummies are the ones who get caught. Give me someone with a 1400 on their SAT and I'll turn 'em into an uncatchable criminal."

"I made a 1280," she said. "How 'bout you?"

"1220," he replied with a resigned look and another shrug.

She felt good that she'd outscored him, and she filed that fact away. Someday she use it on him. But not now. "So we're both a little short, huh?"

"I was being flip about the 1400. My point is that we're not dummies and we're not unsophisticated. We can pull this off."

Something was still bothering her. "I still don't see how a forced confession helps us. We wouldn't be able to use it against them. How is that any better than my idea of entering into a binding contract with them if they just tell us what happened?"

He wondered when she would ask that question. "You're right. A forced confession isn't worth anything by itself. But I'm hoping we'll get more than just a confession. I'm hoping their confession will lead us to physical evidence. And if we do, we can use that against them."

"I thought you said there wasn't any physical evidence? You said after 36 years that it would be essentially impossible."

"I said that when we were discussing how to corroborate the theory. At that point, it wasn't practical to think about physical evidence. I wasn't about to kidnap-- I mean borrow-- one of them based on a theory that even I wasn't sure I believed. But it's different now. Now we need to find out what they did with your mom's body. Because if we can get them to tell us

where her body is, we might be able to find the physical evidence we need." He didn't tell her the rest of his plan... that would wait.

Drew's words took Allie by surprise. For virtually her entire life, she wondered what had happened to her mom's body-- had it been discarded like waste in some out-of-the-way dumpster, or sunk to the bottom of a lake in a concrete coffin, or buried in the earth like a bulb, never to grow? Not knowing made her spiteful and a new, greater rage bubbled in her. There was something more, too-- a determination to make them pay... even if it meant risking her life. Anything, she told herself, was justified if it led to justice. Justice was justified by justice, and nothing else.

She also agreed with Drew that finding her mom's body was important from a legal standpoint. Without a body there was rarely a murder conviction. That was known in both legal and non-legal circles as the 'Jimmy Hoffa doctrine.'

"Okay," she said, "I'm in. I say we do whatever we have to do to bring justice."

Drew nodded and smiled. "I agree."

"Thanks, Drew," she said.

He winked. He was the one who should be thanking her, for making him fearful of flying, for making him believe there was the possibility of a real life after Lori and Luke.

THIRTY

The female of the species
is more deadly than the male.
—Morettiard Kipling

“Okay, Allie,” Drew transitioned, “*you’ve* got a ton of work to do, so let’s get to it.” He purposefully emphasized ‘you’ve.’

“What do you mean, *I’ve* got a lot of work to do? Like what?”

“Like typing.” Drew pulled out the miniature tape recorder that was in his pocket during lunch. He hit the rewind button. “You can use my computer.”

Typing? A minute ago they were talking about kidnapping one of the four highest ranking men in the United States government, and now she was going to do some *typing*? She wasn’t following his thinking.

“What am I going to type?”

“Everything Bob Grady said at lunch.”

“Everything Bob said? What about what you and I said?”

“Just Bob.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re going to make something that’s gonna knock their socks off.”

“I don’t underst-”

Drew cut her off. “I’ll explain it after we get Bob’s word’s down on paper, okay? I promise. But we’ve got to get moving. Just trust me for now.”

She didn't like his bossiness, but she trusted his judgement, especially after the coup they'd pulled off at lunch. "Okay."

Drew hit the play button and the conversation from lunch began...

"Hey Bob, long time no see. What's it been..."

Sitting on the leather couch sipping his drink, Drew watched Allie's fingers fly over the compute keys each time Bob's voice on the tape spoke out. She looked harried. Drew looked relaxed. In between typing, she flashed Drew a glare that seemed to say 'how come I'm doing all the work and you're just sitting there, all relaxed, sipping your drink and daydreaming.'

Drew's smile provided the answer: 'because I'm the boss.' And while he looked relaxed, he certainly wasn't daydreaming. Rather, he was formulating the explosive conversation they would soon create. He was also wondering how much danger they were in now.

While Bob's words were fixed, they weren't necessarily set in concrete-- they could be moved around any way Drew desired. Plus, there was nothing to prevent Drew from using Bob's answers to a new question. That's why Drew had carefully steered the small-talk with Bob. It may have seemed like small-talk then, but it would be BIG-talk when Drew was done with it. The trick was to mesh any new words with Bob's old words, and create shock and disturbance and confusion within their ranks.

Nearly an hour passed before Allie finished transcribing Bob's words. She printed out the file and handed the ten pages to Drew. Seated at his desk, Drew studied the words Allie had typed out and scratched out new words of his own on a yellow legal pad. After a half hour, he handed the new text to Allie.

She read Drew's creation with a racing mind. "This is incredible," she said when she finished. "But I'm not sure what you're trying to do with it?"

Drew shrugged. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, either. But if nothing else, it'll create a sense of doubt-- a diversion and potentially a division within their ranks-- that they'll have to resolve. And that can only be good for us. Because while they're dealing with this, we'll be moving ahead with on our next step."

"Which is to borrow one of them," Allie said, in leading tone.

"Right. We're going to take a play from the lions."

"The Denver Lions?" she asked, confused.

He chuckled and shook his head. "FYI, it's the Detroit Lions, not Denver. But I'm not talking about a football team, I'm talking about the lions of the wild kingdom. You ever watch those nature shows on Discovery or A&E?"

She nodded. "I like the ones about beavers and otters."

He smiled, somehow knowing she'd like those two animals the most. Like her, they were the most playful. "Have you ever watched a show about lions?"

"Un-huh."

"Remember what happens when a hungry lion comes upon a pack of wildebeests or a herd of zebra?"

"A hungry female or a hungry male?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah. The males lie around on their butts. The females do all the hunting."

"You say that like it bothers you."

She smirked. "I just don't like the males' laziness... or their arrogance."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I sit down on the couch here, looking lazy and arrogant." Their smiles matched.

Drew continued. "Anyway, Miss Wild Kingdom, since you know so much about female lions--"

"They're called lionesses," she said interrupting.

"Okay, already. So do you know how a lioness gets her prey?"

Allie shrugged, having exhausted her knowledge of lions. "Tell me."

Drew looked into her eyes. "She isolates the weakest one and goes after it."

"Pretty smart," she reacted. "No wonder the females hunt." Then she began to think about their situation and how it applied. "So what are you saying... that you're gonna lie on your butt while I catch these guys?"

Drew chuckled. "I won't be lying on my butt, I'll be lying in wait, ready to help if you need it. But you're right-- you're going to be the hunter."

"What are you talking about... the hunter?"

"The H-U-N-T-E-R." Drew spelled out the word. "The one who isolates the prey, kills it, and brings it home to the daddy lion." Drew winked at her and pointed his thumbs at himself.

"You're starting to piss me off, Drew." Her voice was rising. "I have no idea what you're talking about. What's worse, I'm not sure I want to hear, either. I'm not going to kill anyone."

Drew laughed. "Of course you're not, Allie. When I say 'kill', I mean it figuratively, not literally."

"Great. So would you please explain what all this means to me-- figuratively, literally, or with your very impressive spelling skills. I don't care which. But do it in a way I can understand."

He went on to explain how she was going to lure one of the four highest ranking officials in the United States government into her den.

"I don't like this, Drew," was all she could manage in response. "It doesn't sound as easy as you're making it out to be."

"Sure it is. All you have to be is your sexy self."

"My sexy self doesn't go about coming on to an old man and drugging him," she responded to his simplistic explanation.

"None of them are old. They're all about ten years older than me."

"Jeez, don't remind me. But you're different... you're like a kid that never grew up. And you're fun." She paused. "So which one of them are we talking about?"

"That's easy," he responded. "The one who loves young girls like you."

"Tony Moretti," she answered, certain.

"Right. Mister Libido Man."

"And how exactly should I go about getting a date with the President's Chief-of-Staff? Should I just cold call him?"

"Yeah, I think that'll work."

"And should I just offer myself to him?" she suggested sarcastically.

Drew shrugged. "You could be a little coy, at least. Make him feel like he's conquered you. Deep down, most men don't like easy, slutty women. They like to feel like they had

something to do with the conquest. It's an ego thing." Then Drew explained how he wanted her to go about luring Tony into her den.

"You're sure this is going to work?" she asked when he finished explaining.

"I can only guarantee death, taxes, and my own stellar sexual performance," Drew said, smiling, "everything else in life has uncertainty. But I can tell you this isn't new ground we're chartering. The CIA has been using these techniques for decades. It's pretty simple actually. Reward-punishment electrical stimulation has an unbelievable way of producing truthful answers to difficult questions. We strap him to a table, hook his balls up to a stun gun, and sooner or later he'll tell us what happened to your mom. Then we keep him until we go find out if he's told us the truth. If he has-- if we find your mom's body-- we've got him. He can't exactly go to the police and tell them what happened to him, can he? No way. No matter the way we get the tape of him confessing, the fact is we'll have a confession. More importantly, if he's told the truth we may even find your mom's body."

She was envisioning all this.

"So, are you sure you don't want to quit?" he asked.

Her head was in her hands, and she rubbed her face, as if trying to rub away the worry and stress. "Yes."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I'm scared. I need you to tell me everything's going to be alright." Her voice was cracking.

Drew embraced her and held her tight. "Don't worry, Allie. I've got a good feeling about what we're doing. Everything's gonna be fine."

She nodded into him as she squeezed him tightly. She hoped he was right. Unfortunately, she didn't have those same good feelings.

They talked some more and Drew convinced her that it would be okay, that he would take care of her, and that everything would work out. After a few minutes, her composure was back.

"Ready?" he asked, as she sat at his desk.

"I hope so," she responded, reminding herself it was all for justice. She jotted down some words on a page of the legal pad-- Naval Academy book, Jimmy Carter, John Poindexter, John McCain, Ollie North, Jack Kurtz, you. Sexy, silly, laugh. Lunch.

Drew handed her a cell phone she had never seen before. It was one of those old fashioned flip phones without a password to activate.

“What’s this?” she asked as she took the phone.

“Old school technology. You buy these phones from 7-11 with 120 minutes of airtime. Nobody knows who you are or where you are... they’re the best way to stay under the radar these days with all the caller i.d. in the world today.”

She nodded. Things were definitely becoming more clandestine, more interesting, but also more scary.

“202-486-5400,” Drew said to her. “That’s the central number to the Office of the Chief-of-Staff.”

“Did you get that from 7-11, too?” she asked as she punched out the number.

Drew smiled. “No, the White House web site.”

“And I suppose Tony Moretti just takes all random cold calls?”

“Probably not. But we’ve got nothing to lose.”

The line was ringing.

"Tony Moretti, please," Allie requested, as the call was answered.

"Your name, ma'am?" the female secretary asked.

Allie froze, having momentarily forgotten to not use her own name. But she remembered she would be disguising herself as a brunette and the 90210 re-run from the previous night popped into her head. "Um, Doherty, Ms. Shannon Doherty," she responded. And anyway, her girlfriend Kathy had said she looked like Shannon Doherty when she wore that brunette wig the Halloween before.

Shannon Doherty? Drew rolled his eyes as he stood beside her and watched her doodle on the legal pad. She drew arrows and crosses, and cute hearts and flowers.

"Will Mr. Moretti know what this is about?"

"No. But please tell him it concerns a book I'm writing about him."

"A book about Mr. Moretti?" the secretary repeated back, making sure she heard correctly.

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

"One moment, please."

Allie waited on hold, sure the secretary would come back on and tell her that Mr. Moretti was busy or at a meeting. Then she would undoubtedly take a message.

She heard the line come to life. "Tony Moretti," a voice announced warmly.

Holy shit... it was him. Perhaps Shannon Doherty had been a good choice for a name. "Um, hi Mr. Moretti, my name's Shannon Doherty. I know you don't know who I am, but if you'd just give me a minute, I can explain the book I'm writing about you."

"You're not the Shannon Doherty from 90210?" he responded, his tone now a mixture of sarcasm and disappointment.

She chuckled. "Sorry." She thought of something witty. "But I have been told I look a lot like her," she added energetically. She remembering Drew's instructions to act silly and to tease. "And I bet you I'm a lot more fun than she is." She laughed a silly, sexy laugh and hoped she wasn't too bold sounding.

He laughed. She sounded about thirty, indulgent, and sexy. "Hah. I like the way you talk, Shannon Doherty. Perhaps I need to find out a little more about this book you're writing."

It wasn't too bold, she told herself. *Nothing was probably too bold for this pig.* "I think you'd like both me and the book." She looked down at the notes Drew had written out for her. "It's about high profile Naval Academy graduates. I'm starting with Jimmy Carter and moving through John Poindexter, John McCain, Ollie North, Jack Kurtz, and you." She wondered whether Tony Moretti felt like he belonged with those others. If she were really writing a book about Tony Moretti, she'd have grouped him with Arnold the Pig, Wilbur from Charlotte's Web, and Babe. She smiled at this thought and then continued. "I want to try and correlate your Naval Academy training and experience with your roles as leaders in our government. So, as you can imagine, it would be very helpful if I could interview you and hear about some of your experiences from the Naval Academy."

I'll show you some of the sexual experiences I had, Tony thought to himself. "Sounds like an interesting book. I'm flattered just to be mentioned in the same breath with those distinguished men."

"Would you be willing to meet with me, say for lunch sometime?" she asked.

"I think that could be arranged." He hoped she was half as good-looking as the real

Shannon Doherty, and half as sexy as she sounded over the phone. "Tomorrow looks bad, but how 'bout Friday?"

She wrote *'Friday?'* on the yellow legal pad and held it up for Drew to see.

Drew shook his head up and down. That timing was nearly perfect. It would give them a chance to make the necessary arrangements and procurements to carry out the plan.

"Okay. Yeah. Wow. Friday would be great," she responded upbeat. She was shocked at how easy it was to get an invitation to lunch with the President's Chief-of-Staff. "My treat," she volunteered. "You'll be doing me a huge favor."

You can make it up to me in ways that don't involve money. "You like Mexican?" he asked.

"I like spicy," she responded.

Good, you can sprinkle salsa all over my body and we'll go from there. "Okay. How 'bout if we meet at noon at the Sagebrush Cafe in Arlington. Do you know where it's at?"

"Sure," she answered. "My hotel is just down the road from there." She hoped that mentioning her hotel would plant the idea in his head that she wanted to end up there, with him.

It took root. *Good. And after lunch, we'll have wild, spicy sex in your room.* "Sounds like a plan," he responded. "I'll free up some extra time in my afternoon in case lunch carries over..."

Pig. "Awesome. I'll be the Shannon Doherty-look-a-like at the bar drinking a Corona."

And I'll be the good-looking, highly successful, confidante to the President whose name you'll be screaming out in ecstasy later that afternoon. "I'm looking forward to it Miss Doherty. See you Friday at noon."

"Bye."

THIRTY ONE

You know, Darling,
sometimes I sit here feeling sort of useless.
--Hedy Lamar in *Crosslands*

Allie closed the flip phone and smiled triumphantly at Drew. "Pretty good, huh?"

"You should have your own 1-900 number."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "I think he had a woodie."

"A *woodie*?" Drew drew out the word for emphasis.

"Yeah. You know, a hard on."

"Thank you Dr. Joyce Brothers, but I know what a woodie is. I was just surprised to hear you say it. It's pretty much a guy word. How'd it get into your lexicon?"

"I heard it in a movie," she replied blandly, hoping he'd drop the subject.

But her reddening cheeks convinced him to delve deeper. "What movie?"

"Oh, just some dumb movie I watched with some girlfriends... Pinocchio, I think." She wished she could lie to him better.

Thinking he'd seen every version of Pinocchio with Luke, Drew didn't remember anything like she was talking about. "Pinocchio? Are you sure?"

"It's wasn't a children's version." She was still avoiding eye contact and her cheeks were even redder than before.

Not a children's version? "What kind of version was it then? An adult version?"

Her eyes met his. "You could say that."

It dawned on him. "You watched an X-rated version of Pinocchio?" The laughter was building inside as he pictured the movie.

"I was at a bachelorette party," she stated defensively. "So what?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything was wrong with it. It's just kinda funny," he replied, his laughter venting. "It certainly gives new meaning to the term *woodie*." He smiled at his line. At the same time, a thousand questions filled his head. "Was it a cartoon version or real people?"

"Real people."

"And, I suppose, Pinocchio's thing grew every time he told a lie?"

"His penis, not his thing," she said, correcting him. "And no, it grew every time he saw the woodcutter's daughter. She was a porn star home for the holidays."

"Huh. Sounds like a compelling plot."

"Actually, it was pretty funny. The porn star catches Pinocchio peaking at her through the bathroom window while she's showering, so she lures him in by pretending to see a mouse in the shower. Anyway, one thing leads to another, and you know..." Allie winked.

Drew nodded. "...he gets a woodie."

"Right. And not just any woodie, either. A big one!" Allie's eyes were wide, as if using them as a prop to illustrate Pinocchio's big woodie. "Afterwards," she continued explaining, "the porn star convinces Pinocchio that he and his unbelievable woodie should go to New York with her. She tells him he'd make a fortune as a porn star."

"And does he?" Drew asked, actually intrigued.

"Unfortunately, the woodman hears about their plan and stops Pinocchio from leaving."

"How's he do that?"

"He chops off Pinocchio's penis."

Drew looked pained. "Oh, geez, the Lorena Bobbit legacy."

Allie nodded. "Yeah. And unfortunately for Pinocchio the re-attachment surgery isn't successful."

"So how it ends?"

"Pinocchio becomes a political investigator," she said smiling.

"Ha ha." He rolled his eyes.

"So was I really that good on the phone?" she asked, changing the subject back to the call with Tony Moretti.

"Good? You were amazing. From a cold call, you were able to get the President's Chief-of-Staff to go to lunch with you."

"And get a woodie," she added, grinning.

"I've heard he gets a woodie if he hears a high-pitched female voice."

"I think it was me."

Drew cocked his head. "You were definitely hot."

"You didn't get a woodie, too, did ya?" She was conspicuously staring at Drew's crotch.

Now it was Drew's turn to blush and he wondered if she could see he was excited. Sometimes boxers just didn't provide the necessary support and camouflage. "Let's just say you can be very provocative."

"So you're still able?"

"Able to what?"

"Get a woodie?" She chuckled.

He looked at her sternly. "I'm only 47, Allie. And, for the record, yes, I can get a helluva woodie... some would call it a redwood."

"Hah. Sure you can, Drew."

"I can. Why? You think 47's old?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't have to be old."

"Maybe I just need to hang out with you and watch some of your naughty movies. What other X-rated Disney films have you watched?"

She thought quickly. "There was The Naughty Little Slutty Mermaid."

He smiled at her quick wit. At the same time he wondered if she were serious. "Let me guess, little Ariel is captured by tuna fisherman and they pimp her out to the other sea creatures."

"You've seen it?"

"No. Just a lucky guess."

"You know, Drew, if all this political dirt-digging gets boring, I see quite a future for you in the crossover adult film industry."

"Thanks, Allie. But I think I'll pass."

"Okay. But if you ever want to watch Pinocchio, let me know. I'd like to see it with you."

"Wasn't it enough the first time?"

She shook her head. "I just want to see your face when you see what a real redwood is so you won't go around talking yourself up so much."

"You'd be too embarrassed to rent it," he responded.

"I'd just get a couple Disney movies and inadvertently mix it in."

"I'll make a deal with you, Allie. You rent it, and I'll watch it with you." He extended his hand. "Deal?"

They shook hands.

"So what happens Friday? You don't think I'm going to have to sleep with Tony Moretti, do you?"

"From the way you talked, he sure as hell thinks you're going to. And you're going to have to make him think you want to. But it'll never get that far. Just get the Rophynol in his drink about a half hour before you two leave the restaurant. By the time you get him to the hotel, he'll barely be able to keep his eyes open. I'll be there, and then we'll find out what he knows."

She looked worried.

"What's wrong?"

"This is going to be scarier than what we did with Bob today."

"You're right. But try not to think about all that. Just relax, make some small talk about

the book, and get him interested in you. That should be pretty easy for you. If you gave him a woodie"-- Drew winked-- "on the phone, you should have no problem once he sees you."

Allie smiled at the compliment. "You really do think I'm a babe, don't you?"

"What I think doesn't matter. It's what Tony thinks."

What you think matters more than anything. She picked up on Drew's voice again. "... you've got to make Tony Moretti want you. He likes women. He loves young women. So be provocative and flirty and act young-- make him squirm, make him horny, and make him want to go to back to your hotel with you."

She could do that. She nodded. But something else was nagging at her. "Do you think they know we're the ones after them?"

"No," Drew responded quickly. After a quick pause, he added, "maybe" to his answer. Then came the word, "probably."

"Am I supposed to select one of the above?" she asked unimpressed with his multiple choice answer.

"I'm sorry. My gut reaction was that they don't, not yet at least. But as I've thought about a little more, I guess they could."

"That explains the 'no' and the 'maybe'. What about the 'probably'?"

"Well, if they might know it's us, then we have to think the conservative thing and say they 'probably' know it's us. I mean, I'm sure it's no secret to them that Melody Morgan had a daughter. And, after 36 years, it's not too hard to figure out that the only person in the world who would really care about what happened to Melody Morgan would be that daughter. They're obviously not a bunch of dummies, so I'd bet they'll come to that conclusion sooner, rather than later. Then, it really wouldn't be too hard for them to track you down... after all they've got the resources of the entire U.S. government at their disposal. And once they find out you work for me, they'll put two and two together-- you and me-- and figure out the whole thing at the Old Ebbitt's Grill wasn't some big coincidence, you know?"

She liked when he said, 'you and me.' She always wanted the two of them to be thought of together. "Then what?" she asked.

"Then we better watch out."

"You think we're in danger then?" She didn't like the fact she'd been the one to bring the issue up for discussion. Drew was supposed to be thinking ahead. He was supposed to have this

figured out already. Her confidence in him was waning.

"I think we need to assume we're in danger, whether we are or not," he said.

"So what should we do?" She was becoming more nervous.

"We're going to go undercover for the next two days... pretty much disappear." In reality, Drew had already thought out their escape. "After we turn this transcript"—he held up the yellow legal pad—"into a tape recording, we'll get out of here, pick up some clothes and any other stuff we need from our houses, leave our cars behind, hop on the metro, meet up at National Airport, rent a car, and get a hotel room out in Vienna."

"They'll still be able to track us electronically... you know, with credit cards and that kind of thing."

Drew shook his head. "Doubtful. I've got cash, traveler's checks, untraceable phones, a fake driver's license, and even fake passports for us if we need them."

She looked at him with amazement. "When did you get all that?"

"Unlike you, I don't just go home and watch 90210 re-runs or X-rated Disney movies." He said it with a smile. "I've been busy... ever since my Dad told me about what happened, I've been planning for this... just in case it panned out."

She felt protected. "You amaze me."

"Thanks. You amaze me, too. I wouldn't want to be doing this with anybody else."

She thought the same.

"Okay then," he continued. "Let's get on with it... we've got a lot to do between now and Friday... we need to make this bombshell tape, go undercover, and get Rophynol, handcuffs, and a stun gun."

Hearing him rattle of those things made her worry again. She hoped to God they were doing the right thing. At the same time, she felt safe with Drew, as if he were her real-life guardian angel. That calmed her. As she thought about the things on his list, a funny thought struck her. She verbalized it. "If I didn't know you better, Drew, it almost sounds like you've done this before." She looked at him curiously. "You're not one of those secret date-rape guys are you?" She was smiling coyly now, hiding her worry.

"I was wondering how long it would take 'til you got on to me."

She laughed.

"And you need to study up on the Naval Academy and those graduates in that *book* of yours."

She knew that. "Anything else?"

"I would tell you to practice being sexy, but you already know how to do that."

She winked at his compliment. "What should I wear on Friday?"

"You're asking *me*, the rumpled khaki fashion king?"

"Uh-huh."

"One of your Friday minis and a tight button down... that red one."

She knew just the one.

"Okay," Drew said, "You go now, get any stuff you'll need from home for a few days, walk to the metro, and meet me at National." Drew looked at his watch, "You think you can make it there by 6:30?"

That was in three hours. "Sounds good," she said trying to sound confident. Suddenly, though, tears welled in her eyes.

"You okay?"

"No. Just promise me you won't leave me alone tonight, Drew?"

"I won't Allie. Don't worry. We're gonna be okay. You go now, I'll make the tape, get it in the mail for express delivery by tomorrow, and see you at National at 6:30."

Allie sensed danger ahead, and as she left the DUMP office, she wondered whether she'd ever be back...

Later that night, Jack listened to Drew and Allie's conversations in the sanctity of his second floor White House study. He was proud of Allie-- if he ever had a daughter, he'd want her to be just like Allie. She was smart and funny, brave and principled.

Then Jack thought about the bigger picture. The infection was coming to a head and Jack was happy to hear they were going after Tony. Preying on his sexual appetite was definitely the right approach to take. The only question was whether Drew and Allie would get to Tony before

Vic got to him.

Like an outsider looking in, Jack was even rooting for Drew and Allie. If they got to Tony before Vic, perhaps there would be one less death.

At around 1 am, Jack called Donno and told him what he needed to know.

THIRTY TWO

This paper is my voice.
This ink, my blood.
This letter is me.
—Anne Brochet in *Cyrano de Bergerac*

As one of our nation's greatest creations, the American postal system will deliver just about anything to just about anyone, with essentially no questions asked. Whether it's a letter to grandma, a Publisher's Clearinghouse sweepstakes notice, a social security check, or even a doctored-up cassette tape of a stuttering White House senior legal advisor, so long as the right amount of postage is on the outside, whatever's inside will get to its intended destination. And because senders aren't required to identify themselves, surprises are that much easier.

It was nearly 10 p.m. when the black iron gates were commanded open by the press of a button by the driver of the big black Lincoln. Once through the gates, the Lincoln traversed 100 feet of blacktop and stopped in front of a two-story brick Colonial brightly illuminated by strategically placed floodlights.

"Falcon One to Sparrow One, over," said the driver as he turned off the engine.

"Go ahead Falcon One," came the response from the radio.

"Beaver is outside the den," said the driver.

"Copy that. Beaver is outside the den. Out."

Following the acknowledgment, the driver stepped out, checked the surrounding area, and opened the rear right door of the limo. Although his free hand was fixed on the 9 millimeter strapped in his shoulder harness, the driver knew he was at the mercy of the terrorists. A well-executed attack here and now would've been unstoppable.

Gathering his briefcase, Vic Graves stepped out. "Thanks, Jim," the FBI Director said. "Go get yourself some rest. Six o'clock will be here sooner than either of us want."

"Yes sir," the driver/agent replied.

As was standard procedure, the agent stayed in the car until he received confirmation the Director was safely inside and all was clear. *Another day, another \$520*, thought agent Jim Chardose as he drove out the gates and headed home.

"Anything interesting happen today?" Vic Graves asked Agent Bill Fleming who was busy resetting the security system.

"No, sir. It was pretty quiet, actually. You've got a couple messages by the phone, but nothing that looks like it can't wait 'til morning. I made you a turkey club in case you wanted a snack."

Vic nodded his thanks. It seemed to be a turkey club every night. The next time he screened an agent, he'd find out if they could cook. But fortunately, he knew the days ahead of him would be different. When he became VP, he'd have a full-blown staff to serve him. And then, as President, he'd have the finest chefs in residence.

"Oh, one other thing," the agent said, remembering. "You received a next day envelope in the mail today with a cassette tape enclosed. The x-ray was normal. So were the biological and chemical assays."

Vic nodded at the agent's explanation. It was standard procedure to monitor any package or envelope Vic received. "Okay then. That'll be all. I'll see you in the morning."

Agent Fleming nodded and made his way through a breezeway that connected to a small, brick one-bedroom efficiency off of the kitchen. Fleming like being a well-trained, glorified house-sitter/babysitter-- four days on, three days off. And the bulk of the on-time was spent hanging out in the house, making sure everything remained safe and secure. He didn't even mind preparing the occasional turkey club.

Vic Graves grabbed the sandwich from the fridge and walked into his study. He poured himself two fingers of Dewar's and plopped down onto the leather chair behind his desk. Although Tony Moretti was still alive, the Director wasn't worried. According to what McGovern had told him that morning, everything was on track for Friday. What's more, the Director liked the way McGovern was going to pull it off... it seemed appropriate for Tony to die in the company of a woman. And then, once Tony was gone, nothing could stop Vic.

Vic flipped through his mail-- a couple of bills, and at least six or seven pieces of junk mail: credit card offers, refinancing opportunities, even Pizza Hut coupons. Somehow, it didn't seem right that the nation's FBI Director received junk mail! He made a mental note to have Fleming use his discretion and weed these out in the future. Then he came upon the white, express mail envelope with the cassette tape Fleming had mentioned. The name and return address in the upper left hand corner immediately caught his eye and grabbed his attention:

Melody Morgan
May 22, 1988
Shoulder of Collington Road
Bowie, MD 21412

Vic's mind and pumping heart kicked into high gear-- *Melody Morgan? May 22, 1988?*
What the hell?

He opened the envelope quickly, not thinking to handle it carefully in case he'd want it dusted for fingerprints later. Curiosity killed the cat, sure, but what about the FBI Director? Inside he found a single sheet of paper rubber-banded around the cassette tape. A simple single-lined message was typed: "Vic, thought you'd be interested in hearing this-- M-."

Vic studied the tape quickly. Although it appeared normal, something told him it wasn't. Also weird was the fact the sender had put the message on a cassette tape-- almost as if flaunting it as the cutting edge technology of 1988. Luckily, Vic's stereo system still included a cassette deck, and he inserted the tape and sat back down. The anticipation was fearful.

From the speakers, Vic heard a male voice he didn't recognize. "Bob, we know that you were involved in the disappearance of Melody Morgan on May 22nd 1988." The voice sounded official, authoritative.

The hair on Vic's neck quilled. Jesus!

A seemingly eternal pause followed. Then, came the reply. "I d-d-don't know what you're t-t-talking about," the voice stammered.

The stammering voice was Bob Grady's, and while Vic hadn't heard the stuttering in almost 36 years, it was Bob, no doubt. He sounded the same as he did at that Navy doctor's house the morning after. Vic took a big swallow of the Dewar's, hoping to be calmed. It didn't work. *Could you be just a little less believable, Bob?* Vic wondered who the hell Bob was talking to.

The unknown authoritative voice spoke out again. "Cut the crap, Bob. You know what happened to Melody Morgan, and we know you know. We also know that Vic Graves was involved."

Hearing his own name almost caused Vic to spit out a mouthful of the smooth liquor. Who the hell was Bob talking to?

"I d-don't know what you're t-t-talking about."

Vic's blood pressure spiked. Same Bob, same unbelievable stuttering denial.

The authoritative voice countered quickly. "Okay, Bob, let me make it easier for you to remember? We've got an eyewitness who's willing to testify that on Saturday night, May 22, 1988, she saw a Volkswagen camper van with four men stopped on Collington Road directly behind Melody Morgan's Dodge Diplomat. Those four men were you, Vic Graves, Tony Moretti, and Jack Kurtz. We've even matched a print from the hood of that Diplomat to one of you. Plus, we have a retired Navy Doctor who's willing to testify that you and Vic came to him for emergency medical attention the morning after Melody Morgan vanished. His expert opinion will state that the wounds in Vic's back were caused by a stab wound and two sets of fingernail tracks... wounds consistent with a female fighting for her life. Do you remember now?"

"It's all circumstantial evidence," came Bob's dubbed reply.

Vic nearly exploded. *Circumstantial evidence? What kind of mealy-mouth response is that, Bob, you dumb shit legal twit? You should be denying every word, countering with explanations, maybe even laughing at such ludicrous charges.*

The authoritative voice responded. "It may be circumstantial, but it's explosive, too. Face it Bob, you guys are going to have a lot of explaining to do-- like how one of your fingerprints turned up on the hood of a missing girl's car; and, how it was that you were the last people to be seen with her before she disappeared from the face of the earth; and, what caused the wounds in Vic Graves' back. Those fingernail tracks were from that girl as she fought for her life, weren't they, Bob?"

There was a deathly silence from Bob.

This steamed Vic. His initial reaction was that Bob should have struck back. But then, after thinking about Bob's previous responses, maybe no response was for the best. After all, every time Bob spoke, the hole seemed to get deeper.

The authoritative male voice spoke out again. "Listen Bob, we've got enough evidence to go to a Grand Jury. That means discovery, depositions, and almost certainly a hearing. At the same time, we're going to ask for an independent counsel investigation. To make a long story short, we're confident we can get one or more indictments-- kidnaping, maybe even murder. And then, we intend to prosecute those indictments to the fullest extent possible. Do you understand what that means?"

"We're up to our eyeballs in shit," a resigned Bob replied.

Vic nearly spit up a lung, not to mention the Dewar's that swished around in his mouth. *Up to our eyeballs in shit? You mother fucking idiot, Bob. Why don't you just admit that we did it? Or offer to help the goddam feds out?*

Vic's blood was nearly boiling. He'd always feared that Bob was the weak link. Now he knew, beyond doubt, just how right he was. The chain always broke at the weakest link. Vic

was back to wishing that Bob would just shut the hell up. Silence was indeed better.

As if cued by Vic's reverse wishes, he heard Bob's voice again. "Can you help me get a deal?" Bob asked.

"A deal?" Vic shouted angrily in his den, the veins on his neck pulsing. "You want a fucking deal? You fucking asshole." Vic was yelling at the top of his lungs now. "I'll get you a deal. I'll make it so you never speak another word, you stoolie."

As his voice trailed off, Vic heard noises coming from the kitchen. Someone was running through his house. After hitting the stop button on the cassette remote, Vic reached for his gun in the top drawer. He looked up just in time to see Agent Fleming rushing into the den, holding his agency-issue 9 millimeter in his right hand. Poised to kill, he sized-up the room quickly. "Is everything okay, Director?" he yelled excitedly.

Vic put his hands up in front as if to give the 'whoa' sign. The last thing Vic wanted was to be mistakenly shot in his own house by the man protecting him. "Everything's fine, Fleming," he said calmly. Vic thought quickly of an explanation. "I just got a little too excited listening to that tape I got in the mail. It was from an old friend I haven't seen in a while. There was some bad news. I guess I lost my temper. But it's okay now. Everything's fine."

The Agent nodded. "I'm sorry, sir. I guess maybe I overreacted."

Vic shook his head. "No, you did exactly the right thing. You weren't sure what was happening. I appreciate your alertness."

"Thank you, sir."

As Fleming turned and walked away, Vic poured himself another double. His head was pulsing. Once back behind his desk, he hit play on the cassette remote.

It was the authoritative man's' turn to speak again. He was answering Bob's question about a deal. "We can do that, Bob. In fact, I'm prepared to offer you immunity in exchange for your testimony leading to the conviction of any and all persons involved in the disappearance of Melody Morgan. Complete immunity, no restrictions-- no bar on any future book deals, speaking engagements, no limits-- complete freedom for you."

Whoever the authoritative man was, he knew Bob Grady well: offering immunity and no bar on any future book deal. Those were the kind of carrots that might work with the spineless legal twerp. Vic almost didn't want to hear Bob's response. He wouldn't sell them out, would he?

"That sounds great," Bob replied, sounding almost relaxed.

Vic's blood pressure spiked as he hurled his crystal glass into the fireplace opposite his desk. "Mother fucking Judas," he shouted. He listened for Fleming's footsteps. All was quiet.

"Okay, then," the authority responded. "I can have a set of immunity papers drawn up by tomorrow. All you'll need to do is sign them and tell us the truth. Once that's done, we'll meet with the Attorney General and get your testimony. Are you prepared to do this?"

"So soon?" Bob asked.

"Un- huh," the authority confirmed.

There was silence, and Vic could almost picture Bob mulling over the offer.

The authoritative voice spoke again. "The deal isn't going to get any better than this Bob. The longer you take to decide, the less likely it is that we'll need you."

"So you'll get me something tomorrow?" Bob asked.

"Yes," the authoritative voice replied. "Tomorrow."

There was no reply. And that was the end of the tape.

The unbelievable conversation had the potential to derail everything. It wouldn't matter what was going to happen to Tony on Friday. Nothing would matter. If Bob cut a deal, they would all go down... including him, including Jack.

Shit.

Bob Grady.

Would he really sell them out?

I should have taken care of Bob a long time ago... the weak bastard.

These were the thoughts buzzing through Vic's head.

Then Vic thought about the tape. Something was wrong. Although he couldn't put his finger on it, something was definitely wrong. Vic hit the rewind button and played the tape over again. This time he listened without emotion... without judging Bob. Ten minutes later he did it again.

Finally, the answer struck Vic. Bob had gone from a bone-chilled, scared, stuttering imbecile to a fat, happy stoolie in the blink of an eye. And *that* was the problem. It had happened too quickly... too dramatically. Even after being offered the deal, Bob would still

have been at least a little scared. After all, he'd just been confronted with the terrible idea that the secret of Melody Morgan would be disclosed. But, Bob sounded like a man without a care in the world. It seemed *backwards*. A man didn't go from bone-chilled fright to supreme happiness that quickly. A man could go the other way, sure, but not the way the tape suggested. Happiness can go away in a flash, but not fright... it lingers.

That's when Vic considered the idea that the taped conversation wasn't true. But if it wasn't true, then what was it? A sick joke? Or a wild guess about Melody? Was that possible?

After a few minutes, Vic came to the conclusion that only one thing was sure: Bob's voice-- *his stuttering voice-- was on the tape*. And it reminded Vic how fragile life was when one shared a deep, dark secret with others.

He thought some more. Maybe the tape was some sort of weird sting designed to get Vic? Or to see how he would respond? The only way to know for sure was to confront Bob.

Now settled down and sitting in the silence, only two things were sure in Vic's mind: one, Vic had to determine the tape's authenticity; and two, he wouldn't put it past Bob to save himself and sell them out. But the big questions were: who had sent Vic the tape? And why? Was Jack somehow behind it? Or even Tony? One thing was certain: he needed to talk with Bob. And that conversation could be the most important conversation of both of their lives.

Vic punched out Bob's cell.

Bob picked up on the second ring.

"Bob, it's Vic. I need to see you right away."

Bob didn't sense the urgency in Vic's voice. "It's almost 10:30 Vic, can't it wait 'til morning?"

"No, it can't. It's urgent." Vic's tone jumped now.

Vic's tone sent Bob's mind racing. Something sounded very wrong. *Could it somehow be connected to what had happened at Old Ebbit's? Had Vic somehow found out?* That's when Bob felt himself go faint. *Now what do I do?* A voice inside answered: *grab Molly and the kids, jump in the Suburban and drive away and never look back. Forget the book deal. Forget about everything. Save yourself before it's too late...*

On the other end, Vic wondered why Bob wasn't responding. "Bob?" he said.

Bob had to respond... and he had to either disappear or go see Vic. "Okay, Vic, where do you want to m-meet?" *Damn it, don't stutter...*

Vic didn't miss that stutter. Bob was nervous. "My house."

"I'll be there in half an hour," Bob said, this time not stuttering.

"Okay." Click.

Bob was shaking as he hung up.

THIRTY THREE

I'm not upset that you lied to me,
I'm upset that from now on
I can't believe you.
-- Friedrich Nietzsche

Vic informed Fleming that a visitor would be coming, and therefore he should not come out running with his gun a blazing when he heard the gates open. Then Vic went upstairs, showered, and changed into casual clothes. Sooner than expected, he heard the intercom buzz. Either traffic was light or Bob had driven like a madman to get over very quickly. And traffic in D.C. was never light.

“Bob?” Vic spoke into the speaker.

“Yeah, Vic, it’s m-me,” came Bob’s reply. He sounded rushed... and scared. Indeed, Jack’s words from the day began had been streaming through Bob’s head the entire ride over: *Vic would kill if he had to... including a nervous classmate with a propensity to stutter.* Don’t stutter, he commanded himself. Of course that was counterproductive, as it only made him that much more nervous.

Vic buzzed the gates open and as Bob drove through, a terrifying question flashed in his mind: would he drive out these same gates?

Standing at the front door, Vic studied Bob’s face as he walked up, looking for any telltale signs of fright or disloyalty. As he stepped into the foyer, Bob made eye contact with Vic, but his eyes quickly strayed.

“What’s going on, Vic? Bob said, without stuttering.

Vic motioned toward the den, ushered Bob in, and locked the door as if to indicate they would remain inside until Vic unlocked the door. Prisoner-like, Bob stood uncomfortably in the middle of the room. As he looked around, he noted the broken glass in and around the fireplace. That wasn’t good.

Vic walked toward Bob and said, “I got something in the mail today that I think you

better hear. Sit down.” Vic, the alpha dog in the relationship, said it like an order.

Bob sat on the couch opposite the fireplace.

“You might want to have a drink, too,” Vic added. A drink, Vic had already calculated, might put Bob at ease and cause him to drop his guard. That would help Vic discern the truth.

“Okay.” Bob took the drink from Vic.

Seated at his desk, Vic pressed the stereo’s remote, his eyes focused on Bob, looking for a reaction that might seal Bob’s fate.

"Bob, we know that you were involved in the disappearance of Melody Morgan on May 22nd 1988." The voice sounded official, authoritative.

Bob’s face fell and whitened, just as it had the day before at Old Ebbit's.

A seemingly eternal pause followed. Then, came the reply. "I d-d-don't know what you're t-t-talking about."

Hearing his own voice, and his stuttering denial, made Bob even paler, even longer in the face... like a man being sucked down by the truth. He took a deep pull on the Dewar’s hoping for some courage.

When the authoritative voice implicated Vic and described the evidence they’d accumulated, Bob listened to his same stuttering denial again. He sounded worse on the tape than he imagined he’d sounded at Old Ebbit's. No doubt he sounded like a guilty man. He felt queasy again.

“That tapes a f-ffake,” he said to Vic, interrupting the tape. His stuttering was genuine again, just like on the tape.

Vic paused the tape with a press of the remote. “If it’s fake, then why are you stuttering?”

“Because I’m scared. Obviously, somebody’s trying to set me up.”

“So are you saying that’s not your voice on the tape?”

Bob shook his head in denial. “It’s m-my voice, but I never had the conversation that's on that tape. Somebody obviously took some things I’ve said before and d-d-dubbed in those questions.”

While that might have been a believable explanation, Vic wasn't convinced. He wanted Bob to hear more. More than that, he wanted to see more of Bob's reaction.

“Listen to the rest of the tape,” Vic commanded as he pressed the 'Play' button again.

When Bob heard himself ask for help in getting a deal, the smooth Dewar's come up his esophagus and back into his mouth. It sounded bad for him.

Vic noted Bob's uneasiness. There was more to this than Bob was saying and he wondered what it would take to get to the truth. “You know, Bob,” Vic said, “to someone listening to it for the first time, this tape sure sounds real enough.”

“It's not, V-Vic, I swear,” Bob countered emotionally. He feared the look on Vic's face. At the same time he was once again remembering Jack's words from the day before: *Vic would kill to keep the secret*. Vic's look seemed to confirm those words. And Vic wasn't buying his denials.

“What's on that tape isn't what happened, Vic, I swear.”

“What do you mean, that isn't what happened? What happened?”

Bob had no choice but to tell Vic about the incident at the Old Ebbit's Grill. “Something happened to me yesterday when I was at lunch,” Bob answered with resignation.

For the first time, Vic believed Bob. “What?”

Bob explained the chain-of-events at the Old Ebbit's Grill-- his meeting with Drew Matthews about a book deal and the Asian waitress who blind-sided him with the accusations about Melody Morgan. Obviously, Bob explained, Drew had taped their conversation, dubbed in new questions afterwards, and sent the 'new' conversation to Vic.

“Drew Matthews is behind this?” Vic reacted, his voice charged with emotion.

Bob nodded. “He has an assistant named Allie Morgan... she's Melody Morgan's daughter all grown up. I think she's the one who got Drew started on this.” Bob described the theory about Drew and Allie as his own, choosing to remain silent about his post-Old Ebbit's Grill meeting with Jack. He didn't want Vic to know he'd told Jack, nor that Jack had told him not to tell Vic or Tony.

Bob continued. “But the conversation I had at Old Ebbit's wasn't the one on that tape,” he stated emphatically. “There wasn't anything about a deal or other evidence or anything like that.”

As Bob explained, Vic's reaction was mixed. He had been right thinking the tape was a fake. And that also meant that Bob wasn't in the midst of turning on them. On the other hand, it

was more than just a little unnerving. If Drew Matthews had come up with all this, what was next? Was it just a matter of time before Drew somehow penetrated their secret?

Vic spoke out, "So you weren't going to tell any of us what happened?" There was an edge of disgust and doubt in Vic's tone. "Don't you think we have a right to know what happened?"

Of course. That's why Bob had gone to Jack. Unfortunately, after talking with Jack, Bob didn't know where to turn. That was as true as anything. While it was clear Jack wasn't going to save them, Bob was scared to tell Vic, especially after Jack's Stephen King-like words that Vic would kill if necessary. Consequently, Bob did nothing, except hoped... that the problem would somehow just magically go away. That's how Bob was-- he hated conflict. If there was a squirrel in the attic he'd turn up the music and it would be gone. That also explained why his law practice had failed so miserably, for a lawyer who doesn't like conflict is like a serial killer with a conscience.

Bob answered the question carefully. "I didn't think anything else would come of it Vic. I guess I didn't want to alarm you'all."

"Oh, come on, Bob," Vic reacted quickly. "Do you really expect me to believe that? We've been in this thing together for 36 years and now, out-of-the-blue this happens? And you didn't think we'd want to know? Cut the crap, Bob."

"It's true," Bob lied. He felt his downward spiral picking up speed.

"I think you were just too scared to tell any of us."

Bob didn't deny Vic's charge. If that's what Vic wanted to believe, then all the better. Plus, he wanted to move the conversation away from him. He wanted to focus Vic's attention on what to do about Drew and Allie, rather than his own weak nerves. "You're right, Vic, I was scared. But I thought it was some sick joke. I guess I was hoping nothing more would come out of it."

Vic believed that much. Bob hoped problems went away instead of making them go away.

"So what do you think we should do?" Bob asked.

"Well, we're sure as hell not going to sit on our hands and do nothing. If Drew's the one behind this, then we've got to head this thing off before it goes any further. Because one thing's sure: Drew Matthews isn't going to just sit on his hands. You should have known that. He's going to dig as deeply as he can. We can't let that happen. He's already proved that we're vulnerable."

Bob nodded. This was the kind of 'active, take charge' reaction he had hoped to hear

from Jack the day before. It was pure Vic-- if Vic heard a squirrel in the attic, he got his gun. And while Jack may have been magical when it came to things like the military and the economy, when it came to plotting and scheming, Vic would save them. Bob relaxed a bit.

Then Bob verbalized one of Jack's lines from the day before. "The only way Drew can get anything would be if it came from us. There's no evidence out there that he'll be able to find on his own."

Vic agreed with that. He also knew Bob was the weak link, the one who would have been voted 'most likely to cave in.' And as Vic considered a next move, he came to the conclusion that the tape was a blessing in disguise... just like all that B.S. with Tony as V.P. In one fell swoop, Vic could eliminate all the obstacles in his way. Unfortunately Bob was like a squirrel in the attic, and the tape would be his death sentence.

Vic shook his head, clearly troubled. "I can't believe the way you caved in, Bob."

Bob didn't like Vic's tone or the direction he was heading. "Look Vic, I was blind-sided. There was nothing I could do."

Vic agreed that Bob could do nothing. But he disagreed on the reason why. It wasn't because Bob was blind-sided, it was because Bob was weak. *That* was the problem. And if he were weak once, he'd be again... if, and when, things escalated. And Vic was not about to let everything fall apart because of Bob's weakness. When survival was at stake, the first law of the jungle was most true-- only the strong survived. And the strong had to weed out the weak. And no squirrel would ever live peacefully in Vic's attic.

Vic spoke out. "Bob, I think it would be best if you take a little vacation and get away."

Bob didn't like Vic's suggestion. "What are you talking about?"

"We're at risk, Bob... serious risk. We have no idea what Drew's going to do next. But after what happened to you yesterday, there's no doubt he smells blood in the water. He's going to attack and do everything and anything he can to bring this out in the light. We can count on that. So, we have two choices: we can sit back passively and react, or we can act-- assertively. You said it yourself: the only thing that can bring us down is ourselves. I agree with that 100 percent. We need to reduce our risk. And we do that in two ways-- one, we reduce our profile, our vulnerability; and two, we get rid of the attacker. We need to pursue both avenues in parallel. And the quickest way to reduce our profile is by hiding you, where Drew can't find you."

A million questions blurred through Bob's mind. The most immediate was this one: "Where's that?"

Heaven or hell... I really don't care which. Vic said this: "My lodge up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's just outside Berkley Springs. It's isolated and you'll be safe there. Nobody will know you're there."

Bob's next question came out. "What about Tony and Jack? Should we tell them about this?"

"You let me worry about that, Bob." After a slight pause, Vic continued. "But probably not. We're better off with them not knowing. After all, with all his protection, Jack's not a problem. And me, either. I've got essentially round-the-clock coverage. I'll have to think about Tony. But don't worry, I'll take care of him. It's you I'm most worried about. You're the most vulnerable."

Bob didn't like being the only one to go underground. "Why can't you just assign me round-the-clock protection?"

Vic's mind kicked into gear as he thought about the real answer to Bob's question. *Because if I assign you round-the-clock protection, I won't have the opportunity to get rid of you once and for all Bob. That's really the only way we'll ever be safe. We can't worry about you being blind-sided again. You're out, Bob.*

Vic answered Bob's question this way: "Because we don't want to send Drew a signal that we're worried about him. And if we did something out-of-character, I think he'd realize just how vulnerable we are. And I don't want to give him any ideas."

Bob called 'bullshit.' "Don't you think my disappearing is going to do that?"

"Not if we couch it in the right terms. We say that you're off working on the platform for re-election."

Bob sensed that Vic's mind was already made-up. He also knew he was in no position to haggle. "For how long?" he asked.

Forever. "As long as it takes me to solve this once and for all... a week, maybe two at most."

"So what the hell am I supposed to do for that long? What do I tell Molly?"

Vic was exacerbated, tired of Bob's backtalk. After all, if not for stuttering Bob's own doing, they wouldn't be in this predicament. If Bob had any backbone and strength, he would've vehemently denied the accusations and the whole thing would probably have blown over. "Spend two weeks writing that book of yours. Then when all is clear, you can fade away to Atlanta, just like you've always wanted."

"What about Molly? She doesn't like to be alone."

Vic was getting impatient with Bob. The stuttering imbecile should have been grateful Vic was allowing him to walk out alive. "Look Bob, just handle it, okay. But do it so nobody knows where you're at. We can't risk Drew knowing where you are. For all we know Drew's bugged your house or your car. So don't tell Molly and don't tell your kids. Just tell them you've got important work to do on the re-election and you should be back in week or two."

"I have to be able to call them."

Vic tried to regain his patience. "You'll be able to," he answered. "I've got a secure line up there that can't be traced. Plus, I'll be here. You can call me for anything you need. But you just have to stay put and trust me to take care of this."

Bob was nervous. He felt like a criminal on the run, hiding out, not being able to tell his family the truth. It went against every one of his values. "I'm not sure I can do this, Vic."

"I'm not asking you to do it, Bob, I'm *telling* you to do it." Vic's tone was short and hard. He was fed up.

Although Bob didn't like Vic's tone, it *was* his fault they were in this situation, even if he couldn't have helped it. If things really did heat up, perhaps getting away would be best. It would be like turning the music up-- 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind'-- just as it had been for the past 36 years. Vic could handle everything. And once everything was okay again, he'd come back, get that big book deal, and go down to Atlanta as planned.

Bob felt himself relax a bit. In fact, he was almost glad Vic had received the tape in the mail. "Okay, Vic. I think you're right. I'll go."

"Good," Vic replied, knowing everything would be easier if Bob went along voluntarily. Vic gave the address and a key to Bob. "I want you to leave in the morning. Have Molly drop you at the Metro, go out to Dulles, rent yourself a car, take the back roads up to my cabin, and be alert. Once you're up there, call me and let me know everything's okay. In the meantime, I'll take care of things at this end."

"What do I tell Jack?" Bob asked.

"Tell him what we talked about. Tell him you're burned out and need a rest. He'll buy that. Then, after everything's taken care of, nobody will have to know anything."

Bob nodded. That sounded logical to him.

The two men shook hands, Vic unlocked the door, and led Bob out. He sensed Bob's uneasiness. "Just relax and don't worry, Bob," Vic said. "I'll take care of everything. Trust me."

Bob shrugged and nodded at the same time. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to trust Vic. At least Vic seemed intent on doing something about Drew and Allie.

From the arched window behind his desk, Vic watched Bob's tail lights grow smaller as he drove through the black iron gates. While Vic probably should have been nervous at the turn of events, he was just the opposite. In fact, he was almost euphoric. Receiving the tape in the mail had been a sign to leave nothing more to chance. It forced him to deal with the problem of Bob.

Happily, Vic liked his solution. The only question was what to do about Drew Matthews and this Allie Morgan. Fortunately, once Tony and Bob were out of the way, Drew and Allie would be less pressing of a problem and there would be plenty of time to take care of them. Satisfied, Vic finished his second Dewar's and turned in.

THIRTY FOUR

I can resist everything
except temptation.
—Oscar Wilde

For two long and stressful days, Allie had been readying herself for the kidnapping of Tony Moretti. Thankfully, spending them exclusively with Drew by her side had also made them two of the best days of her life. That's when she knew she loved him. And now that it was go-time, she was eager to make Drew proud. In response to the nagging voice in her head that questioned whether breaking the law was the right thing to do, she answered with this: justice was worth it. Still, the voice persisted.

Allie, aka Shannon Doherty, walked into the Sagebrush Cafe at 11:45 wearing a long dark wig, brown contact lenses, her shortest black mini, and a bright red, silk button-down blouse. She'd worn the same outfit to work once, causing Drew to joke that he would be docking her an hour's pay for the distraction. From her point of view, getting him to notice her would have been worth it.

With her brightest red lipstick, and her top two buttons undone, she was getting plenty of notice on this day as well, and anyone who watched her could see she'd come to the Sagebrush for more than just fajitas.

The typical lunchtime crowd was in place-- mostly local businessmen and women, a sprinkling of seniors, and the ever present Japanese tourists. A group of construction workers crowded the bar and couldn't stop ogling her as she walked towards them. They were using their lunch hour to quench their thirst with Corona's and Dos Equix's, and seeing them made her wonder whether more construction accidents occurred after lunch compared to before.

She made her way toward the bar and took the only open stool near the middle. As she settled in, none of the construction heads turned back toward the t.v. above the bar; clearly she was more enjoyable to watch than the afternoon Cubs game. She ordered a Corona, hoping the beer would relax her, nervously squeezed the lime into it, and took a deep swallow. The beer seemed to be working for the construction workers-- most looked like they didn't have a care in the world. But then again, none of them were about to slip a Rophynol into the President's Chief-of-Staff's drink and kidnap and torture him.

That was certainly something to worry about. In addition, she had all those dreaded details to remember as well. Discussing a fictitious book dreamed up by Drew, and having to sound credible about it, was one worry. Slipping a drug into Tony's drink without being caught was another. Besides the obvious illegality, it was also dangerous. What if Tony had a bad reaction of some sort and dropped dead or went into convulsions? Or what if the drug didn't work? What would she do? Would she actually sleep with him? The thought made her skin crawl.

But what gave rise to her greatest trepidation was the idea of acting seductive and witty to one of the men potentially responsible for her mom's death 36 years earlier. Did he once kiss her mom? Or get a hard on over her? Her crawling skin now pulsed with a mixture of disdain and hatred.

During the phone call two days earlier, these thoughts hadn't crept into her mind-- probably because the contact had been so distant, merely sound waves over the air and through a phone. But this would be personal-- there would be eye contact and smiling and winking and laughing, and at some point, she'd gently touch his arm and rub his leg with her stocking foot as she seductively licked the rim of her Margarita. And, of course, she'd complement him on being such a great man... when, in fact, he was probably nothing more than a chicken-shit murderer.

She took another long draw and the beer slid down her throat. Like a drug it seemed to go right to the tense nerves in her body, soothing them. It took only three more long pulls until the beer was empty and she was beginning to feel a bit relaxed. The construction worker on the stool next to her was impressed with her ability to suck down a beer. If she enjoyed that so much, he thought to himself, maybe...

He took a chance. "May I buy you another beer?"

She smiled seductively as she sized him up. He was about her age and exceedingly handsome, with a rugged square face and thick brown hair pulled back into a tiny ponytail. He looked like a man you'd see in a John Deere catalogue.

"I'm meeting someone," she replied. "But until then, sure," she tacked on, raising her eyebrows, continuing the theme of being sexy. Normally at a bar, with a girlfriend, she'd shrug and act more or less indifferent. But Drew had told her to go early and, if possible, strike up a conversation with someone at the bar. That way, when Tony Moretti arrived, he'd see what a sexy dynamo she really was. And so, as she waited for Tony, she made small talk with her new-found friend. If she weren't so much in love with Drew, this was the kind of down-to-earth man she'd want.

Fashionably late at five past noon, Tony Moretti glided into the Sagebrush with an air of importance, success, and pompousness. Dressed in a grey pin-striped suit with a blue shirt, matching tie, and high-glossed black wingtips, he looked like a million bucks. Quickly, his hungry eyes made the rounds, taking in a pair of blondes seated near the front window, looking out on Clarendon Boulevard. He exchanged smiles with them. *Not bad... certainly do-able*, he

thought to himself. Hopefully Shannon Doherty was at least that much. If not, maybe he'd hook up with those two. It had been months since his last three-some.

Scanning the bar, Tony saw what he thought he was looking for and walked over. The brunette with the Corona was grabbing the arm of the man sitting next to her, laughing almost hysterically. "Get outta here," she cried out, "are you serious?"

Even without seeing her face, Tony Moretti liked what he saw on the stool. *Way, way do-able from behind.* He hoped she was half as do-able from the front. He tapped her on the shoulder. "Shannon?"

She whirled around on the stool and showed herself to Tony Moretti, her beauty striking his eyes like an arrow. She was even more do-able from the front than the rear, he noted happily.

"Hey!" Allie called out excitedly, as if she were being reunited with a long, lost friend. She acted ditsy. She looked over at John, the pony-tailed construction dreamboat. "I told you he'd come." She winked at Tony Moretti. "Tony, this is John Butchko. John, Tony Moretti," she said, making the introductions.

The construction worker stood to shake hands with the older man. So this was the President's Chief-of-Staff, he thought with disdain and contempt. He hated guys like this. The candy-ass looked like he'd never worked an honest day in his life-- his hands probably softer than a baby's butt, his fingernails probably manicured weekly. "How're you?" the construction worker said as he squeezed firmly.

Tony Moretti nodded and smiled as he let up on his grip. *Who was this pony-tailed dirtball?* He hadn't expected Shannon to be with another man. It was supposed to be just the two of them.

"John didn't think I really knew you," she said, sounding like a girl who'd had a beer to many. She looked longingly at the man she'd been talking to. "See I told you." Then, as quickly as a light goes dark with the throw of a switch, her mood changed abruptly. "Now scat," she ordered, not afraid to wield her womanly power.

The pony-tailed construction worker was momentarily confused. *Did she just say 'scat'? What about the good time they'd been having?* He hesitated to leave.

She looked at him almost sternly. "Go on, skeedaddle." She shooed him away as if he were a pesky fly. "But call me sometime. You owe me dinner." She scribbled a fake phone number on a paper napkin and handed it to him.

John Butchko slinked down to the end of the bar, readying himself for the ration of shit his buddies would surely dole out for being replaced by a wing-tipped, soft-handed, candy-ass.

He hated rich, arrogant guys like Tony Moretti. They always seemed to end up with the babes.

"Who was that guy?" Tony Moretti asked as he lowered himself onto the construction worker's newly vacated bar stool.

"Some guy who just bought me a beer."

He looked into her soft, brown eyes, not noticing the contacts that camouflaged her blue eyes. She really did look like the 90210 Shannon Doherty. "You seemed like old buddies."

She looked into his steely, grey eyes. "Nope," she laughed, "I just met him ten minutes ago."

"Do you normally make friends so fast?"

"With guys, yeah, usually. But not girls. They don't seem to like me as much."

"Perhaps they feel threatened by you... or jealous."

"Perhaps they feel insecure about themselves," she responded quickly. "I can't help it if I get along so well with guys. My mom says it's because I was a tom-boy growing up." She thought about what she'd just said. Of course her mom hadn't told her that. Even if it were true, her mom couldn't have said it. Her mom had disappeared when Allie was just ten months old... the same year Tony had graduated from the Academy. She felt a quick rage towards him. Quickly, though, she remembered Drew's words-- stay focused, and most importantly, be a tease.

She picked up his voice. "... looks like you've outgrown that. Anyone who confuses you with a tomboy would need glasses or a lobotomy."

He didn't waste time. She played along and winked at him. "So, can I buy you a drink, sailor?"

"I was a Marine."

"Sailor, marine, whatever. All men in uniform are the same to me-- sexy."

He grinned. "How 'bout a Corona," he said to the waiting bartender. Tony's eyes strayed down to her cleavage that seemed to invite his eyes. Ummmm... fire in the hole! His groin flamed.

When the bartender returned, he took the bottle and raised his hand. "To the success of your book," he toasted.

She raised her glass. "To the stories you tell me that will make my book a success."

They drank their beers, talked about the book, and after a second beer, a hostess sat them in a corner booth.

"So have you interviewed anyone else about the book?" Tony asked as Allie looked over the menu.

"You're the first," she said, shaking her head. She was getting more relaxed, confident she could hold her own with him.

"I guess I should be flattered. Why me first?"

"Why not you? You're a self-made millionaire, a key insider in the most successful Administration in American history, a man with an unlimited future, and you've got killer dimples." She licked the salsa from the corner of her mouth and winked.

"Killer dimples?" He laughed aloud. "Is that how you intend to describe me in your book?" His dimples were showing.

"Not unless you've got a better description."

"Between you and me I like it, but off the record, I'm trying to downplay that part of my image. I'd like people to recognize me from my accomplishments as well."

His arrogance almost caused her to choke on her tortilla chip. "I can understand that. But my attitude is, 'if you've got it, flaunt it.' People admire good-looking people... especially in politics. I mean, all things being equal, I think people vote for how a person looks as much as anything. Let's face it, Americans are shallow. Not many ugly men win elections. So I wouldn't go downplaying your looks too much."

"You're not shy about saying what you think."

She took a long, deep pull on her Corona, sucking down the last inch like it were nectar. "My mom was big on assertiveness. She said, 'Shannon, if you want something, you just go and get it.'" Her eyes were twinkling.

"Well, it looks like your mom did a great job raising you. My compliments to her." He tipped his Corona towards her.

"Thank you. That's very nice. I'll tell her you said that." *That is, I would tell her if you hadn't killed her 36 years ago.*

After ordering lunch, they continued the small talk and Allie steered the conversation to the Naval Academy. "So tell me why you went there?"

Tony chuckled aloud. "That's an easy one. My parents were too poor to send me to college. I was fortunate enough to be a pretty good lacrosse player and get an appointment... and the rest, they say, is history."

"Did you like being there?"

"If anybody tells you they liked being at the Academy, they're either lying, or they have a short memory. Nobody likes being at the Academy. After all, it's not exactly a fun place for an 18 year-old to spend four years of his life. You're cooped-up, living in a regimented environment of discipline and follow-the-leader." He paused to transition. "But it is a great place to be from, and you do make a lot of close friends while you're there. Friends for life. The camaraderie is what makes it special."

"That's something I wanted to ask you about. Your close relationship with Jack Kurtz, Vic Graves, and Bob Grady. I've read where you four were best friends while at the Academy."

He nodded.

"How did the four of you get to be so close?"

"Actually, it was pretty simple. On I-day-- Induction Day-- we were assigned to the same company... completely random, completely by chance. Fate, may be a better way to describe it. Vic and Jack roomed together during plebe summer. And Bob and I roomed together. Our last three years, we all lived together in a four man room. That's why we're so close. There's nothing like living in Bancroft Hall with three other guys day-in and day-out for four years. Roommates at the Academy have no secrets."

Yes you do, she thought to herself. And I know yours. And later on, when we hook that stun gun up to your balls, you're going to tell it to me, asshole.

"So do you ever wonder how your life might be different if you'd been assigned to different companies?"

Tony looked like he were in deep thought. "You know, somehow, someday, I still think the four of us would have hooked up. There was this chemistry between us, like we were meant to be together. Call it fate, call it kismet, just don't call me Mister Killer Dimples. Please." Tony smiled. He was enjoying the lunch and their conversation. He really liked this Shannon Doherty. She was smart and sexy. Plus, she seemed only interested in him. He especially liked that. If everyone were like her, the world would be a better place, he thought, mostly serious.

She smiled at him. "And here you all are, nearly 40 years later, back together, essentially running the country. Isn't that mind-boggling? You know, to think of where you came from and where you are now? Could you have ever envisioned something like that happening?"

"We've all worked hard and tried to do the right thing at every turn," Tony responded, trying to sound humble and political.

Allie wanted to throw up. *Did you do the right thing when you killed my mom?* She couldn't wait to hook up the stun gun to Mister Killer Dimples and find out. When she got done with him her nickname for him would be Mister Fried Scrotum or Mister Shriveled Dick.

"How would you describe yourself as a midshipman?" she asked.

"Um, let's see... slightly above average academically, well respected by my peers... basically a good guy."

She wondered how stupid Tony Moretti really was. Did he think she wouldn't check his Academy records if she were really writing a book? Did he really think she wouldn't learn he'd finished third to last in his class, led the pebes in his company in demerits, and was once chained to a urinal for stealing a classmates' girlfriend?

"Were there any major scandals at the Academy while you were there? Like with drugs, or cheating, that sort of thing?"

"Not like some of the things that happened in the 90's, but every year there was probably something." He seemed to be searching. "I guess the biggest thing that happened while we were there involved two roommates in 22nd Company who decided they liked sleeping in the same bed together."

"Was there a lot of homosexuality at the Naval Academy?"

He took another swig of his beer. "You're asking the wrong guy." He said it with unmistakable machoism and a wink.

"So how do you feel about women being at the Naval Academy?"

He reminded himself to be politically correct. "I think publicly-supported institutions like the service academies should provide equal opportunities for both men and women." He thought it sounded Presidential.

"What about the future?" she asked. "Assuming President Kurtz is reelected, what's next for you?"

He wanted to tell her he'd be Jack's VP. That would get him in her panties. But of course he couldn't. "Hard to say, exactly, but you can bet I'll be right there at Jack's side, serving him and the American people."

She had a funny thought: Tony and Jack might be serving side-by-side... but it would be in prison. Outwardly, she managed a smile and a slight nod.

He liked it better when she was a sexual tease. That's when he decided to take control of the conversation. "Okay. Enough questions from you for a while. My turn. You know, you really do look like Shannon Doherty."

She smiled and nodded as she took a long draw on her strawberry margarita. "And you look like a young Al Pacino," she countered.

He smiled. "That would make us quite a couple," he said.

She could tell where the conversation was heading.

Their tall, handsome waiter brought the fajitas and they continued the small talk while they ate. Although Allie acted sexy and provocative, things were stalling, and with each passing second, she grew increasingly scared. She had to get the Rophynol in his drink soon, but he wasn't giving her the opportunity. If he didn't go to the bathroom soon, they'd have to resort to the back-up plan.

As if cued by her wishes, Tony felt his stomach begin to gurgle. At the same time, he felt his heart rate pick up. Something didn't feel right. "Listen, I've got to go to the little boy's room," he spoke out. "If the waiter comes by have him bring me a strawberry margarita, okay?"

"Salted or unsalted."

"Your call." He felt a bit dizzy.

"I like salty things," she said, liking her lips. She was turning up the sexy.

"Salt it is," he said with a forced smile. Then he turned and shakily made his way to the restroom.

Allie looked over at their waiter. He was standing by the salsa bar, watching them. She hurriedly got his attention with a quick wave and the waiter was there in a flash.

Allie ordered Tony's drink, along with another for herself. "Can you hurry them, please?" she asked.

The waiter looked at her curiously. "I'll have 'em here as quick as I can," he said. It was his second day on the job, and he hated it. People were rude, generally. Luckily, it was also his last day on the job. After today, he would go back to the FBI Building on Pennsylvania Avenue, and after he debriefed Vic Graves, he'd get those nasty pictures back. Then, he'd go buy a good tux for the White House dinner invitation that would be coming. Fentanyl was such a good way to do this, he thought to himself proudly. It would look just like an O.D.

As she waited for the drinks, Allie fumbled in her purse for the Rohypnol. It was the drug-of-choice for date rapists... and now, Chief-of-Staff kidnapers/torturers. As she cradled the two tablets in her palm, a novel thought struck Allie: would she be the first female ever to use this on a guy? It was always the other way around-- after all, what good was a limp dick? Not much... unless you intended to handcuff him to a bed and hook a stun gun up to that limp dick.

According to Drew, the drug would start taking effect about a half-hour after it was taken into his system. She looked at her watch to mark the time. It was 12:40, meaning she needed to have Tony back to her hotel by 1:10. That meant she needed to work fast.

As the drinks came, Allie looked around to ensure nobody was watching her. Satisfied it was clear, she made a move to stir Tony's drink and surreptitiously dropped the two pills into the chilly red drink and gave it a good mix. By the time he knew what happened, he'd be strapped down on the bed, the only thing movable his lips. And if he moved them wrong-- if he lied -- he'd feel a new sensation in those festive balls of his.

Her heart was pounding fiercely and she took a deep breath to calm herself. The hard part was coming up-- she had to come on wildly to one of the men who had been involved in her mother's death. She was still whispering a silent prayer when she looked up to see Tony Moretti walking towards her.

"Been hanging out with all the other dicks?" she asked sarcastically, as he sat down.

The trip to the bathroom had made him feel better. Evidently, it had just been indigestion. He took a big swig of the drink. "Umm, that's smooth! I could drink a lot of these."

"You do that," she encouraged, smiling wide. "Because I'll bet if I get you drunk, you'll tell me lots of good stories and secrets about the Academy." She rubbed his leg with her foot, moving up toward his knee.

Tony smiled at her. He had hoped she'd make the first move. That always made it easier. She was obviously taking her mom's advice and going after what she wanted: him. *Thank God for moms like that.*

"Listen here, Miss Shannon Doherty. With those big brown eyes of yours, and that cute smile, you don't need to get me drunk to have your way with me."

The time was right, and the time was now. "That's good, because if I got you too drunk," she responded, rubbing his leg again with the ball of her foot, "you'd be useless to me."

He reached down and began to caress her foot, raising his eyebrows seductively. In response, she smiled and licked the length of her straw. Nervously, she moved her foot higher

on his leg and pressed it gently and playfully against his groin.

He wasted no time in taking her offer. “Did I hear you say you wanted to take this interview further? I have some time.” He was massaging her foot with his hand, pressing her against him, and she could feel him getting hard.

Allie’s skin crawled as she wondered if he’d touched her mom this way, or if he’d had an erection that night, too.

“Will you promise to tell me some interesting stories for my book?” she asked as she seductively licked the rim of her drink.

Tony crossed his heart with his free hand. “I promise not to disappoint you,” he said with a sly grin as he pictured her naked, “in any way.”

She was picturing him strapped to the bed with a stun gun against his balls. That’s the only way he wouldn’t disappoint her. She couldn’t wait to see the expression on his face then.

Tony took another big swig of his margarita.

She smiled back at him. *Keep drinking, Mr. Killer Dimples.*

He swallowed the slushy mixture and took another. He was almost finished with it.

“So, were you serious about continuing the interview through the afternoon?” she asked innocently.

“Sure. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.”

“We could go back to my hotel?” she suggested. Although her heart was beating like a bird, she was beginning to feel like a high-class hooker.

I would do you in a box, with a fox, on a dock, with no socks, Tony thought whimsically. If he hadn't become so successful blackmailing Jack all these years, Tony was convinced he could have made a fortune writing adult books based on Dr. Seuss. "Sounds good. I can tell you some real good stories..."

Their waiter had been hovering at the booth next to theirs, changing the white tablecloth, and putting out new silverware. He smiled as he listened to them talk.

“Bottoms up,” she announced as she pushed her glass out to toast.

As he drained his drink, she looked nervously for any little white pills stuck at the bottom. She wondered what she would say if there were. Luckily, except for a few black strawberry seeds, all was clear.

“Let’s go,” he said, throwing down two twenties.

“I wanted to treat you.”

He winked. “You can make it up to me later.”

If she hadn’t hated him already, she would have by now. He was so damn arrogant.

As she rose from the table, Allie looked back towards the bar and winked at a nondescript middle-aged man in a Nat’s cap drinking a Corona. That was Drew’s signal. Almost immediately he threw down a five, hurried out the restaurant, and jumped into the rented Ford Focus parked out front. He needed to reach the hotel before them.

“Oops,” Allie called out. “I’m going to use the little girl’s room before we go.” That would give Drew all the head start he needed.

Tony nodded and remained standing by the table. He looked over at the waiter standing over by the salsa bar. That seemed to be his station when he wasn’t waiting on patrons. Tony reached down, picked up the two twenties, and held them up for the waiter to see.

The waiter walked over.

"Here you go," Tony said as he handed him the money. "The change is all yours... Thanks."

Jay McGovern nodded at Tony and smiled. *You cheap bastard. I thought you were a multi-millionaire? Your bill was \$36.50... that's a \$3.50 tip... not even ten percent. You deserve to die, asshole.*

In about an hour, two at the most, the 10 milligrams of fentanyl would take full effect-- first Tony’s lips would turn blue, then his breathing would become labored and his chest would tighten, and then he’d start gasping for air like a fish out of water. The waiter only wished he could be there to see it.

"Thank you, sir," the waiter said. Then Jay McGovern turned and walked to the cash register behind the bar. He couldn’t have scripted things any better-- Tony’s female lunch companion would bear the brunt of any suspicion regarding Tony’s death. No matter, the FBI would ensure the results of the autopsy showed heart attack as the cause of death.

THIRTY FIVE

I always look well
when I'm near death.
— Greta Garbo in *Camille*

Five minutes later, Allie was gripping the steering wheel with black leather gloves, driving Tony to her hotel in a Maven car-shared Corolla she'd parked at the restaurant. In the passenger's seat, Tony sat as far to the left as he could, his hand resting on her thigh like a seasoned boyfriend. Every so often he would give her a light pat and caress her skin and make a move with his hand under her mini.

“Hold your horses,” Allie said, pulling his hand away with her gloved hand. She tried to say it cute instead of repulsed. “We'll be at the hotel soon enough.” She felt a little disgusted and a lot fearful. When would the Rophynol kick in? What if Drew had calculated the dosage wrong? Or had purchased the wrong drug form ‘his guy.’ Jesus, was she going to have to sleep with this arrogant bastard?

As Allie turned onto Route 7, the purring of the engine was like a lullaby and Tony's eyelids began to droop. I shouldn't have had the Margarita, he told himself. Something about tequila always made him tired. He'd have room service send up some coffee for him... and maybe some whipped cream for Shannon. She seemed like the kind of girl who knew what to do with whipped cream.

Ten minutes later they reached the Vienna Inn, with Tony leaning towards Allie, resting his head on her shoulder. He was heavy.

Allie was more relaxed now, but obviously not as relaxed as Rip Van Winkle next to her. After parking, she nudged him. “Wake up, sleepy-head.”

Tony startled. “Huh?” He looked around to get his bearings. “Phew. I must've dosed off,” he said.

“Overworked and undersexed?” Allie suggested, as she got out of the car.

Tony barely managed a nod, as speaking seemed to take too much energy. He managed to get out of the car, gain his balance, and stagger toward the hotel lobby. He looked like a midday drunk.

Sitting in his dark blue Grand Marquis across the street from the hotel, Don Meacham watched Tony stagger inside the lobby entrance. Of course, Donno knew it wasn't alcohol. Indeed, after Jay McGovern had come to him seeking corroboration of Vic's blackmailing tale, Donno had taken Jay directly to Jack's private study. Then, after Jack provided the unbelievable corroboration, Jay told them his plan to erase Tony. At the end, Jack had just nodded solemnly and said this, "Agent McGovern, this meeting between us never took place and you must never tell anyone about it... including Director Graves. Understood?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. President."

Now, just two days later, Donno was a witness as McGovern's plan was coming to fruition.

Inside the hotel, Allie helped Tony into the elevator and pushed the button for the second floor, still wearing the driving gloves, just as Drew had instructed her. She was more relaxed now, knowing there was no way she was going to have to sleep with him. The fact that Drew was waiting in the room gave her an added boost of confidence and a sense of safety.

Once inside room 202, Allie guided Tony to the king sized-bed.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said, "while I freshen up." She quickly disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door.

Tony was too tired to understand her. In fact, he was too tired to understand why he was so tired. He knew just one thing: he wanted to close his eyes. He laid down on the bed and then, like a light, was out. Passed out from the Rophynol, he didn't feel his chest begin to tighten from the fentanyl.

In the bathroom, Allie hugged Drew. "I'm glad to see you," she whispered, as she pulled tight to him. She was almost crying.

As he held her, Drew turned on the faucet to mask their voices. "Scared?" Drew whispered back as he released her.

"Only that I might have to sleep with that bastard." Her voice was low.

Wearing surgical gloves, Drew cracked the door and looked to see Tony Moretti passed out on the bed. "Hmmm. From the way you were stroking him with your foot at lunch that sounds almost surprising."

"You sound almost jealous," she quipped back.

"I'm just telling you how it looked." Drew handed her a pair of surgical gloves. "Put these on."

"I should have been an actor," she explained, as she exchanged the driving gloves for surgical ones. "Once I put it out of my mind that he was involved with my mom, it was easier than I thought."

"So, he likes you?"

She smiled. "Likes me? He friggin' loves me."

"I think it's lust," Drew corrected.

She changed the subject. "So how long will he be out?"

"At least an hour, maybe two."

"What do we do in the meantime?"

"Undress him and handcuff him to the bed."

"Sounds kinky."

"Hey, whatever floats your boat, Allie."

Tony was like a corpse being undressed, but they managed to get it done.

"Look at that?" Drew commented, pointing to Tony.

Allie snuck a peek. "What?"

"That is one small pecker," Drew remarked.

Allie smiled. It looked like most every other one she had ever seen... except Pinocchio's. And that had to have been some sort of special effect just for the movie. "How do you know it's small? You go around comparing?"

"No. But I know mine," Drew said as he pointed to Tony, "And comparably speaking, that one is very small."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure thing, Redwood. Whatever you say."

Drew produced four sets of handcuffs and quickly fastened them to each of Tony's appendages-- sans his small pecker-- and to the bed's frame. He wiped down Tony's arms and hands with antiseptic wipes to make sure there was no trace of anything related to Allie on Tony.

Then he duct-taped his mouth shut so nobody would be able to hear his screams.

“He looks like some sort of sacrificial virgin,” Allie commented. “Now what?”

“Now we wait. And when the owner of that small pecker awakes, we’ll see what he knows.” Drew was holding the stun gun in his hands.

The idea of finding out what happened to her mother in just an hour or so had Allie’s adrenaline pumping. Everything was going just as they’d planned.

“You sure you know how to use that thing?” she asked Drew as the two went into the front of the suite and sat on the couch together.

“Sure. No problem.” Drew’s experience consisted of discharging it a few times the day before onto a hotel towel. The small burned spot it left caused him to cringe thinking what it would feel like on testicles.

“It looks dangerous.”

Drew nodded and chuckled. “It is. But only if you're on the receiving end of the discharge.”

“What if something goes wrong? What if he dies or something?”

He's not going to die. “Then we’d be guilty of murder... or pecker molestation,” he verbalized.

“You really think this is going to work?”

Drew was nodding. “If this doesn't get him to talk, I don't know what will. I can't think of anything more motivational than 24 volts across the scrotum.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll start screaming when we take the tape off his mouth?”

“We’ll crank up the t.v. And... trust me, he’ll only scream once.” Drew discharged the stun gun before her eyes to show her what would happen.

Seeing the static blue discharge of the stun gun made her wince. “Jesus, I really don’t like this, Drew.”

“I know. I don’t either. But it’ll be over soon.”

“It sounded better in the office,” she said.

Drew thought so, too. He was a bit scared as well. They had broken several laws and that wasn't sitting well with him. In fact, he was so bothered that he had a fleeting thought to unfasten the handcuffs and just get out of there.

"So what do we go until he comes to?" Allie asked.

"Want to play cards?" Drew suggested.

Allie looked at him like he was crazy. "Here you are at a fleabag motel with one of the best looking girls in Washington D.C., with the President's Chief-of-Staff handcuffed naked to a bed, and you want to play cards?" She was doing her best to relax them with their usual carefree banter.

"You know how to play strip poker?" Drew asked, more himself.

She shook her head sideways

"Good. I'll teach you." He laughed at a funny thought. "And when Sleeping Beauty wakes and sees you naked we'll see how big his pecker really is."

"You're assuming you'll win..." she said grinning. "If you lose, we can compare yours to Tony's," Allie injected smartly.

"You're assuming you'll completely arouse me."

She winked and pushed up her boobs until they were almost falling out her blouse. "I think that's a good assumption."

He didn't counter that.

Drew rose from the couch and picked up a mask that was sitting on the table by the door. He put it on. It was Barack Obama's face.

Allie shook her head at him. "I'm not playing strip poker with Barack."

"I'm gonna go check on Sleeping Beauty," Drew said.

Before he went into the bedroom, Allie was speaking, "You really think that was a wise choice for a mask— a black man?"

"Half black, half white." Drew extended his white arms. "Just like me." He laughed as she rolled her eyes.

Drew walked into the bedroom to check on Tony. There was a strange whiteness about

him that didn't seem right... and he seemed too still. Drew looked closely at him, watching for his chest to rise or fall. Nothing. Drew reached down and felt Tony's wrist. It was cold. Then Drew felt for a pulse... nothing. *Oh Shit!*

"Allie," he yelled out, his voice shaking. He pulled off the mask and nervously searched for a pulse on Tony's carotid artery.

She hurried into the bedroom to see Drew's surgical gloved fingers laid across Tony's throat.

He looked back at her with scared eyes. "Tony's dead," he announced, his voice tense, his heart double-timing.

"What? Are you serious?" Her voice was frantic, her eyes darting.

Drew nodded. "Un-huh. He's dead."

"How?"

"I don't know... all I know is he's dead."

"Jesus, Drew." Now she was shaking. Her worst fear had come true.

"We need to get out of here," Drew said with a certainty to his voice. He looked around the room quickly to make sure they weren't leaving anything, pulled on the mask, took Allie's hand, and the two ran out the door, down the hall, and into the stairwell at the end of the motel. They flew down the two flights, ran around the back to Drew's rental car, and pulled out of the motel back entrance. With Allie crouched down in the passenger seat, it looked like Barack Obama was hastily leaving a midday rendezvous at the sleazy hotel.

Scrunched down, Allie's head was swimming in fearful thoughts as she felt them maneuvering through the back streets of Vienna. Luckily the staggering rush hour hadn't yet begun, and 10 minutes later they were on I-66 heading toward the beltway.

"You can sit up now," Drew said. He'd shed the Obama mask.

As they merged onto 495 and crossed the American Legion Bridge into Maryland, Allie asked, "You don't think the Rophynol killed him, do you?"

Drew shook his head. "Two Rophynols wouldn't kill a hummingbird. A person would need at least 20 before death could occur." Drew had done a lot of research on the drug.

She countered with, "I saw a Facebook post a couple months back about a girl at UVa

who died from a Rophynol laced with fentanyl.”

Drew nodded. “Un-huh, I read about her. But, I’m pretty confident the Rophynol we used wasn’t tainted.”

“How do you know?”

“Because my Dad got it for me... from a friend of his who works at the FDA. It was pure, trust me.”

She felt better about that. “So how do you think he died? A heart attack?”

Drew shrugged as he carefully blended in with traffic. The last thing they needed was to get in an accident or be pulled over for not signaling a lane change or something stupid like that. As he drove, he considered her question more fully. While Tony *could* have died of a heart attack, Drew didn’t believe his dying was coincidental with them being moments away from potentially learning the truth about Allie’s mom. But before he could answer, Allie was asking a question along those lines, “Do you think Tony was killed because we were getting too close?”

Drew tried to wrap his head around this more troubling question. *Something* had killed Tony, and if it wasn’t natural causes like a heart attack, then *somebody* was behind that killing. And if somebody was behind that killing, then it had to be one, or more, of three people-- President Jack Kurtz, FBI Director Vic Graves, or the President’s senior legal advisor Bob Grady. That possibility-- that the President’s Chief-of-Staff had been assassinated to keep quiet about a crime committed 36 years ago-- was almost too unbelievable. Perhaps more troubling was the fact he was killed just moments before they might have learned the truth about Allie’s mom. Had Tony’s every move been watched? Was there a contingency plan at the ready in case someone got too close to one of the co-conspirators?

As unbelievable and troubling as all that seemed, something just didn’t make sense to Drew-- if Tony was killed to keep quiet, wouldn’t it have been a lot easier to just kill Drew and Allie?

As Drew considered these unbelievable and troubling questions, he came to the conclusion that something else was going on, something perhaps even crazier than their theory. He verbalized it, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but I don’t think Tony was killed because of us. I think Tony was killed *in spite of us*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means somebody wanted Tony dead, but not because we were getting too close to him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because if it was because of us, we’d be dead, too.”

"How do you know?"

"Because this is the big leagues, Allie. Players up here don't make fundamental mistakes. And if they do make a mistake, it's usually a minor one. If they killed Tony and not us, it's because they wanted Tony dead and us alive."

“None of that makes sense,” Allie reacted.

“Not yet... but it has to be right. I just know it.”

She asked the pivotal question. “So why would whoever killed Tony want us alive?”

“I can only think of two reasons... and one of them is really crazy.”

“What’s the not-crazy reason?”

“They want to keep us alive so they can pin Tony’s death on us.”

“You think they’d keep us alive just for that... and take the risk that everything we know would come out in public?”

Drew shook his head. “We really don’t know *anything*, Allie. We have a theory, we have my Dad’s testimony that Vic Graves needed stitches the morning after your mom disappeared, and we have Bob stuttering on an audio tape. That’s it. None of that means they killed your mom or they’re guilty of anything. And I think they know that. Plus, while we’re defending ourselves for Tony’s death, I’m sure they’ll say we came up with that crazy theory as a defense or to obfuscate our guilt. We’d lose big time... and again, I think they know it.”

“But we didn’t kill Tony... right?”

“I *don’t think* we killed him... but we did drug him... and kidnap him... and handcuff him to a bed. Taken together, we may not be guilty of murder, but we’re guilty of a lot of other things. And even if he did die of a heart attack, they’ll say we caused it. Face it, we’d lose.”

She thought back to Criminal Law class and those lectures about unintentional deaths and injuries— a man playing a trick on a friend in which the friend somehow subsequently dies; a friendly push that leads to a fall down steps that paralyzes a friend; a 22 year-old with a skeletal mask who jumps out of bushes and causes an old lady to run away scared and into the path of an oncoming car. There were hundreds of people in prison for causing unintentional injuries and deaths. She felt defeated and scared and had a flashing thought of feebly defending herself in a courtroom. Now, she was wishing they’d just gone to talk to one of them with an immunity

agreement, just to know once and for all. “What’s the crazy reason?” she asked.

Drew smiled. “Your guardian angel wanted us-- *you* -- alive.”

“Who’s my guardian angel?”

Drew’s eyes lit up. “President Jack Kurtz.”

THIRTY SIX

You can't connect the dots looking forward;
you can only connect them looking backwards.
So you have to trust that the dots will somehow
connect in your future. You have to trust in
something-- your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.
--Steve Jobs

Allie's face dropped and the hairs on the back of her neck quilled. "You're shitting me. Jack? What makes you say that?"

"Because... I think we've been looking at Jack completely wrong all this time."

"How so?"

"We've been thinking Jack *loves* his Academy classmates, right?"

She nodded.

"But what if he really hates them?"

"I don't follow you."

"Maybe Jack keeps his classmates close because he has to."

"Why would he *have to*?"

"Because of the secret. Maybe they forced Jack to put them in their current positions... maybe they even demanded it. Or maybe Jack keeps them close because it's safest for him. You know the old saying-- keep your friends close and your enemies even closer..."

She nodded. "But what made you say Jack's my guardian angel?"

"That's just a guess, obviously. But... all the dots connect... kind of."

Part of her couldn't imagine anything crazier than leaving the President's Chief-of-Staff naked and chained dead to a bed in a fleabag motel. But now, what she was hearing from Drew, was perhaps even crazier. She tried to wrap her head around it. "Go on."

Drew took a deep breath as he exited 495 onto Route 50 toward Annapolis. "Okay, here goes. But bear with me. I've never connected all the dots aloud, so it may come out a bit disjointed."

She flashed him a conciliatory look. "Proceed, genius."

"Alright. So, after graduating from the Academy we know Jack became a fervent, born-again Christian... right?"

Allie nodded. "Right. He was raised Baptist, but in both the biographies, Jack said he pretty much lost his faith while he was at the Academy. But then he became a Jesus follower while he was at Quantico."

Drew was nodding. "Exactly. Losing faith *during* college isn't so radical... lots of college kids do that. But becoming a devoted Jesus follower *after* college is what I want to focus on." He paused to set off his next thought. "Whenever anyone makes a radical shift in a fundamental aspect of their life, such as their religious view, I always ask this question: what made the person change? So, answer that one for me: what made Jack go from indifference to Jesus to a fervent, devoted Jesus follower?"

Allie was quick to answer, "The prospect of war? You know, the training at Quantico got him thinking about life and death and he decided to become a follower..."

"Maybe," Drew agreed. "But Quantico is still just training. Sure, you learn how to play Marine, but nobody dies. It's not war. And in 1989, when Jack graduated for Quantico, we weren't in any wars. The first Gulf War didn't start until August 1990."

She shrugged. She really didn't know what training at Quantico was like or when the first Gulf War had begun.

"Maybe," Drew suggested, "something happened to Jack *right before* he reported to Quantico... maybe something so terrible and so troubling that it triggered his decision to become a devout Jesus follower..."

She felt a chill on her arms and neck. It was the kind of chill when you just know something far-fetched is true.

Drew continued, "Maybe he was involved in the death of a 24 year-old girl four days before graduation. And afterwards, whenever he thought about death and God and heaven and hell it scared him so much that he did the only thing he could do— he turned to Jesus."

“That could do it,” she agreed.

“Okay. That’s dot one,” Drew said. “Now for dot two-- there’s that whole weird chain-of-events with him getting married and divorced. He meets this 25 year-old girl after finishing up at Quantico, they date for a few months, get engaged and married in the span of six months, and divorce less than two months after they get married.”

Drew paused to let Allie take in the sequence.

“Do you know the number one reason why young married couples divorce within the first year of marriage?” Drew asked.

Her mind pictured the cover of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. It sounded like an article they would have published. “Sex or money,” she answered.

He nodded. “Un-huh. So which one?”

“Um, I’ll say sex. Probably an affair.”

“Sex is the right answer,” Drew said. “But it’s usually not because of an affair. It’s usually because of sexual incompatibility.”

“What kind of sexual incompatibility?”

“It could be a variety of things— one partner could be disinterested, or repulsed, or even unable to perform...”

“How do you know all this?”

“Well, I didn’t see it on a 90210 rerun... or an X-rated Disney movie.” He winked. “I did some research. Like I’ve always said, you can find anything on the web. Anyway, I told you I thought it was strange how Jack got divorced less than two months after he was married... I wanted to try and understand what could have caused that.”

She asked, “Okay, assuming that’s why Jack got divorced, which of those things do you think it was?”

“Either repulsion to sex or the inability to perform... it really doesn’t matter which though.”

“Why?”

“Because I think whatever happened with your mom on May 22, 1988 is what caused

whatever it was.”

“Whoa! That’s a huge jump.”

Drew nodded and conceded. “Agreed. But, once again, it fits... even if it is a stretch.” Drew turned and smiled at her as they drove past the exit to Bowie. Thirty-six years ago, Allie’s mom had been on the shoulder of the road not more than five miles from where they were. Today, Drew was wishing he could somehow go back in time to that night. He felt her presence as Drew continued to explain, “So, let’s assume something sexual happened between your mom and Jack that night. And remember, the night you showed me the movies of your mom you said you thought whatever happened to your mom involved sex, right?”

She nodded.

Drew continued, “We don’t know what happened that night, but we know your mom ended up dead. All I’m saying is the trauma of that night could have caused Jack to become repulsed by sex or unable to perform.”

“Don’t you think Jack would have known that before he got married?”

“Not necessarily. His wife-to-be was a fervent, born-again Christian, too. In fact, according to the biographies, they met at a church retreat. It’s possible they never had sex and intended to consummate their relationship after their wedding.”

While it was a lot of speculation, Drew’s explanation fit. “You have any more dots?” she asked, hopefully. She hadn’t heard enough.

He smiled wider and nodded proudly. “One more. So, put yourself in Jack’s shoes and imagine your life at that point in time— you’re a fervent, born-again Christian with a failed marriage, you’re racked with guilt about a horrible thing you were involved with, and you’re facing a lonely future that doesn’t include a family. So what do you do?”

“Become a guardian angel to the little girl whose mom you killed...” she suggested.

“Exactly. It totally fits. You become like a surrogate daughter to him... he helps you, it eases some of his guilt, and it gives him a pseudo-daughter/family... even if it is from a distance. *You’re* Jack’s surrogate family.”

Her head was swimming as she tried to wrap around the fact that Drew’s theory made the President of the United States her surrogate parent. It was a crazy thought. Yet, as crazy as it sounded, even she had to admit it-- all the dots connected.

Drew continued, “And he’s watching over you... that’s why you didn’t die in that hotel room.”

“You think Jack’s watching us right now... you know, with surveillance or a tracking device or something like that?”

Drew had been glancing continually at all of the mirrors as they drove. Unfortunately, there had been so many cars, and so much traffic, it had been virtually impossible to keep track. As best he could tell, they weren’t being followed. “I don’t think it would be too hard for the President of the United States to keep track of the coolest, most beautiful girl in America.”

She smiled when he called her cool and beautiful. “So, assuming your theory is correct, what do we do? Shouldn’t we try and communicate with Jack?”

Drew passed the Rowe Boulevard exit that would have taken them to the Naval Academy. He stayed on Route 50 towards the Bay Bridge. “That’s the question, Allie... unfortunately, I don’t know that answer.”

“If everything is as you say, I think we should.”

“The problem is,” he paused noticeably, “I may be wrong.” He turned to her and smiled. “In fact, I’ve been told I’m not right very often.” Now he winked.

She smiled back, remembering her comment from just weeks earlier, on the day Seth MacPherson had announced his resignation. That seemed like forever ago. That was also the day Tony Moretti was considered one of the front-runners for the VP slot. Today, Tony was dead. “Oh, come on, Drew, I was just joking. You know that.”

“I know. But I can’t take the chance I’m wrong... not with you.”

Not with me? “What’s that mean?”

He felt himself beginning to choke up. “It means I can’t lose you like I lost Lori and Luke. So, if I’m not absolutely sure, I just can’t... won’t... do it.” He let out a deeply held breath.

She thought it was sweet and didn’t respond right away, hoping he would keep talking. She wanted him to say he loved her. At the same time, she wanted to tell him she loved him. But she wanted him to say it first. She didn’t want him to say he loved her because she said it first. There would be another time to tell him... a better time... or so she hoped. Instead, she said this, “So where are we going?”

“We’re going to lay low tonight. We need to be up early tomorrow.”

“For what?”

“Tomorrow, we die,” Drew said unemotionally.

“What’s that mean?”

She listened nervously as Drew explained that it was time to go under cover for good. He knew the feds would be looking for the young lady who’d been with Tony, and sooner, rather than later, they’d figure out it was Allie. When he finished telling her his plan, she thought again about telling him she loved him. After all, based on what might happen the following day, she worried about dying having never said the words aloud.

They drove across the Bay Bridge and onto the eastern shore of Maryland. At Easton, Drew turned southwest, towards the quiet little town of St. Michaels. They found the Old Brick Inn, parked the car in the rear, and Mr. and Mrs. Colin Brown checked in.

“How many nights will you be staying?” the B&B owner asked.

“Just one night,” Drew answered.

“I’m afraid all I have is the honeymoon suite. Is that okay?”

Drew looked at Allie lovingly, like a newlywed. “That’ll be fine. We’re actually celebrating our second anniversary,” he lied.

“Well bless you both. If you’re interested, we have a special anniversary deal where we send up champagne and chocolate covered strawberries. It’s an additional \$39.99.”

“Great. We’ll do that, right honey?”

Allie smiled at him. “Whatever you want, babe. I’m just so happy to be your wife.”

The B&B owner smiled at them. She loved to see couples so in love.

That night, Drew and Allie watched CNN’s coverage of the death of Tony Moretti. According to the reporter, Tony’s body had been found in Room 202 of the Vienna Inn, naked, and handcuffed to the bed. The reporter stopped short of saying the President’s Chief-of-Staff was in the middle of a kinky sex act, but the implication was clear. Although an autopsy would be performed, the reporter indicated that a massive heart attack was suspected. The police, the reporter concluded, were still looking for Tony’s female companion-- a brunette in her mid-30’s named Shannon Doherty-- for questioning. At the moment, she was being considered a person of interest but not a suspect. A short statement from the White House expressed deep sadness for the loss of Tony Moretti, but nothing else.

Drew was sitting nervously on the edge of the bed, his head hung pensively low, as he waited for Allie to come out of the bathroom. It had been a stunning day of life and death—the President’s Chief-of-Staff was dead and he and Allie were alive. And both outcomes might have come about because of the actions of the same person-- the President of the United States himself. What’s more, tomorrow was shaping up to be equally, if not more, stunning, with both life and death involved. After all, it’s not every day that one dies in a fiery boat explosion on the Chesapeake Bay, only to rise out of the water, reborn like a Phoenix.

Still, as he sat there, Drew was not thinking about either the stunning events of today or those that might occur tomorrow. Rather, he was thinking of love and loss and gain-- love lost yesterday and gained today-- and a steady stream of thoughts flowed solemnly through his mind: *I’ll always love you, Lori... you know that... and you know how lonely I’ve been without you... I know it doesn’t seem possible, but I miss you more than I ever loved you... I hope you can forgive me for what I’m feeling about Allie and what I think is going to happen tonight. He felt his chest constrict as the next thoughts gushed: Thank you, for giving me life back, Allie... I never thought I would ever feel like this again... I love you.*

He could feel the tears welling in his eyes when he heard the bathroom door open. Looking over, he saw Allie framed by the doorway, looking beautiful in a short silk nightgown. She smiled at him initially, but quickly noted the unmistakable teary glaze in his eyes. “What’s wrong, Drew?”

He looked down, embarrassed. “Nothing.”

She walked over, sat down on the bed next to him, and took his right hand into hers. He glanced at her but quickly looked down again, not wanting her to see his tears.

“An old man once told me ‘nobody’s thinking nothing when they say they’re thinking nothing.’”

“A wise old man or an ornery old fart?” he asked, still not making eye contact.

She chuckled. “Both. But the thing is, he’s usually right about things...” She paused to let him soak that in. It was almost as if she wanted him to know she had full faith in him, in spite of the day’s setback with Tony.

He looked into her eyes.

“So tell me what’s wrong,” she said. “Okay? Please.”

“I was thinking about Lori...” He hesitated and added, “... and you.”

“What about us?”

He felt the tears gather, then the first tear fell. As she watched it, she pulled him close and hugged him. And while he cried softly into her shoulder, she rubbed his back and knew she loved him even more than just minutes before.

A minute later, his crying subsided, he pulled back and wiped his eyes. Looking into her soft blue eyes, he felt safety, but mostly love. “I was thinking,” he said softly, “how much I loved Lori and how lonely I’ve been.” He swallowed hard and fought back more tears. “But mostly I was thinking how lucky I am that I found you. You’ve given me a life back.” He hesitated and then said it, “I love you, Allie.”

The words brought forth a new stream of tears and she pulled him tightly against her. Finally, after a long and glorious minute, she pulled away and looked at him through her own teary eyes, “I love you, too, Drew. I love you so much.”

They hugged again and in that moment, neither could imagine life without the other.

“Maybe,” Allie said, “the real purpose in searching for my mom was to bring us together.”

He hugged her hard and nodded into her shoulder, and that night, they made sweet love, like honeymooners with their whole lives in front of them. Afterwards, without warning, Drew began crying, the years of corralled emotions driven from him like wild horses set free. It was actually more uncontrolled wailing than crying, and just when he seemed to stop, another round of racking sobs and deep moans would erupt. It was like the crying in the bathroom the day he’d met Becca at Sibley Hospital. But there was one big difference: this crying was because of deep joy, not sorrow.

Allie held him tightly, and as his chest heaved, and the tears rolled from his cheeks onto her, she knew she’d found her true love. As she thought about her Drew-- his sensitivity, his caring, his giving-- tears of her own began to form in her eyes.

She fought back the tears and spoke out. “Was I that bad?” she said softly between his latest rack of sobs.

He looked up at her and laughed between two subsiding sobs. “I’m just so happy, right now. I just can’t help it.” He didn’t seem embarrassed in the least for his emotional outburst. Truth be known, he liked being sensitive. More importantly, he loved being in love again.

She smiled back. She knew he was happy, but it was nice to hear him say it. “You didn’t tell me you were such a stud.” She raised her eyebrows as she said it.

His wailing had subsided for the most part now and he looked at her confused. “Are you sure? All my talking, all my jiving about redwoods, and I never mentioned that? I find that hard to believe. Maybe you just weren’t paying attention.” He was acting like the Drew she knew best again.

She shook her head. “I would have remembered you saying that.”

“Hmmm. I guess it must have been some other girl I was talking with then.”

She perked up. “Hey now, Drew, don’t go talking like that. From this moment on, there is only one girl in your life, and I am it. Don’t you ever forget that.”

He liked the idea of being her exclusive possession. And given their predicament, he envisioned them spending a lot of time together... on the run. He wished they’d never crossed the line of legality.

THIRTY SEVEN

People often believed they were safer in the light,
thinking monsters only came out at night.
But safety – like light – is a façade.”
--C.J. Roberts

Seated at his FBI desk that same night, Vic Graves smiled as Jay McGovern debriefed him on the sweet turn of events. The fact that Tony Moretti was dead would have been enough, but what made it especially sweet was the marvelous and fitting way in which the dimpled New Jersey playboy had gone out: in the middle of what appeared to be a kinky sex act. Inside, he was laughing as much as a killer could possibly laugh.

“What about the girl he was with... the brunette?” Vic asked.

“We don’t have an I.D. yet,” McGovern responded. “She checked in at the hotel the previous day and was registered as Shannon Doherty with a \$500 deposit in Travelers Checks signed by Shannon Doherty. We traced those, but they were paid for in cash so there’s no record of who she really is.”

“What about surveillance videos... either at the hotel or where she purchased the Traveler’s Checks?” Vic asked. They were the obvious questions an agent like McGovern would have expected the FBI Director to ask. In reality, Vic thought he knew exactly who this Shannon Doherty really was— she was Allie Morgan, Drew Matthews’ assistant. She was also the daughter of the woman Vic had killed 36 years ago. Thankfully, Vic was one step ahead of her.

McGovern answered, “Believe it or not, the hotel is so old they don’t have a surveillance video system. I hate to say it, but it’s almost like she selected that particular hotel because it was so nondescript and out-of-date.”

“And the place where she purchased the Traveler’s Checks?”

“A 7-11 in northeast DC. The video shows an old lady-- homeless looking-- as the purchaser. If I had to guess, I’d say this ‘Shannon Doherty’ found someone to purchase the Traveler’s Checks for her.”

Vic’s private line flashed red. He glanced down at the screen and saw the phone number

from his Berkeley Springs cabin. Bob could wait.

Vic considered all he was hearing from McGovern. Allie and Drew had come awfully close to isolating Tony and potentially learning their secret. That meant Vic had been lucky... very lucky. And Vic hated being lucky. Luck was chance, and chance was unacceptable. It was time to get rid of chance once and for all. That's when Vic came up with another assignment for his new favorite pedophile agent.

McGovern continued to explain, "Of course I could easily identify her, having waited on them at the Sagebrush, but we still don't know who she really is or what she was doing with Tony... unless you really believe it was just a lunch date."

"I think I may know who the brunette is," Vic stated confidently.

"Who?"

Who, sir. Don't get too familiar with me, McGovern. Your ass is still mine. "Her real name is Allie Morgan... and she works for Drew Matthews the head of DUMP."

Of course McGovern knew Drew and DUMP. "What do you think she was doing with Tony?"

"I think she and Drew were trying to get information out of Tony... maybe even about the blackmailing. Even though Tony's no longer a threat, this thing still has the potential to explode."

McGovern didn't pursue how the Director could have known it was Allie or Drew. Instead, he asked this, "How could they know?"

"I don't know. But I've got a sneaky suspicion that's what they were after." Vic clicked on his computer a few times and motioned for McGovern to look at the picture he'd found. "Ignore the blonde hair... but is this the girl?" he asked.

Blonde or brunette, McGovern didn't need to look twice. "Un-huh, that's her," he answered.

"I want you to find Drew Matthews and Allie Morgan and bring them to me," Vic said, "... for the murder of Tony Moretti."

McGovern nodded. "Yes, sir." And once again, he left the Director's office knowing he needed to call Don Meacham.

As soon as McGovern was gone, Vic dialed the private line to his Berkley, West Virginia cabin.

“Vic?” Bob answered nervously. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you ever since I heard about Tony.”

“I know. I’ve been over at the White House all afternoon with Jack.”

“So is it true about Tony... a heart attack?”

“No, Bob. He was drugged... and murdered.”

“Jesus, Vic. B-b-by who?”

“By your little friends from The Old Ebbit’s Grill-- Drew Matthews and Allie Morgan.”

“Holy shit, Vic.”

“Holy shit is right. Evidently they tried to isolate Tony and get him to talk. When he wouldn’t talk they killed him... to exact revenge.”

Bob thought back to the pact the four Middies had made in the van 36 years earlier. It appeared Tony had stuck to the pact, even to the death. “How do you k-kknow T-Tony didn’t t-talk?” Bob was now fully scared.

“Actually, I don’t. I have no idea what happened in that hotel room. But I know the brunette with Tony in that hotel room was Allie Morgan.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve had an agent surveilling Tony ever since our little talk at my house three nights ago.” Vic conveniently left out a few relevant facts— most notably the fact that his agent had been the one to poison Tony. But what Bob didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him... yet.

“So why didn’t you stop them from getting to Tony?”

Because then I wouldn’t be the VP. Vic said this: “Because Jack told me not to. Jack told me we were all better off if Tony was dead.”

Jack?! Bob thought back to his conversation with Jack after the incident at the Old Ebbit’s Grill. That was when Bob had learned of Tony’s blackmailing... and Tony and Vic’s ambition to both be VP... and Jack’s haunting words that Vic and Tony would kill if need be... including a nervous classmate with a propensity to stutter.

At the same time, Bob tried to square Jack's other revelations during that same conversation. Jack had unequivocally said he wouldn't do anything illegal or anything against his conscience. Yet now, according to Vic, Jack had allowed, perhaps even ordered, Tony to be killed. Bob considered that. Allowing Tony to be killed wasn't illegal. Indeed, Bob could make a case that it wasn't even unconscionable... after all, Tony had been blackmailing Jack for 25 years... perhaps Jack rightly concluded that Tony was getting what he deserved. But ordering Tony to be killed was definitely another matter. Could Jack have done that? The thought process had Bob's head swimming.

Bob said, "So w-what about Drew and Allie n-now?"

Vic was ready for the question. "That's what Jack and I were discussing all afternoon. Jack gave me the order to take care of them. I just need to find them first." Vic was purposefully obtuse about what that meant. And for his sake, Bob didn't really want to know the details, either.

"Okay, Vic," Bob said with resignation.

"You just stay put up there, Bob. That's the safest place until Jack and I take care of this."

Bob agreed and that was the end of the call. And that night, as he contemplated everything, Bob was only sure of three things— one, life had gotten too complicated; two, he didn't know who to believe or trust; and three, he probably was safest up at Vic's cabin.

THIRTY EIGHT

I wish to have no connection
with any ship that does not sail fast;
for I intend to go in harm's way.
--John Paul Jones

For most victims, the day of death usually begins like every other day: the buzz of an obnoxious alarm clock startles them awake; a hot shower washes away the night's grime; deodorant is applied to mask the coming day's grime; clothes are donned; a cup of coffee and some cereal or a muffin goes in the tummy as small-talk is made with a spouse and kids about the day's activities or the upcoming weekend plans; the newspaper gets a quick peek; teeth are brushed; the kids and spouse are kissed goodbye; and it's out to the car, off to work. It's the same routine as the day before, and for the non-victim, as the day after. For the victim, however, the next day never arrives. Instead, before the sun rises again, a plane will crash, a shot will ring out, or a car will careen out of control; and then, what was once a very normal day, is suddenly a very unforgettable day.

To Drew, what made the whole thing so wickedly evil was that common, ordinary, sameness. The day Lori and Luke died had begun exactly like the day before. Luke had stumbled into their room, still half-asleep, carrying his special pillow, self-named Abu. He crawled up into bed, and cuddled in-between Drew and Lori. After a half-hour or so of restlessness, Luke awoke fully and cock-a-doodle-dooed everyone awake and then lost a tickle fight with Drew. Following two bowls of Lucky Charms in front of a Brady Bunch re-run, there was some Nintendo action, a walk around the neighborhood with Jack, and a lost game of Checkers with Lori. Then, Drew read *The Velveteen Rabbit*, waved good-bye, and Lori and Luke were off to the mall... never to see his him, Jack, Abu, or their neighborhood again.

Not only weren't the Lucky Charms lucky that day, but there was no signal to stay in the big brass bed, no warning not to go to the mall, and no reason not to drive on curvy Route 236. There was no forewarning. *That* was the cruelty.

Today, seven-and-a-half years later, Drew would be the exception to the rule about dying. For on this day, Drew knew he was dying... because he planned it that way. And so, Drew did not begin this day like every other day. On another day Drew wouldn't have awoken at 4:45 at a B&B in St. Michael's, Maryland. On another day Drew and Allie wouldn't have driven to Big Jake's house before the sun rose. On another day Drew wouldn't have been loading Aqua

Scooters, scuba gear, and explosives into his Dad's sailboat, as he was now. And on another day Drew wouldn't have been wondering whether he and Allie could just disappear from the face of the earth and get away with it.

As Drew finished loading the last of the gear into the hold of the 28 foot single-masted O'Day sailboat, the sun was just beginning to peak above the black, watery horizon. Yet even at this early hour, the air was already warm and sticky. It would be another scorcher, Drew knew, with afternoon thunderstorms more than just probable. That was good. A good storm would their dying.

When he walked back to the house at 6:50, the Old Man had pancakes on the griddle and his famous spicy sausage gravy bubbling on the stove.

"Sit down, Drew," the Old Man said, "you don't want to die on an empty stomach."

Despite all that had happened the day before with Tony Moretti, Drew smiled as a funny thought came to him. "I guess I shouldn't worry about cholesterol today." He was glad to still have his sense of humor. No matter the situation, a sense of humor made everything better.

Sitting at the small breakfast table, Allie swallowed a gooey mouthful. "This is so good," she said to no one in particular as she wiped her mouth. Then she looked at Drew. "Can you cook like your Dad?" Like Drew, she seemed cheery as well. Being loved and being in-love did that to a person.

The Old Man jumped in before Drew could answer. "Drew has trouble making ice." He chuckled aloud as he set a steaming plate in front of Drew. "Eat up, boy. You've got a big day ahead of you."

"The boat's all set. I checked the charge on the Aqua Scooters and they checked out fine. The C-3's aboard, along with the timing charge. Everything should be good to go." He looked over at his Dad. "You sure you're going to be alright here, Dad?"

"I'll be fine. This isn't about me. It's about you two and the four... er... three of them. Nobody's worried about a 75 year-old man like me. Besides, you're going to need someone here to corroborate your disappearance and grieve at your funerals."

Drew nodded. It would help to leave the Old man behind. But he worried nonetheless. After all, the Old Man was a potential witness and Drew had said as much in the doctored up tape they'd sent Vic Graves. Now he wished he'd never mentioned him. But it was too late to change that. Drew's only comfort was that the Old Man only knew circumstantial evidence. They wouldn't kill a 75 year-old man just because of that, Drew thought, trying to assure himself.

After breakfast, Drew and Allie talked both about the events that had transpired, and the events that lay ahead. It was hard to believe that only two-and-a-half weeks had elapsed since Allie first mentioned her mom's disappearance to Drew. As they talked, Drew would look out the front windows for signs of any surveillance, cars, or anything else out of character. But there was nothing out of the ordinary.

As the day wore on, the heat and humidity raced against each other to reach three digits. At about noon, as Jake barbequed steaks on the grill, the thermometer hit 100 degrees. The humidity was a distant second, at only 95 percent.

"Smells great," Drew announced breathlessly as he entered the kitchen dripping with sweat after his usual three mile run. Running during the hottest part of the day made him feel like a Spartan.

"It's garlic bread," Allie answered. She was thinking how nice it would be having Drew come home at the end of each day and complementing her on the smells she'd create in their kitchen.

"I was talking about the steaks," Drew replied, his breathing almost back to normal. "I could smell them halfway down the street. There's nothing I like more than a good steak from the grill."

So much for compliments for the happy homemaker. "Nothing?"

"Yeah... nothing," Drew responded nonchalantly, seeking to get a rise out of her. In truth, there was nothing better than the night before with her.

"So if I were a genie and could grant you only wish-- to give you the one thing that you liked most-- you'd want a steak from the grill?"

"Yep," he replied, unable to come up with anything witty.

"You wouldn't want peace on earth, or food for all the hungry kids, or an end to disease?"

"Nope."

"Don't you think that's kind of selfish?"

"Nope. And a good genie never questions her master."

"Okay, then. How was your run, master?" She said it like a flippant genie.

"Slow. Hot. Painful. I hate running." His breathing was normal now.

"So why do it?"

"I've developed a fondness for living." He smiled and winked at her.

She smiled back. "You and fondness for living? I didn't know those two things went together."

"They do as of last night."

She hugged him hard and reached around and squeezed his butt.

They were still hugging when Jake came into the kitchen carrying the steaks. "For a couple of folks supposed to be dying in a few hours, you two sure look happy," he said.

Allie pulled away from Drew. "As I walk toward the valley of death I shall fear no evil," Allie responded solemnly, her head held high, her fist against her heart.

Drew reacted, "You mean 'swim toward the valley of death' Allie. No walking today."

"Alright you two," Jake said, "we better get going on this lunch. There's a storm rising, and you need to meet her."

"Amen," replied Drew, as he and Allie sat down to their final meal.

After lunch, the three walked down towards the water, and as Drew reached the dock, he looked back towards the cedar-shingled two-story cape with all its memories and wondered whether he'd ever see it again.

His father sensed Drew's struggle. "You'll be back, son."

"I hope you're right, Dad. Thanks for all your help." He hesitated as if he had something else to say.

Jake sensed it. "Something wrong?"

Drew looked into his Dad's eyes. There was so much he wanted to say to him. "You know, Dad, I've never thanked you for what you did for me after Lori and Luke died..."

"What do you mean?"

Drew began to tear up. "That little girl in Sibley... Becca. You asked me to visit her. I don't know if you know it, but she-- you-- saved my life." The first tear fell. "How did you know to ask me to go see her?"

Jake let out a deep breath. “You know, Drew, I really didn’t know. But I knew you were hurting and I prayed and prayed. And when I thought of you, I couldn’t stop thinking about little Becca. I can’t really explain it, but I think it was Tom or your mom or God that put her on my heart. And,” the Old Man hesitated as he, too, became emotional, “I just knew the two of you needed each other.” The Old Man paused and let out a few more breaths. “The one thing I learned after Tom died was that we all need somebody... especially during the hard times.” He paused again. “In a time of destruction, we need to create... and in a time of loss, we all need a good hug...”

Drew stepped forward and hugged his Dad. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, son. Be safe.”

Drew released. “If we’re not back by 6 or so, you should call the Coast Guard and let ‘em know we’re missing and you’re worried.”

Jake winked at the reminder.

Drew and Allie were soon underway on the 28 foot vessel, puttering on the 15 horsepower outboard under the Severn River Bridge towards the Chesapeake. The Naval Academy, with its harmonious mix of the old massive granite buildings-- Bancroft Hall, Ricketts Hall and Leahy Hall-- and the modern tinted glass structures-- Michelson and Chauvenet Halls, and Nimitz Library-- was off to their right, and on the athletic fields butting against the Severn, several companies of newly-arrived plebes marched awkwardly in crooked-lined formations, singing out newly-learned songs in spirited voices. While the songs didn't seem to be helping their feet maintain the proper cadence, the young 18 and 19 year-olds sounded enthusiastic enough. They were just a week into Plebe Summer, with four long years ahead.

As he thought about the marching plebes, Drew wondered how many dreamed of greatness-- of becoming the President's Chief-of-Staff like newly-deceased Tony Moretti, or an attorney like Bob Grady, or the FBI Director like Vic Graves, or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then President of the United States like Jack Kurtz. He shook his head at the idea that almost 40 years earlier, four plebes-- like almost any of the four marching here today-- had looked as innocent and sounded as enthusiastic as they sung out songs with a marching beat:

 Around
 her neck,
She wore a yellow ribbon,
She wore it for that Middie
 who was far, far away.
 Far away,
 Far away,
She wore it for that Middie
 who was far, far away...

As the words danced in his head, Drew wondered if Melody Morgan ever wore a yellow ribbon.

"A penny for your thoughts," Allie said as she watched him gazing at the young marchers.

"I'm easy, but I'm not cheap." He thought of something else. "Actually, my thoughts aren't for sale... at least not for money."

"Ooooh, I like that Drew." She took off her Ray Bans, raised her eyebrows, and made a saucy face at him. "If not money, what? Consciousness on your death bed? Advice from the Dali Lama himself? Sexual favors?" She quickly lifted up her T-shirt to show off her bikini top. In spite of the unknown dangers ahead, she was in her usual playful mood.

"Now you're talking. I'm just glad you didn't wear that top when my Dad took you sailing. You'd have given him a heart attack."

"I doubt it," she replied nonchalantly. "Went I went sailing with him, I went topless."

While Drew wouldn't have put it past her, he had to ask. "You didn't really, did you?"

"Sure. Why not? It's nothing he hasn't seen before."

He had a fleeting thought that maybe she'd use the same logic with him. Instead, she motioned toward the marching plebes. "So what do you think of the young sailors over there?"

"Plebes," Drew responded unemotionally.

"Huh?"

"They're plebes, not sailors."

"Oh? Okay. So what do you think of those young *plebes* over there?"

"I think there could be a future great President among them or a future murderer."

"Not both?"

"Perhaps both," he agreed, as he looked at his reflection in her sunglasses. She looked cool in them. She always looked cool, he thought, and he wished he were 37. He continued, "What's scary is the fact that we're on our way to disappear from the earth because of that very question-- only it's about a group of plebes who marched on these very same fields and wore the same uniforms almost 40 years ago."

As the boat continued past the Academy, Allie took the helm, Drew raised the two sails, and Mother Nature propelled them under the Bay Bridge and easterly toward the middle of the bay. As they picked up speed, Drew began whistling the tune from Gilligan's Island.

Without warning Allie began to sing along. "The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed. If not for the courage of the fearless crew the minnow would be lost. The minnow would be lost." She was in synch with his whistling, but not in tune.

Drew held his hands over his ears. "Ouch! Enough singing already... you can have your bonus. Just promise me you won't sing."

She smirked. "How we doing, Gilligan?" she asked with a gleeful tone as the wind pushed them ahead.

"Who you calling Gilligan, girl?"

"Would you rather be called Skipper?"

Drew stuck his stomach out as far as he could, held it for a moment, and then let out the air with a big push. "I guess not. Anyway, I think I'm more the professor-type."

She couldn't help but let out a laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You thinking you're the professor-type."

"I am," he protested. "Actually, I'm probably smarter than even the professor."

"How do you figure? There was nothing the professor couldn't make on that little, deserted island. Heck, if he wanted to, I bet the professor could've built a nuclear bomb out of coconuts."

"Oh yeah? Well if he was so smart how come he couldn't even build a raft or boat to get 'em off of the island?"

"Because then there wouldn't have been a show, that's why. You're just jealous of him."

"Jealous? Me? Of the professor? Nice try, Mary Anne."

"Who you calling Mary Anne?"

"You. You're just like her."

"Just like plain Mary Anne?" she responded incredulously. "I think I'm more the Ginger-type. Sexy and glamorous."

He agreed, but didn't say it aloud. Thinking about the castaways had Drew thinking about the life they might be leading after they disappeared—they would have each other and not much else. And Drew continued to wish they'd never embarked on the crazy journey of theirs.

Drew turned his attention to the chart, checked the GPS indicator, and plotted their position. They were still about 18 miles northwest of where Drew wanted them to be. He turned them to the south, toward the storm rising on the horizon. With the temperature still hovering around 100, and the air thick with moisture, the Bay and the horizon fused together into a clouded, grey haze. It looked as if the Bay was being sucked up into the air... as if millions of air molecules were sucking millions of water molecules in invisible straws, trying to quench a thirst. Once airborne, the water molecules would band together in huge cumulonimbus clouds, and by late afternoon, the resultant clash between the air and water molecules would be violent, with wind, thunder and lightning. And in the end, the water molecules would invariably fall back into the Bay. Such was a day in the life of a Chesapeake Bay water molecule.

"So how much longer, Drew?" Allie asked, as the winds picked up and the sky began to darken. She'd shed the Ray Bans.

"It's at least an hour until we get to where I want us to go down. After that, it all depends on when the weather starts to get rough. We'll stay aboard as long as we can. Why? You're not bored are you?"

She looked over at the thickening dark clouds. "No. I'm just getting a little scared that's all. What if the storms worse than you think?"

"Then we might really die."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

"If you'd have asked me that a month ago I'd have said 'no,' but to be honest, yeah, lately I'm a little scared of dying."

"Why the change?"

"Remember the night we watched the movies of your mom?"

She nodded. Even though that had only been two weeks ago, it seemed like an eternity. But she very well couldn't forget the night he told her that the most powerful men in the world may have been behind her mom's disappearance. "Yeah?"

"Remember when you got mad at me because I wouldn't tell you the theory about what happened to your mom?"

How could she forget? She nodded.

"And I told you that you made me scared of flying?"

"Un-huh. You said you'd explain what that means some day."

Drew nodded. "When Lori and Luke were alive I used to be scared of flying... of dying in a plane crash. But after they died, that changed. In fact, sometimes I actually wished the plane would crash." He swallowed hard and felt tears in his eyes. "But on the flight back from Vegas that day, when I thought about you, I started to get scared again. I didn't want to die."

"You were scared because of me?"

He cocked his head. "Pretty silly, eh?"

"Pretty sweet," she said correcting him. She put her arms around him and gave him a big hug. "So are you scared of dying today?"

"Are you?" he asked, turning the question on her.

"I'm confident you're as good a captain as the Skipper. He didn't let his crew get killed."

"That was t.v."

"Yeah? Well sometimes this whole thing feels like t.v. It's pretty unbelievable."

"Maybe we can write a made-for-t.v. Sunday night movie about it one day," he suggested.

"Made for t.v.? Don't you think this would be big enough for the big screen?"

"I guess. It is pretty unbelievable when you pan out and think about it."

Allie paused to think. "So if you were the Director, who would you have play me?"

"I don't know," he responded quickly, as his mind searched for a good answer. "Maybe Dawn Wells."

"Who's that?"

"She's the one who played Mary Anne on Gilligan's Island," Drew answered with a smile. He loved his great memory. How many other people would have remembered that?

"I was thinking of Kristen Bell," she came back.

"Nah. Too bony," Drew answered. Plus, her titties are too small," Drew added with a wink.

Allie smiled and proudly threw out her bosom. She thought more about their movie. "I wonder what the ending would be."

"How would you like it to end?"

"I guess the bad guys would be punished, and the good guys-- us -- would live happily ever after." She envisioned them living in Drew's Colonial, with two blonde, blue-eyed kids. As that image faded, she whispered a prayer for them to not really die on this day... and another prayer for those two blonde-blue-eyed kids to share with Drew.

As they sailed further southeast, the winds continued to pick up and the menacing sky and winds enveloped them. With the storm almost upon them, Drew checked their position again. They were near the spot he wanted them to go down.

"Time to get the gear on," Drew said, and he motioned for Allie to follow him below.

THIRTY NINE

You don't drown by falling in the water,
you drown by staying there.
— Edwin Louis Cole

Down in the cabin, Drew and Allie donned wet suits and checked their masks and regulators. The fact that both were scuba qualified had been a key factor in Drew's decision 'to die' this way.

"Ready?" Drew asked.

Allie flashed the thumbs up sign and went topside. In just ten minutes, the seas had picked up noticeably, with swells nearly as high as the side of the boat, and they were tossing around more than Allie had expected. With the wind howling and the rain beginning to pelt down, Allie felt more scared than ever. She could scarcely believe they would be purposefully jumping into the swirling, angry Bay. As was the case with kidnapping Tony, this was turning into one of those things that sounded better beforehand, when it was just talk. In real life it seemed like a very stupid thing to do. They really could die.

Drew followed her above, cradling the two Aqua Scooters in his arms like mid-sized dogs.

"Forgetting something?" he asked, holding up one of the Aqua Scooters.

"Whoops. I guess that will make it easier." She took the 15 pound device from him.

He fastened the rope from her Aqua Scooter to her scuba belt for her. "You sure you're alright using this thing?"

"Yeah. I used one just like this when I went cave diving in Florida. You just point it where you want to go and press the green button."

Drew nodded. "They're advertised at five-to-seven knots an hour with a three hour battery life. According to the GPS, it's only about ten miles to Bloody Point, so we should be good to go."

As the boat pitched abruptly, Drew held up the chart for her to see. "We're here," he pointed, "right about where we said we wanted to be. We just need to stay on a heading of 135 degrees and we'll be fine. Okay?"

She nodded.

The winds and water were more violent than Drew expected and a burst of thunder cracked out above them, like a starter's gun at the beginning of a race.

"I think you should get going," Drew yelled to her as he held the helm tightly.

She nodded and checked her wrist compass and moved to the starboard side of the boat, toward the southeast. Drew leaned towards her. "Once I see you're free and clear, I'll set up the timer and the charge. Then I'll meet up with you."

She nodded even though she didn't need reminding.

He watched as she guided herself along the side of the heaving and twisting vessel. As she leaped out, she yelled out, "I love you, Drew." Then she disappeared under the violent water.

She said it again. Last night hadn't been a dream. And as her words entered his brain, a new sense of power and purpose enveloped him at the realization he was no longer just helping a friend or an employee, but rather the woman who loved him, whom he loved. And when it was all over, he dreamed, there would be a happy ending: the good guys would win and the bad guys would be punished. It had to happen. Life couldn't be so cruel for that to not happen.

Looking out at the choppy water, he found her between wave troughs, and with each rise and fall of the Bay, she followed, like a human sine wave. Against the backdrop of the powerful water she looked small and almost helpless as she pointed the Aqua Scooter away and slowly distanced herself from the boat. Creeping away, she looked back and flashed a thumbs up at him.

He pushed his hand away, motioning for her to increase her distance away. Then he grabbed the VHF radio handset. "Mayday, Mayday, this is 'Lil Snoop' calling, can you hear me?" Drew yelled into the handset as the lashing wind and white-crested grey waves tossed the two-ton boat around like a wine cork. His voice was genuinely frantic.

The only response was static.

Come on, God dammit, answer. Making contact with someone would greatly corroborate their disappearance. Then, knowing the latitude and longitude, investigators would almost certainly find the sunken vessel. And when they didn't find Drew and Allie, the only logical conclusion would be that the two had been lost and presumed drowned. The Coast Guard would

conclude that their bloated, fish- and crab-nibbled bodies would turn up on the eastern shore within a week or so, depending on the currents. At least that's what usually happened.

But without the final radio contact, the sunken vessel would probably never be found and their disappearance would look overly suspicious... certainly, at least, to Jack Kurtz, Vic Graves, and Bob Grady. And they were the only ones who mattered.

"Mayday, Mayday, this is 'Lil Snoop' calling, over?"

Finally, a crackling voice responded, "Go 'head Lil Snoop, this is the Easton Coast Guard Harbor Control."

"This is Drew Matthews. We've had an explosion aboard our boat, we're on fire, and we're taking on water," Drew yelled. "There are two of us aboard. We need help. Our position is 37.52142 latitude, -76.1054 longitude. Please hurry. We're not going to be able to keep her up for long." Drew sounded scared, which wasn't much of an act given the severity of the storm.

As the small vessel disappeared between waves, Drew felt overwhelmed, wondering if he'd bitten off too much this time. With the boat pitching and yawing violently, setting up the timing device with the C-3 explosive was almost impossible, clumsy or not, and he was wishing he'd set it up earlier. But sailing around with armed explosives would have been too risky, so he'd deferred it 'til now. Yet now it was like trying to wire a static ceiling fan onto a moving ceiling.

Finally able to connect the final lead, Drew doused the engine with diesel and set the timer for the detonator. Based on his calculation the charge would blow a hole in the aft section of the boat where the prop penetrated the hull, making it look like the outboard had somehow exploded. Then, the diesel would ignite and the resulting fire would mask any C-3 residue. After a final check, Drew moved forward knowing he had five minutes to get as far away as possible.

Grabbing his Aqua Scooter, Drew checked his compass and moved to the starboard side of the doomed vessel. As he reached the edge, a wave smacked the boat, thrashing it sideways and sending Drew flying in the air. He flew in slow-motion and envisioned hitting his head, losing consciousness, and dying in the coming explosion. If not that, perhaps he'd lose his grip on the Aqua Scooter and really drown in the Chesapeake? Either of those outcomes would certainly 'corroborate his death,' he thought, half-amusingly, half-sadistically.

Fortunately, though, he managed to land on his side and was able to bounce back up with the Aqua Scooter still clenched tightly in his white-knuckled fist. Returning to the edge of the vessel, he looked out and saw Allie some 50 yards away, and as the boat pitched in her direction, Drew catapulted himself into the churning water.

By the time he surfaced, the sailboat had been swept almost 15 yards away, but with less than four minutes until the explosion, that wasn't far enough for Drew. He pulled on the rope to

bring the Aqua Scooter towards him, grabbed onto it, and pressed the starter button. Thankfully the prop churned to life and Drew pointed himself away from the boat and held on.

On the surface, however, the Aqua Scooter was no match for the waves and Drew felt himself being pushed back, towards the vessel. Knowing he'd be better off submerged, he released air from the bladder of the Aqua Scooter and pointed it downward. At a depth of about ten feet it was noticeably calmer, and although blind underwater, Drew felt himself pull forward, away from the doomed boat.

Two minutes later, feeling safely distanced, he surfaced and looked back to see the 28 foot O'Day looking like a toy boat rising and falling in the stormy waves. Then, just as the boat crested, Drew heard a muffled explosion. Flames followed quickly and within a minute the aft section of the boat was engulfed as black smoke billowed into the grey air. After a few minutes, the boat began to list, and as more water poured in, the sails rotated violently, smacking the surface with a whack as the boat flipped on its side. Within minutes the sails were under water, the boat gone from Drew's view. *Here today gone to Maui*, Drew thought whimsically. And then, as he looked around at nothing but the Chesapeake, Drew felt very lonely. He needed to find Allie.

Checking his wrist compass, Drew looked to the southeast and caught a quick glimpse of her some 30 yards ahead. The loneliness disappeared as quickly as the sailboat and Drew pointed towards her and submerged. Two minutes later, he resurfaced, popping up just five yards away from her.

She startled.

Drew propped up his mask. "Pardon me," Drew yelled out in a thick French accent, "but you wouldn't happen to have any Drew Poupon, would you?"

She propped her mask up, but didn't smile. That's when Drew knew something was wrong. She looked sick as she clung to her Aqua Scooter.

He paddled closer to her. "You okay?" he shouted.

She nodded slowly. "My stomach hurts. I swallowed too much water."

More likely it was that spicy sausage gravy. Quickly, Drew secured a bungee line from his belt to hers. "We need to get going."

She nodded, but her eyes were pleading for him to get her to safety.

"Once you get under," he said confidently, "it'll smooth out and you'll feel better."

"I hope so," she managed weakly as a wave smacked into them.

They donned masks, Allie released the air from her Aqua Scooter, and the two set off with Drew in the lead and Allie tethered behind on the bungee. Travelling at about 5-7 knots an hour with the underwater swimmers, Drew knew it would be a long two hour dark journey beneath the murky and turbulent Chesapeake. With visibility virtually nil, the swimmer's light on the Aqua Scooter provided little help.

At a depth of 15 feet, the water was fairly calm and they settled into a serene rhythm which Drew hoped would calm Allie. It seemed to work, because she never signaled to surface. Although he couldn't make out his compass, he sensed they were travelling in a southeasterly direction. It were as if he had magnets in his head, like a migratory turtle.

After 30 minutes, Drew pulsed on the bunge line three times, signaling his desire to surface. She replied with three tugs back and the two eased upwards. As he broke the surface, Drew looked around quickly, searching for any vessels or aircraft. The pounding waves had been replaced by smaller swells of two to three feet and Drew could see several hundred yards in all directions. All was clear. Behind him, to the northwest, was the storm they'd left behind. Ahead, was grey, but mostly clear.

Allie popped up behind him, took out her regulator, and propped her mask on her forehead.

"Feeling better?"

"Much," she replied, as she treaded water. "You were right. My stomach settled down after we smoothed out."

"Good." Drew checked the GPS on his watch to verify they were about where he expected. "We're about a third of the way, so we better press on."

"Okay," Allie replied. "Hey, Drew?"

"What?"

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For doing all this for me. This is kind of cool."

As they donned their scuba gear, Drew smiled into his regulator. It *was* cool. Even *he* felt cool. Unfortunately, it was also scary.

After another 45 minutes of blind travel, Drew could feel the turbulence of the water

easing. Whether it was because they were further away from the storm, or approaching a shallower, more protected area, Drew didn't know. A minute later though, his fin brushed the bottom and Drew knew it had to be the latter. Remembering the chart, that would put them no more than three miles from the shore. The water would stay at about fifteen feet for the next two miles, then gradually slope toward the shore the final mile. That meant another half hour until they reached Bloody Point, the narrow bluff where they would surface... and be resurrected.

Drew had purposely picked Bloody Point because it stuck out furthest into the Bay and was one of the most isolated spots on the eastern shore. That would minimize the possibility of not being seen as they came ashore. In fact, a person would have to be on the Bloody Point, or on the higher ground of the southern bluff to see them. The chance of anyone being on Bloody Point after a huge thunderstorm was nil. And nobody was ever out on that bluff. Bloody Point was also the spot where Big Jake's fishing buddy had stashed the Winnebago for them earlier that morning.

They pressed onward. Finally, with the depth no more than ten feet, and knowing they couldn't be more than 200 yards from shore, Drew decided to take the Aqua Scooter up to the surface for a quick look around. He felt a little like a human submarine, a little like a new person-- Drew Matthews was dead, drowned somewhere out behind him in the murky Bay, and Drew 'Bond' was entering the world as a new person. He wished for a periscope to check out this new world. No doubt the Coast Guard would have helos searching for them out in the Bay. But here, near the coast, some fifteen miles to the southeast of their last reported position, Drew didn't expect anyone to be looking. It would have been virtually impossible to think the duo could somehow have made it to the shore. But it was still possible, and Drew wondered how he might explain himself if they were somehow spotted and picked up.

No lie would sound good and Drew figured he would probably just have to resort to good old honesty: *We think the President and three of his classmates killed Allie's mom 36 years ago, and now we're afraid they're after us. So we decided to fake our deaths and operate from the safety of our grave until we're able to solve the crime.* Unfortunately, this sounded more unbelievable than any lies he could come up with.

As he reached the surface, Drew poked his head out and saw an uncharacteristic grey mist all around. Usually after one of these big summer thunder boomer storms, the sky was bright and clear, but today, evidently, a low pressure front had moved in behind the summer storm, creating the perfect cover. Treading water, Drew removed his mask to get a better look. They were only about 100 yards from the closest shore, and from the way the land jutted out and the bluff rose to the south, Drew recognized Bloody Point.

Allie surfaced a second later and Drew flashed a thumbs up at her. Ten minutes later, they crawled to the shoreline. They'd made it.

The Winnebago was just where the Old Man's fishing buddy had said he would leave it,

about 50 feet off Black Walnut Road, in the midst of the trees and bushes just off the point. As they carried their gear towards it, for the first time in 24 hours, Drew felt safe. No one could have known they were still alive.

Lying flat on the highest bluff south of Bloody Point, Don Meacham was all but invisible to anyone below. But he could easily see below. Looking keenly through his black binoculars, he focused on the two wet suited divers stowing their gear in the Winnebago below him. Jack had told them this is where they would surface... and here they were. Hours earlier, during the terrible thunderstorm, Meacham had placed a GPS homing device on the roof of the Winnebago. That way he'd be ready to apprehend the pair when the order from Jack came down. As soon as he saw the Winnebago set out easterly towards Easton, Don hiked back down the bluff and set out on the mile walk back to the general store where he'd left his dark blue Crown Victoria.

It was almost 6:30 p.m. when Drew and Allie reached Easton, a small little fishing town on the eastern shore. There, they turned onto Route 50 West and headed back towards D.C. Once in D.C., they'd hang low in a nondescript hotel and crash until the morning. In spite of all the stress, the thought of spending another night with Allie was comforting, and that's all Drew focused on.

"Tired?" Drew asked, as he glanced over to the passenger's seat. He could tell by Allie's scrunched expression she was thinking of something.

Indeed, she was. Although everything had gone according to plan, Allie was thinking about how things might be if they really had died. Would Drew want her or Lori in the afterlife? That was the question. Unfortunately, she wasn't liking her answer. It wasn't her fault, she reminded herself. She was, after all, at a tremendous disadvantage to Lori. She'd never stood at the alter vowing to love Drew, had never bore his son, nor shared special moments that make a man and a wife just that. Her brain kicked into high gear now. Perhaps she could make such passionate love to him like Lori never had? Perhaps then he'd pick her for all eternity? She felt herself growing angry at herself. She wasn't supposed to be competing against a dead woman. She told herself to stop. Then she looked over at him and answered his one word question.

"Dead," she responded to his question with a wink and cute smile. The scrunch in her face was gone. "Do you think what we're doing is crazy, Drew?"

"I don't know. It was all going fine 'til Tony died on us. But I know I'm glad we're in this Winnebago with everyone thinking we're dead, instead of looking over our shoulders wondering whether someone wants us dead." He looked over at her and asked, "What do you think?"

She liked when he asked her opinion. "I trust you," she replied.

He liked to hear that. Trust was the most important thing in any good relationship. "So how's it feel to be dead?" he asked.

"No different really. I guess maybe it'll hit me when I hear about it on the news or see my obituary in the paper."

"Not many people get to hear about how they died or read their obituary."

There was no doubt about that. "How 'bout you Drew? How do you feel?"

He was hoping she'd ask. "Actually, it's weird, but for the first time in seven years I'm actually starting to feel alive. It's almost like someone cleaned my slate. You know, like I don't have a past anymore... no baggage."

She could understand him feeling that way. As much as he tried, he could never let go of the wrong turn his life had taken. The sad part of that, she'd always thought, was that none of it had been his wrongdoing. "Maybe dying was the best thing that could have happened to you," she agreed.

He hesitated. "The best thing for me was falling in love with you."

She smiled at him. That made all the craziness feel better.

FORTY

Three may keep a secret,
if two of them are dead.
--Benjamin Franklin

Later that night, as Drew and Allie were driving back to D.C., up at the Berkley cabin, Bob Grady felt a mixture of relief and sorrow as he watched the CNN special report about the disappearance and presumed drowning of Drew Matthews and his assistant, Allie Morgan. Obviously, Vic and Jack had succeeded in taking care of the two. With nobody else after them, the secret was safe and they were once again free and clear, and Bob would get the book deal and retire to a quiet, financially secure life in Atlanta. That was the genesis of his relief. The sorrow came from knowing two more innocent people were dead because of them-- first Melody Morgan, now her daughter and a moral, do-right man named Drew. No matter how Bob sliced it, that was sad.

But what choice did they have? Based on the evidence, Drew and Allie had already killed Tony, and according to Vic, it was just a matter of time before they'd try and come after the rest of them.

Where would Drew and Allie stop? If they killed one, why not two, or three, or four? It came down to the two of them versus Bob, Vic, and Jack. Plus, what the four of them had done 36 years ago was an accident... a terrible, misfortunate accident. What Drew and Allie had done to Tony was no accident-- chaining him to a bed and torturing him and drugging him. That was murder.

Did Bob wish it could have been different? Of course. He wished they'd never come across Melody Morgan. He wished Drew and Allie never tried to find out what happened. Unfortunately, wishing on wishes was just wishful living...

One thing was perfectly clear-- Bob was glad Vic had stashed him up at this cabin. Bob was much safer up here. Plus, he managed to pump out three more chapters of his insider book, the one that couldn't be stopped now that Drew and Allie were no longer in the way. Bob picked up the secure phone and dialed Vic's cell, hoping to hear it was all clear for Bob to come back to D.C. He also wanted to attend Tony's funeral scheduled for the following day.

When Vic didn't answer, Bob left a message. Then he sat back down at his computer and

began another chapter of the book that would be his legacy. Three pages later he heard the sound of tires rolling over the dirt and gravel driveway.

In nearly seven days, Bob Grady had heard almost nothing from outside the walls of the four room cabin, and now he rushed to the front window of the cabin and scrunched against the window jam to look out without being seen. The headlights heading towards the cabin put him on edge. Who was it and what did they want? After all, according to Vic, there weren't supposed to be any visitors.

Bob drew away from the front window slowly and made his way toward the back room of the cabin. He found the 10 gauge shotgun Vic had told him about, inserted two shells, and crept back to the front window. Although he couldn't imagine shooting another human being, having the gun in his hands made him feel better. Nonetheless, his hands were shaking and his heart pumped wildly.

The car stopped in front of the cabin and Bob watched nervously as the driver's door opened. The light from the car's interior allowed Bob to catch a glimpse of the driver, and when Bob saw the short figure emerge, his mind eased. Still, he wondered why Vic hadn't called to tell Bob he was coming up. Bob set the gun down in the corner and opened the front door just as Vic reached it. "Jesus, Vic, you scared the shit out --"

Bob was interrupted mid-sentence by a quick swing of a slim Jim Vic had concealed against his leg. The smashing blow sent Bob's head snapping to the side and he slumped to the floor of the doorway unconscious.

"You've been scaring the shit out of me for the past 36 years, Bob," Vic said low as he tapped the foot-long wooden slim Jim against his palm. "But no more." He dragged Bob into the cabin and shut the door.

Twenty minutes later, Bob came to with a series of low moans. Groggy and disoriented, the side of his head pulsed. "Owww, what happened?" he managed, his eyes not yet open. It wasn't until he was unable to touch his tender, pounding head that he realized he was tied down in a wooden chair.

When he finally opened his eyes, Vic Graves was standing in front, about six feet away, smiling almost sadistically at him.

Although not fully conscious, Bob sensed deep trouble. "What's going on, Vic?" he said, his voice low and pained.

"The game's over."

"What are you talking about? What g-game?" Moment by moment he was regaining

consciousness and becoming increasingly scared.

"The game of life." Vic laughed sardonically.

Bob's heart took-off and the pulsing in his head intensified.

Vic continued explaining. "The first time Jack heard you on that tape, he told me it would come down to this. He said you were just too goddam weak. And unfortunately for you, Jack said we couldn't afford to have someone as weak as you left around."

Jack? Bob was in disbelief. Was Jack behind what was happening to him now? What about honor and self-respect? Was that just a bunch of Jack's bullshit? Had Jack played Bob the fool like a court jester?

"What are you talking about? Drew and Allie are dead. We're clear."

Vic shook his head sideways to indicate it wasn't so. "Jack said the only way we'll be clear is when you're gone."

"What? Why? I'm not a threat to you anymore." There was a helplessness in his voice. "You don't have to --"

"I'm afraid I do," Vic said, cutting him off. "I've got to kill you... Jack's order." Vic said it like a mob hit man who had no qualms about killing.

"No, Vic. Don't. Wait. Please. Just give me another chance. Please."

Vic was *almost* touched to the point of wishing that Bob didn't have to die. Of course Bob had to die. Vic's solace was Bob's thinking it was Jack's doing.

"Jack said it would be hard, but I didn't think it would be this hard." Vic's voice was almost breaking up with the contrived sorrow. "I hope you know, I'd give you another chance if it were up to me. But it's not my call. It's Jack's. He says we can't take any more risks. He said there's going to be an investigation into Drew and Allie's death and the subject of Melody Morgan is going to come up. Don't forget, Drew's Dad is still out there."

Nonetheless, by carefully choosing his words, Vic had purposefully opened the door, albeit very slight, for Bob to continue pleading.

"Please, Vic, I'm begging. Just let me live." Bob had a brainstorm. "I'll disappear someplace where nobody ever finds me... just let me live. Please Vic."

"Jack said you'd beg. He also told me to read this letter he wrote on your behalf to Molly and the kids. He thought you might feel better afterwards."

Then, in a soft, yet dramatic voice, choked so full of emotion that it would have made any poetry reading highlight film, Vic began to read:

My dearest family,

First and foremost, I am deeply sorry for any hurt you may be feeling. My intent was not to hurt you, though I know that probably doesn't make the pain any easier to bear. Please know I love each and every one of you more than you'll ever know.

For some, suicide is a permanent solution to temporary problems. Unfortunately, my problems, which I've tried to keep from you'all as best as I could, are not temporary. They've always been with me. The demons in my head, the utter and complete anguish I feel every day, and the sense of hopelessness, have become too much for me to handle.

Molly, my sweetie, you dear sweet love, I know I have failed you, but I ask that someday you will find it in your heart and soul to forgive me. You were, and always will be, the love of my life, the one who made me smile and feel accepted. Please continue to be strong, continue to be there for the children, and to remember me as a man who loved you above all else.

Kids, please remember me for what I always tried to be-- a loving, devoted father who just wanted you to grow up happy, respectful, responsible, and loving. I will miss you all more than I care to think. But I just can't continue with my life any longer. I hope to see you someday in heaven after you have lived a full, happy, loving life.

I love all of you. You all have been the most wonderful family any man could ever ask for.

By the time Vic finished, Bob was crying again. The intimate references to Molly and the kids, the almost folksy, matter-of-fact, southern tone... everything sounded so genuine, so Bob-like. If Jack had indeed written it, he'd captured the essence of Bob... except for all that bullshit about the demons and pain and hopelessness. Bob's only hope was that his family would see through all of that. If not, suicide would be his legacy.

Thinking about his pending fate and the everlasting scars his 'suicide' would leave behind, Bob's mind raced frantically. *Please God, don't let it end like this*, he pleaded and prayed silently. *Not without a real good-bye, and the truth be known. Not without holding Molly*

in my arms again. Please God, no. I'm not a coward. There aren't any demons in my head. Let me die sure, but not like this-- not by suicide. I don't want to be remembered as a quitter. I want Molly and my kids to know I could handle anything as long as I had them. Please, don't let this be my legacy.

"Please don't do this, Vic. I'll do anything." Tears streamed down Bob's cheeks.

Fascinated by the mental pain and suffering, Vic studied Bob's face and wondered how much more Bob could take. He loved giving false hope and snatching it away. Outwardly, Vic expressed empathy and sadness. "God, forgive me," Vic said with resignation. "I don't want this either, Bob. I swear it. But I don't have a choice. If I don't do this, Jack will come after me."

"You don't have to do it, Vic. There's another way," Bob blurted out. He looked and spoke like a man who'd come up with an idea to save his life.

A rhetorical question went through Vic's head as he studied the look on Bob's face: if Bob knew that nothing could have saved his life, would he have continued to fight? Or would he just give in to his fate?

The conversation was going as Vic had planned. If the script held true, Bob would next tell Vic there was a way to outsmart Jack. And when he did, Vic's job was to act surprised. "What other way?"

"You tell Jack I'm dead, but you let me go. There's a funeral and all that, but I'll just disappear. Nobody will ever know. It'll be our secret."

It was about what he expected Bob to say. And it was worthless. "I can't risk that. If Jack ever found out the truth, I'd be a dead man." Vic paused. "In fact, I'm already at significant risk. Once you're gone, it'll just be me and Jack. And who's to say Jack's not already planning to get rid of me, too."

Vic turned and walked toward the back room. He knew Bob would need a few moments to figure something out. And Vic knew Bob would soon disclose the secret when they'd buried the hippie. And knowing that might give Vic the leverage he needed.

Vic returned with a .45 in his hand.

Seeing the gun almost caused Bob to go frantic-- his life could be over in minutes, maybe even seconds. Obviously Vic was so scared of Jack he was willing to kill for Jack.

Vic led Bob on, "I guess that secret you and Jack and Tony shared-- whatever happened when you buried that girl-- wasn't enough to stop Jack from killing you, too."

"Who told you about that?" Bob asked, saying anything he could think of to buy time.

“I have my sources...”

“You know, Bob, if you tell me what happened, it might be enough for me to risk keeping you alive...”

Bob had no choice, he knew. He didn't want to die with that secret in his head. Perhaps it might save him. “We buried our class rings with her body,” Bob blurted.

Vic's jaw dropped. That made absolutely no sense. “You're saying you and Tony and Jack buried your class ring with her body?”

“I know it sounds crazy. It sounded even crazier at the time-- leaving behind evidence. But there we were, about to fill up the hole, when Jack said we had to. He said it was the only way to guarantee we'd always be true to each other. He said the only way we'd ever get caught was if one of us ratted on the others. He said leaving our rings behind would prevent that from ever happening. The irony is that burying our rings with her body is what allowed Tony to blackmail Jack all those years.”

Vic was playing over this new information in his head. Could it be as Bob was saying? Could he be that lucky? If it were as Bob said, then Vic had just struck the richest gold deposit on earth. It wasn't quantity, but rather quality. And in this case, an ounce of gold with Jack's name engraved on the underside, was worth all the gold in Fort Knox.

“You better be telling me the truth,” Vic said through nearly clenched teeth.

“I am, Vic, I swear. Everything I've told you is the absolute truth.”

“So you really expect me to believe the three of you buried your class rings with that dead girl?”

“I swear to God, Vic, we did. I couldn't make something like this up. I know it sounds crazy, but Jack was adamant about it. In fact, he said if we didn't throw our rings in, he'd go to the police. Tony and I were scared he would.”

Vic couldn't understand why Jack would have left behind their rings. It just didn't make sense. “So you and Tony threw your rings in there?”

Bob nodded. “And so did Jack.”

“You're sure Jack did?”

“I saw him take it off his finger and toss it in.”

Lost in thought, Vic didn't respond.

"Jack's ring is in there Vic. I know it is. If it wasn't, why else would Jack have allowed Tony to blackmail him all of these years?"

Vic nodded. That was true. If Jack's ring weren't in that hole with her dead body, Jack probably wouldn't have been so fearful of Tony. "I want you to tell me where her body is," Vic said flat-out.

"Okay. But after I do, you need to let me go."

Vic nodded.

"I need more than a nod."

Vic's face became hard again. "You're in no position to tell me what you *need*. Don't forget, you're the one Jack wants dead, not me. No matter how you couch it, if I let you go, I'm risking myself with Jack. That's not exactly something I want to happen. I could just as easily kill you like Jack told me and then take my chances with Jack."

"True, Vic. But you can't stand there and tell me you wouldn't like to have a trump card up your sleeve, either, right?"

Vic shrugged. "I told you, it's appealing. But let's just get the ground rules straight. First you tell me where her body is, and then, after I corroborate what you've told me, I'll let you go."

"Corroborate? How?"

"I've got resources," Vic said obtusely. "Trust me, I'll know soon enough if you've told me the truth."

"Okay," Bob responded with resignation. His only hope was that Vic would be true to his word. Then, Bob explained, in intricate detail, where Melody Morgan's body was buried.

"Bloody Point, on Tilghman's Island," Vic repeated back. "About two hundred yards to the north of where the road ends."

"Her body's deep, probably at least ten feet down."

Vic nodded.

"When are you going to corroborate?" Bob asked.

Don't you worry about when, Bobbie-boy. Because you won't be around. A strange

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smile came across Vic's lips and he reached back with the .45 and smashed it against Bob's head. Bob slumped unconscious in the chair.

Vic untied Bob, placed the .45 in Bob's limp right hand, and wrapped Bob's right index finger around the trigger. He raised the gun to Bob's right temple, where he'd landed the blows from the slim Jim and the .45. Nothing masked a bruise like a big hole. Then, with his own finger atop Bob's, Vic pulled back on the trigger. "Pop."

The smell of smoke and burnt flesh filled the cabin as Bob's head jerked away from the force of the bullet. The bullet exited on the other side of Bob's head, followed by dark red blood and bits of brain matter. Vic released Bob and he slumped to the ground, onto the puddle of blood. As Vic looked down on his suicidal classmate, he half-wished Bob had been more thoughtful— the least he could have done was put down a tarp to keep from bloodying the pine flooring.

His Kevorkian-task complete, Vic hopped into the rented Accord for the two hour drive back to D.C. And then there were two, he thought to himself as he cruised down I-270... just he and Jack. That changed everything. Vic could almost see the headlines: *Jack Kurtz to Resign for Health Reasons*. And below that: *Vic Graves to be Sworn in as America's 47th President at Noon*. It was Vic's destiny, he knew.

FORTY ONE

Friends help you move.
Real friends help you move dead bodies.
--Anonymous

Although Tony Moretti's burial-at-sea was broadcast live on all the major news networks, for solemnity sake, no cameras were allowed aboard the USS Hancock. Consequently, the event was about as exciting as watching the grey silhouette of a Navy destroyer inching forward against the haze-grey horizon off the coast of New Jersey. In fact, the only interesting thing about the ceremony was the conspicuous absence of Vic Graves and Bob Grady. Vic, according to reports, was laid-up in bed, recovering from a nasty summer cold. And Bob was reported to be working on the re-election campaign in seclusion at an undisclosed location.

Aboard the vessel, Jack stood rigidly at the podium on the fantail and concluded his solemn eulogy with words from the Navy hymn:

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

When he finished reading these last words, the Navy band launched into the song as Tony's elderly parents scattered Tony's ashes into the wind and into the Atlantic. As Tony blew away, Jack walked over and shook hands with Tony's father and hugged Tony's mother. And that was the end of the blackmailing playboy.

Three hours later, as Air Force One descended through 5,000 feet on approach to Andrews, back in his private state room aboard the aircraft, Jack watched CNN's wrap-up of the burial.

Burial.

The word conjured just one memory in Jack's head... the burial of Melody Morgan some 36 years earlier. Jack's mind kicked into gear as Air Force One's landing gear deployed...

... as the four Middies stared at the dead hippie in the back of the camper van, the silence seemed to last a lifetime. Deep down, all four knew what they had to do, but Jack was the one to vocalize it. "We just need to get rid of her body and hope nobody ever finds out what happened."

As bad as that sounded, each knew it was infinitely better than going to the police. If they went to the police, they were definitely screwed. The only question was 'how badly.' If they didn't, and they could successfully hide her body, maybe they weren't screwed. It didn't take someone who'd made a 'B' on a Statistic's final to figure out the answer to such a no-brainer. What did they really have to lose? Nothing. What did they have to gain? A helluva lot.

If they could keep it a secret, they'd graduate, their parents would remain proud, they could marry, have families, and careers. If they could keep it a secret, they could even become a lawyer, a lobbyist, an FBI Director, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff... perhaps even the greatest President in the history of the United States. They were too young and too bright to have this end their lives. Plus, nothing would bring her back from the dead. No matter what, she would still be dead. And what was one less hippie chick on a commune, anyway?

They each rationalized further. Should they give up their futures-- everything they'd worked so hard for-- because of a misfortunate accident that had gotten out of control? They weren't mean-spirited or bad guys... somehow Vic just snapped. And she started it all, too. If she hadn't initiated things with Jack, and then with Bob, nothing bad would've happened with Vic. Plus, she stabbed Vic first. Wasn't she just as responsible? Wasn't she just as much at fault? Wasn't Vic just acting in self-defense? It shouldn't matter that she was dead. Why should four additional lives be ruined?

"So what do you guys think?" Jack asked.

"I don't know about the rest of you," Tony chimed in first, thinking about how happy he'd been just 18 hours earlier upon learning he'd made a 'B' on the Statistic's final, "but I do know that I can't stand the thought of not graduating. Not after the hell we've been through these past four years." He was hyperventilating as he shook his head sideways.

Jack counted that as a vote for getting rid of her body.

"Vic?" Jack called out.

Having lost a lot of blood, Vic was lying on his back in the middle seat of the camper, keeping pressure on his wound. "I'm not getting kicked out of school for that worthless bitch," he answered, pointing towards Melody's slumped body. His tone was nasty, remorseless. "As

far as I'm concerned she got everything that was coming to her. She stabbed me first. I was just defending myself."

Why don't you tell us how you really feel, Vic? Jack thought, as he tallied vote number two for getting rid of her body.

"Bob?" Jack asked.

"I j-j-just want this n-n-night to b-b-be over, to graduate, and m-m-marry M-M-MMolly next month."

V-V-V-Vote n-n-n-number three, Jack thought.

"What about you Jack," Tony asked, "What do you think we should do?"

Like the others, Jack had worked too hard to fail now. He also knew his future included more than jail and humiliation. Unfortunately, he hadn't yet matured into the man who would do the right thing no matter the costs to himself. But that would come. "It's the only thing we can do," he said in a sad, resigned voice.

Their eyes met, and Jack extended his right hand forward. That drew Bob and Tony towards him and they placed their hands atop Jack's in a show of solidarity. They would be bound together all the days of their lives now, in a bond that dwarfed the Naval Academy rings on their intertwined fingers.

"Are you with us, Vic?" Jack asked.

Vic lifted up from the middle seat and leaned forward. He put his hand, slightly wet with his own blood, on top. In the dim light of the camper, Jack looked at each of their faces. He wasn't sure exactly what he felt, but the overpowering emotion seemed to be solemnity. Finally, Jack spoke out in a measured tone, "We give our solemn word as men, as classmates, as friends, and as God-fearers, that we shall never, under any circumstance, including death, willing disclose anything about the events of this night."

Jack looked around the circle to see nods all around.

"I give my word," Jack announced aloud, making it official.

"I give my word," Tony echoed.

"I g-give m-m-my w-word," Bob stuttered.

There was silence. "Vic?" Jack called out.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," came Vic's angry reply.

And that was that.

Because of Vic's wound, they decided it would be best to leave him behind at the Thrift Inn, to nurse it and keep pressure on it. Hopefully, by the time they returned, the bleeding would be stopped and they wouldn't need to go to the hospital. Plus, there was no need for all four of them to do the dirty deed. *In fact, the less the better*, Jack thought to himself. *The less who know where they put her, the better the chance of keeping it secret.*

They continued on to the Thrift Inn, left Vic in one of the rooms they'd checked into earlier that day, and Tony, Bob, and Jack set off on the gruesome task.

"W-w---where should we g-g-go?" Bob stuttered, hopeful that Tony or Jack had a good answer.

Tony didn't disappoint him. "I know a place," he replied quickly. He turned out of the Thrift Inn parking lot and onto Route 50, heading east.

Driving with a dead body in the back of the camper was eerie to say the least. To Jack, it felt as if her soul were still with them— hovering around the roof of the camper and refusing to leave, following the body to its final resting place. The image conjured an even eerier thought in Jack's head: Melody would follow him as long as he lived. Indeed, whenever he thought of sex, he would think of her lifeless body sprawled on the bed of the camper; whenever he thought of graduation, he would think of the gaping hole where her eye used to be; and whenever he thought of drinking and partying, he would think of the huge, sticky pool of blood under her head and that grotesque expression on her dead mouth. And whenever he thought of life, he would think of her death. And in that moment, his heart sank and he felt a profound sadness for his future.

As eerie as the drive was, it was even scarier, knowing one wrong move could be the end. If pulled over now, they could only hope the officer wouldn't smell the alcohol on their breath, or the lingering smell from the joints. And then, of course, there was that mound under the tarp in the back bed. Jack envisioned how it might go...

"What's that back there?" the officer would ask as he shined his flashlight on the back bed.

"What? That?"

"Yeah?"

“Just some dead hippie chick we’re gonna bury.”

“Oh, okay. Well, a word of advice, boys: dig deep... okay?”

“Yes sir. Thank you, officer.”

“Carry on, men. And never forget, you’re the crème de la crème, America’s best hope for the future.”

With all these factors weighing on them, Tony drove like an old lady coming home from Sunday services and the trip seem to last a lifetime.

As they drove across the Bay Bridge, Bob asked, "how m-m-much f-f-f-further?"

"About another half hour," Tony replied. "There's a place over on the eastern shore, out on the point of Tilghman's Island that's real isolated. I've been duck hunting there a couple of times. It's accessible by car, but there's hardly ever any traffic... especially at night. Plus, it's part of a wildlife sanctuary, so the chance it'll ever be developed are pretty slim. Fifty years from now I bet it'll look exactly the way it does today. Trust me. Nobody will ever find her."

Bob was comforted to hear Tony speaking so confidently. Maybe he would graduate and still have a life. As for Jack, he somehow knew his life would never again include comfort.

As they continued to crawl along, Bob, the lawyer-to-be, considered all the facts. She had said they were the first car to come along; nobody knew they were the ones who picked her up; and nobody saw her with them while they were driving. Except for Vic looking under the hood, which was already open, they hadn't touched anything, so there wouldn't be any fingerprints. All in all, from a purely legalistic view, he thought maybe they really could get away it.

Next, Bob considered the moralistic view. None of the three of them had done anything wrong. Sure, he and Jack had sex with her, but that wasn't against the law. She consented. Why should their lives be ruined because Vic hit her in self-defense? Bob and Jack and Tony were almost as much of victims as Melody... except they were left to live and love.

They drove southeasterly on Route 50 for another fifteen minutes, then, just before they reached the small fishing town of Easton, Tony made a hard right onto Route 33-- Black Walnut Road-- toward Tilghman's Island.

It wasn't an island, actually, but rather a stretch of the eastern shore, about a mile in width, which jutted easterly, and then to the south. On a chart or map, it looked like a knobby, bent finger trying to dig into the Bay. After two miles, the pavement of Black Walnut Road ended and the two-lane road necked down to a single dirt lane. The drive to the point was dark, deserted, and almost serene, and the nearly full moon, now only about forty degrees above the horizon, occasionally peeked out from behind the thickening clouds to give light where the van's

headlights could not reach. Because the past week had been dry, the road was firm and dusty. This was good, Tony knew, as it ensured the van wouldn't leave any deep-rutted tracks. A mile later, as they approached the point, the dirt road disappeared and Tony pulled behind some Walnut trees and scrub brush that grew along the coast. He stopped the van and there was only eerie silence.

"Scared?" Tony asked, as he opened his door and the fresh Chesapeake hit him.

"A l-little," Bob replied, his stuttering more in check. "But less than I was an hour ago."

"Me too," Tony agreed. Being at the point, and having seen no one getting out there, it didn't take a passing grade on the Statistics final to know their chances of not getting caught had increased exponentially.

A hunter and camper by nature, Tony retrieved a small utility shovel and an axe from the storage closet in the rear of the van and led Jack and Bob with a flashlight. They hiked about 100 yards off the dirt road, to the north, until Tony stopped at a spot in the middle of several large Walnut trees. He shone the light on the dirt in the middle. "This looks as good as any place," Tony announced.

Nobody disagreed.

Using makeshift gravedigger's tools, the three Middies took turns, hacking and digging into mother earth in serene silence, bathed in alcoholic sweat. Tony had decided it wasn't going to be one of those shallow graves that would be easily found or sniffed out by a dog. Rather, they would dig deep. After an hour, when the grave was about four feet deep, they took turns inside, hacking and digging, digging and hacking, loosening the mixed clay, sandy soil, and roots with the axe, while excavating with the shovel.

"How much further?" an exhausted Bob called up from inside the grave 30 minutes later. It was nearing 4 am, and he was clearly worn thin. Daylight would be coming soon and he wanted to be done while darkness still covered them.

Tony shone the flashlight down the hole. "Another foot or so," he responded, as if he knew exactly how deep an undiscoverable makeshift grave should be. "We should get it at least 10 feet. Nobody will ever go down that deep. Not even if something with a basement were built here."

Bob shrugged at what sounded logical. He just wanted to get back on the road to Annapolis. Then he'd feel better.

"Come on out, Bob. I'll finish," Tony said. He and Jack reached down to help Bob out of the grave.

Tony jumped into the hole and continued the work, digging the final foot with fury, sweat and dirt flying, his chest heaving to keep up with his body's demand for oxygen.

"I'm going back to the van and get her," Jack announced as Tony was finishing up. The alcohol had been sweated out of his system, and he was starting to think clearer.

"I'll help," Bob offered.

Jack shook his head sideways. "I got her," he said. "You stay here with Tony.

Bob didn't argue. The less he saw of the dead, one-eyed hippie with the beautiful blonde braids, the better.

"I've got a sleeping bag under the middle seat," Tony called up nearly breathlessly. "Wrap her in the tarp and zip the sleeping bag to seal her in. That way no blood will get on the ground when you carry her over."

Though he was a novice at burying dead girls, Tony said it like an experienced expert, eliciting a strange nod from Jack. As he trotted back to the van and thought about all that had happened, Jack's dominant emotion was anger-- with most of that anger directed at Vic for ruining everything. It should have been the best night of his life, the night he lost his virginity to the beautiful free-loving hippie. Instead, it was the worst night, the night they killed the innocent hippie. And it was all because of Vic.

... all because of Vic.

The words swirled in Jack's mind as he opened the sliding door and he felt himself get angrier by the minute. Someday, Vic would have to pay for this; someday, justice would have to be served.

Jack found the sleeping bag, laid it out flat on the dirt near the sliding door, and eased the dead hippie's body onto it. He wasn't sure why he was so gentle with her body, but he was. She deserved that, at least, he told himself. He took one last look at those beautiful braids and inhaled her flowery scent one last time. Then, as he was about to zip her into the sleeping bag, he noted the blood-soaked paper towels strewn about the camper floor and the back bed.

This whole sad night was *all because of Vic.*

A series of weird thoughts flashed in Jack's mind... from the movie 'The Graduate' and his Environmental Engineering class... about plastics and disintegration and landfills.

Hmmmm. Yeah, okay... that seems fair... fuck Vic.

And on that last vengeful thought, Jack gathered the blood-soaked paper towels from the

van, threw them into a plastic Glad garbage bag from the storage closet, double wrapped them into a second garbage bag, and sealed the bag shut with one of those plastic twist ties. He threw the bag into the sleeping bag with her body, zipped it shut, hoisted her across his shoulder, and carried her to the grave, arriving just as Bob was helping Tony out.

Jack gently laid her parallel to the hole.

"Let's get her in," Tony said.

A voice in Jack's head said, *'No. This is wrong. Go to the police... this is your last chance to do the right thing... go.'*

Unfortunately, Jack didn't listen. Instead, he grabbed one end of the sleeping bag as Tony grabbed the other.

"Ready?" Tony said, as they held her above the hole and looked down.

'No,' the voice in Jack's head said again. *'Don't do it...'*

Jack's eyes met Tony's and he nodded.

"On three," Tony said. "Move away, Bob." Tony and Jack swung her body gently back and forth. "One, two, threeeeeeeeeee."

As they let go, she seemed to fall forever, almost in surreal slow motion, as if not wanting to go to the bottom of that deep dark manmade hole in the earth. She finally hit bottom with a sickening thump that Jack would never forget. That's when he felt his body shiver. Not wanting to look down at her again, Jack fixed his eyes up... to the heavens.

Looking past the big dipper and the North Star, he searched for God up there. "Dear God," Jack whispered aloud, "please receive this innocent girl, Melody, into your kingdom and grant her eternal peace. Forgive us for this terrible accident and give us the strength to carry out your will, now and forever. Amen." Although Jack felt hypocritical saying the prayer, he knew there was no undoing the past-- she was dead and always would be, and it was something they'd have to live with the rest of their lives.

"Amen," Bob and Tony mouthed inaudibly.

With their Amen still hanging in the air, Bob and Tony weren't thinking about right or wrong, God or Satan, heaven or hell, or grace and forgiveness and punishment; rather, they were thinking just one thing: how quickly can we fill this hole? Before they could throw the first shovelful, however, Jack spoke out, "Wait. Before we fill this hole there's something we need to do."

“W-what?” Bob asked.

“Something that binds the three of us together for all of time... something that ensures we’ll always stay true to each other.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Jack?” Tony asked.

Jack took off his Academy ring and held it up in the dim moonlight. Then, without saying a word, he tossed it into the grave atop her body.

“What the fuck, Jack?” Tony said as he looked down into the dark. He shone the flashlight down and saw the sparkle of Jack’s ring.

“Now you guys do it,” Jack said. He was dead serious.

“I’m not throwing my ring in there,” Tony answered.

“M-m-me n-neither.”

“Fine,” Jack replied, “then as soon as we get back to Annapolis, I’m going to the police and tell them what happened.” Jack said it without any slack.

“Are you fucking crazy? Why would we leave evidence behind with her? That makes absolutely no sense.”

“It makes total fucking sense,” Jack shot back. “Like you said, Tony, nobody will ever find her. I think you’re right. In fact, I think the only way we’ll ever be caught is if one of us turns on the other. This assures that won’t happen.”

Of course not even Jack knew how wrong he was about that last one.

Neither Bob nor Tony liked Jack’s insinuation or the idea of leaving any evidence with her. “Why the fuck would we ever do that, Jack? I call bullshit.”

“You’re proving my point right now, Tony. See how mad you are? I bet you’d like to kill me right now, right?”

Jack was right about that. Jack spoke again, “Look guys. I love you both like brothers. You have to know that. But doing this will bond us together stronger than blood. We have to do this. Just trust me.”

Tony held up his hand with the Academy ring. “This fucking thing cost me \$800, Jack.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll buy you a replacement ring. You too, Bob.”

That cut short that argument.

“You’re full of shit, Jack. And I guarantee you’re not going to the police,” Tony said, still not wanting to leave behind his ring.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t... the fact is, you don’t really know, do you, Tony? If I do go, maybe I’ll take Bob with me. Maybe we’ll go in three years after any trace of semen is gone. Maybe he and I will tell the police you got drunk one night and confessed to us that you raped and killed a hippie named Melody... and you told us where you buried her body. You could tell them you didn’t, but it’ll be two against one... who do you think they’ll believe?”

Tony considered Jack’s question. As bullshit as it was, he couldn’t find fault with the example, either. “I still don’t see how putting our rings down there would change anything,” he countered.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe. But we’d have a hard time explaining how our class rings ended up down there, don’t you think?”

Tony saw Jack’s point.

Jack continued, “Look guys, I don’t know what the future holds, but no matter what, I know we’re linked together forever. Nothing can change that.”

A long minute passed. In fact, every minute that her body remained uncovered seemed like an hour. Finally, Jack spoke out again, “We don’t deserve to wear these rings, either. We’re supposed to be officers and gentleman.”

“It was Vic’s f-f-fault, not ours.”

“No, it was all our faults. We shouldn’t have let it get to the point with Vic.”

“Hey,” Tony injected, “don’t preach to me... I was just the driver. You three were the ones who had sex with her. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You can think whatever you want, Tony, that’s between you and God. Any one of us could have stopped it before it got out of hand. All I know is I’ll never wear an Academy ring again... I don’t deserve to.”

Time was wasting, and both Tony and Bob wanted both the hole and the hippie gone. Finally, Tony took off his ring and tossed it down with resignation. “Fuck it, I’ll get a replacement.”

Bob did the same. And with three rings sparkling in the grave, that was that.

“What about Vic?” Tony asked.

“Vic’s not a problem... as long as he doesn’t know what we did with her body, he’s got nothing on anybody. Given the fact he’s the one who got us in this mess, I really don’t think we need to worry about him. Right?”

Both Bob and Tony nodded at Jack’s logic.

Of course, Jack failed to tell them the real reason he wasn’t worried about Vic... *that* was one of Jack’s secrets... and it was sealed in plastic next to Melody’s body. “As long as the three of us stick together we’ll be fine,” Jack summed.

The hole took about one-tenth the time to fill as it had taken to dig, and by 4:45 the hole was gone along with the beautiful, fun-loving hippie they’d met five hours earlier. They mounded it a bit to account for settling, then smoothed the dirt and scattered some sticks and brush around the top to give it a natural look. Satisfied with their wicked work, the three took deep breaths and experienced completely opposite thoughts-- Bob and Tony were thinking their secret was safely tucked away in mother earth, while Jack somehow knew he’d never be safe again. And when he walked away from her grave, he felt as lonely as a sailor leaving his girl behind. Little did he know how lonely the rest of his life would be...

The three Middies hurried back to the van and by 5:45 were crossing the Bay Bridge heading northwest. To their right, the sun was peaking over the horizon through a gathering of morning clouds and the sky glowed an eerie, deep red-- *Red sky in morning, sailors take warning*.

Unfortunately, that warning had come one day too late for four Middies and one dead hippie.

Soon thereafter, the winds blew, the clouds continued to gather in morning formation, and a large crackle erupted in the heavens as an angry lightning bolt shot across the sky. Minutes later, the clouds opened up and the torrential rain came. It was a wicked storm, as if God wanted them to know the sun would never again shine like it used to, and as he looked up at his angry Maker, Jack knew his life would forever be divided: ‘life before Melody’ and ‘life after Melody.’

Driving through the storm, Jack was a sad mess, the torment weighing heavily on him already, and by the time they made it back to the Thrift Inn, Jack had promised to devote his life to the memory of Melody, to make-up for this terrible night and their terrible mistake. Never again would he do the wrong thing. And with that promise came a flash of inner peace. Unfortunately, it was just a flash.

Thirty six years later, as the wheels of Air Force One touched down, Jack wished for one thing: to go back, forget about self-preservation, and instead do the right thing. If they'd done the right thing, Tony might still be alive, Bob wouldn't be holed-up at Vic's cabin, and Vic, the felon, wouldn't be able to attempt a coup.

FORTY TWO

The problem with comprehension is,
it often comes too late.
--Rasmenia Massoud

The following day, Drew and Allie were sitting in Room 119 of the rundown Phoenix Motel in northwest D.C., planning their next move. It was similar to the plan they had attempted with Tony, except this time they were targeting someone a bit younger: Bob Grady's grandson.

"Okay," Drew said, "let's go over it one more time. The ..."

Before Drew could say another word, the words "Special Bulletin" flashed on the t.v. in front of them. A second later, a CNN anchorman was looking out at them, grim-faced. "This just in," he began, his voice also grim. "CNN has learned that Bob Grady, President Jack Kurtz's senior legal advisor, was found dead earlier this morning in a remote cabin in West Virginia, from an apparent suicide. No other details are available at this time, but we'll keep you up to date as we learn more of this late breaking story. Again, to repeat, President Jack Kurtz's senior legal advisor, Bob Grady, was found dead earlier this morning at a remote cabin in West Virginia, from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot. Stay tuned for more....."

"Oh my God," Allie reacted in disbelief, "Bob's dead."

Drew took in a deep breath as the worst news possible sunk in. He was as much upset at himself for not anticipating it as he was surprised. "Shit."

"What?"

"I blew it, Allie."

"Blew what?"

"Blew our best chance of finding out what happened to your mom."

"What could *we* have done differently?" She emphasizing 'we.' Whatever was done wrong, she didn't want him to feel like it was all his fault.

"I," Drew said, pointing his index finger back at himself, "shouldn't have sent that tape to Vic Graves."

"You think Bob was killed because of that?"

Drew nodded. "That tape put Bob in the cross-hairs. After we almost got to Tony, they probably figured we'd go after Bob next. So they made sure we wouldn't get to him."

First Tony, now Bob, Allie thought to herself. All because of a theory that didn't seem possible two-and-a-half weeks ago. And while she didn't want to believe there was a connection between the deaths and them, deep down she knew there was. At the same time, if the four were responsible for her mom's disappearance, then they were halfway to justice. Unfortunately none of that made her feel better. She didn't want them all dead, not yet at least... not without knowing what had happened to her mom.

"So what should we have done?" she asked, again using the plural pronoun.

"We should have gone right after Bob when we had the chance— probably right after the lunch at Old Ebbit's. We should have put a gun to his head right then and there and forced him to tell us the truth." Drew knew a loaded gun to the head was a sure way of bringing out the truth. Unfortunately, a gun unloaded to the head was an even more effective way of keeping the truth from getting out.

While putting a gun to Bob's head would have seemed too drastic at the time, in hindsight, she agreed with him. If they'd done that, the mess with Tony Moretti never would have happened and they might not be on the run. Nor would they be holed up in some flea-bag motel, watching a special bulletin about Bob Grady killing himself. More importantly, they might even know what happened to her mom.

"Hindsight's 20/20," she shrugged.

Drew looked into her cool blue eyes and nodded. "And dead men tell no secrets."

"It could have been suicide," she countered.

"It could have been. But I doubt it." He sounded sure.

"Why?"

Because Drew was no stranger to suicide. In truth, he knew the subject all too well. After his brother and mom took their lives, Drew read everything and anything to do with the subject. "Because," Drew responded, "a man like Bob Grady doesn't just kill himself just because we sneak attacked him at the Old Ebbit's Grill. We still didn't have anything on him."

"You don't think it's possible he killed himself because he didn't want to face the consequences if we ever got to the bottom of what they did?"

"No," he replied curtly, confidently.

"How can you say that?"

"Because I know, Allie." There was an irritability in his tone she'd never heard before.

"What do you know?"

"What it's like not to have a 'why' to live."

Her furrowed brow and scrunched up nose were clear signs she didn't fully understand what he meant or how it applied to Bob.

"You know who Friedrich Nietzsche was, don't you?" he asked.

An undergrad philosophy major, she did. "He was a 19th century German philosopher."

Drew smiled approvingly at her. "Sehr gut, fraulein. Wissen sie etwas von er?"

She looked at him like he was speaking a foreign language. "What?"

"Do you know anything about him?" he re-asked in English.

"Not much." She was more into John Locke and utilitarianism. She thought for another moment. "I think Nietzsche was a pessimist, mostly. He spoke of war and destruction. In the end, he went crazy and died in an insane asylum. Some people blamed him for Hitler."

He'd have given her a passing grade. "Right. And even though I think he got a bum rap about being the impetus for Hitler, that's not really important as far as Bob Grady is concerned."

"So what's the tie between Nietzsche and Bob Grady?"

"Nietzsche said, 'he who has a why to live can bear almost any how.'"

She played the words over in her head. A minute passed. She couldn't figure out how this 19th century quote meant that Bob Grady hadn't committing suicide in the 24th year of the 21st century. "So what's your point?"

"My point, Allie, is that anything in life is bearable-- any 'how' -- as long as a person has a purpose... a meaning... a 'why.'" He paused to let those thoughts sink in. "And no matter what happened 36 years ago, or at the Old Ebbit's Grill, Bob Grady had as much reason to live as any

man alive."

It was evident that Drew knew more about Bob Grady than he'd shared with her previously.

Drew continued. "Think about it. And forget about the fact that Bob was a hand-picked confidant to the most successful President ever, that he had one of the most influential and important positions in the country, and that he was at the pinnacle of his professional career. That may sound important to some, but to Bob Grady, it didn't mean anything. The only thing that really mattered to him was his family-- his wife, his kids, and his grandkids. He loved them and they loved him."

She saw several disconnects in his logic, but let him continue anyway. When it came to family, there was little doubt he knew a lot more than she did. She'd also learned not to interrupt Drew when he was on one of his rolls. Generally he'd bring his points together before coming to a stop, so it paid to be patient.

"So, according to Nietzsche, with that much of reason to live-- that much of a 'why'-- Bob Grady should have been able to bear almost anything-- almost any 'how'-- even the humiliation, shame, and punishment that might have come if what they did to your mom became public. The bottom line is this-- Bob Grady hadn't lost anything... at least not yet. And he might not have, either. At the moment of his death, Bob Grady still had everything that was important to him."

"Maybe Bob was just one of those people who couldn't handle the stress and the pressure."

Drew didn't believe it. Deep, true love-- the kind that existed between Bob and his family-- allowed one to handle the stress and the pressure. With love like that, suicide was not an option.

She continued, "Maybe this man who loved his family so much couldn't bear the idea of letting his family down if they ever found out what he did."

Drew thought about the illogic. "So he kills himself and leaves his family high and dry, left to wonder for all eternity why this man, who loved them and was loved by them, quit life, quit on them?" He shook his head sideways. "No way. That just doesn't make sense. Any man who loved his family as much as Bob Grady wouldn't do that to them."

Deep down she knew his reasoning and his instincts were probably right. But that meant Bob, like Tony, had been murdered by his own classmates, just to keep a 36 year secret about her mom intact.

"I don't know what to think anymore, Drew. Two of the four of them are dead. And the

President is either my do-good guardian angel or a calculating, cold-blooded killer.”

He could understand her disbelief. "Allie, look, I don't claim to know everything, but one thing I've learned in the past seven-and-a-half years is that politicians are really no different from any of the rest of us. They sit on the toilet to shit just like we do, they wipe their asses with the same toilet paper, and their shit stinks just like everyone else's, present company excluded." He winked. "But the bottom line is that they're human... with faults, weaknesses, and fears just like the rest of us."

She got the point, but he continued on as he tended to when he got up on his soapbox. Normally he'd say essentially the same thing with different words, but every so often there would actually be a new idea. "Fancy titles or not, Jack Kurtz and Vic Graves are not magical and they're not above wrongdoing. If the Average Joe on the street-- the reasonably prudent person as you lawyers like to say-- would kill to save themselves, then Jack or Vic would do the same. In fact, because of their position, and importance, they might even go further than the Average Joe to save themselves. And don't forget, they do have a lot of power. And that much power gives them the ability to do things that others can't... a man with a boatload of money accused of murder can almost buy his way out of a conviction by parading enough experts onto the stand who'll say what the defendant wants them to say. You know that as well as anyone. And a man with lots of power can do things that the average reasonable prudent person could never do...and never get caught either.""

She nodded at that logic, and he kept rambling. "One thing's for sure: they've got more power than just about anyone on earth. God can't undo the past, and neither can Jack or Vic. But God can sure as hell effect the future... and so can Jack and Vic. And if they were fearful that Bob was going to crack and blow the whistle, they'd stop him, just like they stopped Tony.

"So where do we go from here?" she asked, trying to stay ahead of him.

"I don't know." He sounded beaten. Kidnapping little Nate would have forced Bob Grady to choose between his grandson and the secret. Now that option was gone. And with Tony and Bob both gone, solving the mystery of Melody Morgan had become a longshot again.

"The President and the FBI Director aren't exactly accessible like Bob Grady was," Drew continued. "Plus, they're not likely to cave in under the pressure like Bob might have."

Those two reasons were enough to essentially quash any chance of getting to the bottom of Melody Morgan's disappearance. After getting so close with Tony, and now, to have Bob gone, it seemed like they'd finally reached the end. Worst of all, though, they had boxed themselves into a life on the lam-- they would, it seemed, have to remain disappeared all the days of their life. Because one thing was certain: if Jack or Vic knew they were still alive, they'd be hunted down for sure. If they'd kill two classmates, they'd have no reservations killing the two of them.

Out of options, Drew turned his attention back to the t.v. and watched the continuing

coverage of Bob's suicide. File footage showed him sitting around the table at a Cabinet meeting, standing by spokesman Miles Hildebrandt at a White House briefing, and shaking Jack's hand as Jack exited Marine One after a trip from Camp David. The segment ended with a close-up of Bob's face, with the dates of his life: January 21, 1966 - July 14, 2024. None of the pictures, and nothing written on this man's face, suggested that he would put a gun to his head and put an end to his life.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at Bob's face on the t.v., Allie felt the walls of the motel room shrinking. But it was more than just the room... her entire world was shrinking, and with each breath, she felt smaller and smaller... again like Alice in Wonderland again. Then, as she closed her eyes, the world disappeared.

In the darkness, now, she heard herself talking to herself. Why didn't I tell Drew I didn't want to kidnap and torture Tony Moretti? Why did I cross the bright line that separated legality from illegality? That didn't feel right. Why didn't I trust that feeling? It was my intuition... my mom whispering to me: *don't do that my sweet little girl... tell Drew you love him... tell him you just want to be with him... tell him you want a house, a picket fence, a golden retriever, and babies... lots of babies... babies to love, and roll around with on the grass, to take to the zoo, to open presents with on Christmas morning, to laugh at in school plays, to cry with on wedding days... to give your life meaning. I'm gone, Allie. You know that. Nothing you do can ever change that. Give my death meaning by living your life to the fullest.*

When she opened her eyes, tears welled in her eyes and the motel room blurred. She had to get out of that hotel room and clear her head, before she was swallowed whole. "Drew," she said sadly, "I'm going to walk up the street and get some things from CVS. Do you need anything?"

He looked up from the t.v. "I'll go with you. I don't want you out there alone."

Although she really wanted to be alone to collect herself, she didn't argue. Even still, she felt safer with him than without him.

"We should drive," Drew said. "It'll be safer."

She didn't know if anything would ever be safe again. In truth, she felt like she'd be looking over her shoulder until the day she died.

They climbed into the Winnebago and turned out of the gravel motel lot. "I need to call my Dad," Drew announced. If they killed Bob, he figured, would they think to go after a 75 year-old man, too? Or would they just leave Jake to wallow in his grief for his missing, presumed drowned son? "I want to make sure he's okay."

Allie nodded. She was also worried about big Jake.

They were less than a quarter mile from the motel when Drew saw the flashing red light in his side view mirror. His heart jumped. "Shit," he said aloud and instinctively looked down at the speedometer. The speed limit was 35, and he was only doing 33. In fact, it had taken almost the entire quarter mile to get the big rig going this fast. The chill of something just-not-right went through him, like diarrhea. If he were speeding, at least he'd know why he was being pulled over.

The idea of running flashed through Drew's head, but he came to his senses quickly enough. The Winnebago was no match for a golf cart, much less a police car. He'd play it cool. Perhaps it was something simple, like a burned out brake light or not signaling when he pulled out of the motel.

"What's wrong?" Allie asked as Drew maneuvered the big rig over to the shoulder and rolled down the window.

"I'm not sure," Drew replied, trying not to alarm her. "But we're being pulled over."

He saw terror in her eyes.

"Just relax. I'm sure it's nothing."

Somehow, she knew he was wrong.

FORTY THREE

Of all sad words of tongue and pen,
the saddest are these: it might have been.
— John Whittier

The unmarked dark blue Crown Victoria pulled to a stop behind the Winnebago and Drew watched in the side view mirror as a tall, rather large figure emerged and walked towards him. The man was wearing plain clothes-- grey slacks, a dark blue windbreaker with an official-looking emblem of sorts on the left breast, and those ubiquitous Ray Bans. He looked like a cop.

"Good afternoon, sir. May I see your driver's license, please?"

Drew pulled out his wallet and handed the officer a driver's license bearing the name Chris Woods. "I wasn't speeding was I?" Drew said.

"No sir, you weren't. Would you please step out of the vehicle for me?"

"Why?" Drew asked.

"Sir, please step out of the vehicle." The officer's tone was curt. He looked over at the passenger's seat. "Ma'am, I'll need you to step out, too."

Drew resisted. "I'm not stepping out until you tell me why?"

"Sir, if you refuse to step out of the vehicle, then I'll have no choice but to arrest you for resisting my lawful order. Do you understand?"

It sounded circular. "What lawful order? You haven't told me why you want me to step out of the vehicle?"

"Sir, it is against the law to drive a vehicle with an invalid driver's license. In accordance with the DC Code, section 9-211, a driver may be detained, and a vehicle searched, under such a circumstance. Now, if you would please step out of the car."

“What do you mean, *invalid* driver’s license?”

“Sir, this driver’s license isn’t yours.”

“Yes it is.”

“Sir, please step out of the vehicle.” He focused on Allie. “You too, ma’am.”

As Drew stepped out he flashed Allie a look that seemed to say, 'just do what he says.'

Drew faced the officer. "Would you please tell me what this is all about?"

The officer guided Drew around until he was staring at the side of the Winnebago squarely. "Put your arms up where I can see them," he ordered.

Drew slowly lifted his arms. He felt caught.

The officer grabbed Drew's right arm, pulled it down and to the rear, and slapped a handcuff on Drew's wrist. A second later and Drew's left hand was behind his back, cuffed to his right hand. "Keep facing the vehicle," the officer ordered.

Drew was in disbelief. They couldn't have been found, could they? "What are the cuffs for?" he called back over his shoulder, his voice one octave short of frantic. His mind raced in panic.

The officer was now walking forward towards the cab.

Drew thought about yelling to Allie, telling her to run, but he couldn't take the chance. There was no telling what the officer might do if she did. Would he shoot her?

As she walked around the front of the Winnebago, Allie was surprised to see the officer waiting for her. In the background, she saw Drew facing the Winnebago, his hands cuffed behind his back. Her heart jumped.

The officer grabbed Allie by the right arm and quickly slapped a set of cuffs on her. He pushed her next to Drew.

"Turn around," he ordered Drew.

Drew turned and faced the officer.

Allie spoke out, "Why are we handcuffed?"

"You're under arrest for kidnaping and murdering Mr. Tony Moretti. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You

have..."

The shock was so deep that neither of the two prisoners heard the rest of their Miranda rights, and as Drew looked over at Allie, he saw tears starting to form in her eyes, her world completely collapsed. If only he could throw his arms around her and hug her tight. Instead, he just looked at her as if to say 'I'm so sorry.'

Minutes later, they were sitting in the backseat of a police car that was so dark it took more than a minute for their eyes to adjust.

Allie spoke first, her voice shaky. "Drew, what happened? How did they find us?"

"If I knew that, we wouldn't be here," he answered, trying not to sound too flip. "It doesn't make sense."

"So what happens next?"

"I imagine we'll be taken to the nearest police station, fingerprinted, photographed, and put in jail." Drew paused to think. "Then, I'm sure they'll have lots of questions for us, like why we handcuffed Tony to that hotel bed and why we're not dead."

"What should we tell them? The truth?"

Drew shook his head in the darkened back of the police car. "No. Admit nothing, deny nothing. Make no comments."

"Why? People will believe us. If we don't say anything, people are going to think we're guilty. We didn't kill Tony."

There was truth to her words, Drew knew. The guilty remain silent, hoping for the Dream Team, while the innocent want to speak out, to proclaim their innocence. Neither knew, however, that their fate would not force them to face that decision.

"But we did put the Rophynol in his drink, and we did handcuff him to the bed," Drew whispered.

Allie started to cry, which made Drew feel even worse. He had failed her like he had failed Lori and Luke... maybe worse. At least Lori and Luke's pain ended after minutes in the car. Allie's pain was bound to last the rest of her life.

"I guess this means I won't be getting my bonus," Allie remarked, trying to inject humor into a humorless situation. Her voice was thick with sorrow.

He wished her biggest problem was a bonus. Worse, he felt completely responsible. He should have never suggested doing anything illegal. Plus, he had made it sound like a piece of cake, that they were smart enough to pull it off... too many pros and not enough cons. And that had given her too much hope... false hope, it appeared. What else could she have said but 'let's do it.' Perhaps he should have just told her he loved her? Would she have settled for that? Would finding out about her mom have mattered to her anymore? Would she have thrown her arms around him and told him she loved him and wanted to have a family with him?

His chest tightened.

After losing Lori and Luke, he never wanted to be one of those people who live their life thinking 'would've, could've, should've.' Instead, he wanted to live with no regrets. But now, he not only had regrets, he had huge regrets... mostly for what he'd done to Allie.

His chest was heaving now. And with each rise and fall, he knew he blew it... for both of them. "I'll see if we can put the bonus in escrow," Drew responded, trying to contain his failure, trying to sound brave.

For the next couple of minutes they drove in silence, each thinking about what their arrest might mean and their next steps. Of course, Drew felt the worst for Allie. Giving up so much for the sake of justice sounded noble, but it was really just a waste. Justice was not going to prevail, he knew. And now, as they rode to the police station, he continued to kick himself. He should have done it alone, risking just himself. But stupidly, he'd dragged her into this. A flashing thought crossed his mind: perhaps he could plea bargain a lenient sentence for her in exchange for a guilty plea on his part. Then, at least, Allie might still have some chance at life and a family. As noble as that sounded, deep down he wished they'd be together.

"Is this police car strange to you?" she asked.

At first, he thought it was a stupid question. "What do you mean strange?"

"No door handles, no way to open the windows, the dark tint. I can't even see outside."

He looked around and realized she was right. It *didn't* seem like a normal police car. Even if the locks were controlled electronically from the front, most police cars had door handles. And windows that one could see out. But these windows were so darkly tinted that they couldn't even see out. Even the glass separating the front seat from the back was darkly tinted. In fact, they couldn't see out the front, out the sides, or out the back. They were in a box, as if someone didn't want them to see or be seen.

Drew wondered whether the officer up front could hear them. "Hey officer?" he yelled out.

There was no response. Drew used his head to bang on the panel separating the front and rear seats.

"What are you doing?" Allie asked.

"I want to ask him some questions."

"Why?"

"Because maybe we can get him to tell us what he knows, how they found us, what they know about us, things that can help us."

Again there was no response from the front.

Drew pressed his head against the side window attempting to look out. He saw a murky reflection. It wasn't a window at all. Rather, it was a darkened mirror. Drew pulled his feet onto the back seat, and pushed himself up and back, now attempting to look out the back window. It, too, was a darkened mirror.

"See anything?" Allie asked.

"Nothing. It's all mirrors. Kind of weird-- nobody can see in and we can't see out."

"Maybe it's a special car... you know, for high profile arrests."

"Maybe," Drew agreed. Their arrest would certainly be high profile. At the same time, he couldn't help but think their arrest wasn't normal. Why had only one policeman arrested them? That was strange. If the police had evidence on the two of them, an entire SWAT team should have been on hand to make sure they didn't escape. Plus, wouldn't a high ranking official want to be there, to take credit for the arrest? Somebody, Drew concluded, wanted their arrest to be quiet and low key.

Then the car picked up speed conspicuously, as if they were no longer in an urban area. Despite the shock of the arrest, Drew had been mentally tracking the journey. From the feel, he estimated they were traveling at least 70 mph, most likely on a highway.

"Seems like a long way wherever we're going," Drew commented.

Allie nodded. "I was thinking the Fairfax County police station. It was only a couple of miles from where we were arrested."

"Feels like we're heading north," Drew responded, basing his assessment on those same magnetic bearings that he'd used to navigate underneath the Chesapeake Bay. "And from our speed I'd bet we're on the beltway." By now they'd been in the car for over 15 minutes and he knew they weren't heading to a local police station.

"What's up north?"

"I don't know. Maybe the Montgomery County jail. That's where they put high profile criminals. Remember? Mike Tyson was there after he cold-cocked those two old men who rear-ended his Mercedes."

She nodded.

"Anyway, it definitely feels like we're heading north."

They continued on for another hour or so, at a constant high speed. By now, if indeed they were headed north, they had long passed the Montgomery County jail. They were going somewhere else. That's when Drew knew something wasn't right.

Every so often Allie would speculate as to where they were heading and what would happen to them. Drew would merely acknowledge her speculation with words like, "maybe" or "that's possible." The one thing he didn't want to do was worry Allie with his own idea-- that they were being taken to some remote area-- maybe the woods in West Virginia-- where they would be killed, just like Bob Grady. That was the only thing that made sense to Drew. That's why there had been just one arresting officer, that's why they couldn't see or be seen. The fact that the world thought them dead only served to further corroborate Drew's theory. Dead people weren't missed when later murdered!

A shiver went through Drew as this reality dawned on him. They were going to really disappear from the earth on this day, just as Allie's mom had done 36 years ago. And unlike Bob Grady, there would be no special bulletins, and no grim CNN announcement. After all, they were already dead... and their real deaths wouldn't be newsworthy. That's because nobody would ever know about it.

The thoughts blurred through Drew's mind like he imagined the trees blurring by. He hoped his father wouldn't try to find out what had happened to them. Or was it already too late for Jake? If this were happening to Drew and Allie, why wouldn't they seal the secret forever by taking out the Old Doctor, too? Or was it possible that Jake was already gone? Drew wished he'd phoned his Dad before they'd been pulled over.

The minutes flew by, as they tended to during the waning moments of life, and Drew began philosophizing, likening himself to a Jew being taken to Auschwitz by the Nazis. Was the U.S. being run by a couple of cold-blooded killers? Would he have to wait until he reached heaven for the answer?

Another 45 minutes went by, then the car noticeably slowed and made a cloverleaf turn to the right. It felt like they were exiting a highway. After a rolling stop, as if at a light or yield sign, the car turned right, and for the next ten minutes they traveled upwards, in a curving fashion, as if on a winding, mountainous road. It fit Drew's theory that they were heading to a

remote spot where they would die.

"I really do love you," Drew said as he looked over at Allie. "I'm really sorry this happened."

She sensed a sad finality in his tone. Her heart skipped. Then it dawned on her what he'd been thinking. That wouldn't happen, she told herself. They were under arrest, sure. But vigilantly justice didn't happen anymore, she told herself. Then she wondered if she really believed that. She felt naive. "I love you, too, Drew. I'll always love you. Don't be sorry for anything. You did your best and I love you for it. We're in this together."

Her words only made it harder for Drew. He realized, now, that she was the one with whom he was meant to grow old. That was the saddest part-- finally finding love and having it snatched away prematurely. Drew wondered what he'd done to deserve a second dose of such punishment.

Then, something happened that surprised even Drew. As the car slowed to a stop, he heard muffled voices. That seemed inconsistent with his theory. He had expected the car to stop, sure. But then the door would open and the driver would be standing in front of them, alone, his gun drawn, ready to unload it into them. And Drew expected all that to take place in a desolate area, far away from any other humans... where nobody could hear a tree fall or a human scream or love snuffed out like a candle.

Although he couldn't make out what was being said, knowing that others were around made Drew feel better. The worst kind of things happened, he knew, when others weren't around. That was the first rule of atrocities-- eliminate witnesses.

As the voices died, the car proceeded forward again, stopped, and the engine was turned off.

Whatever happens, I must be brave, Drew reminded himself. Allie deserves to know the man she loved was brave. No matter what happened, he wouldn't let his attitude taken. Attitude was the last human freedom.

In an instant the door was opened by the man who'd arrested them. "Follow me," he ordered. "And don't try anything funny. There are guards all around with orders to shoot if you do." The officer made it sound like they were in the middle of a high-security prison.

Drew and Allie stepped out of the car, expecting to see antiseptic grey buildings, twelve-foot tall wire fences topped by rolls of razor sharp barbed wire, and guard towers at every corner. But they saw none of that. Instead, as they looked around, they saw a mountaintop, in the clearing of a forest, with a sprawling, ranch-style house in front of them. To the right and to the left, other smaller houses-- cabins, really-- were tucked in among the oaks and poplars. It looked

like a rustic resort in the mountains, but posh as well. This cleared area was immaculately manicured, with blooming flower beds all around. Wherever they were, no expense on landscaping was spared. It looked like the finest country club. Paved blacktop paths, large enough for a golf cart and bicycles, and maybe even horses, meandered through the trees, connecting the main house and the other cottages. If it were a prison, it looked like one of those minimum security ones that housed graft politicians and Wall Street cheaters. Drew figured he could easily do 10-15 years here... so long as the croissants were fresh and the coffee from Starbucks.

Drew and Allie followed the officer up a flagstone walk and into the ranch-style house. A stone plaque was next to the front door with the name 'Aspen' chiseled into it.

The arresting officer led the two through the small foyer, through a wood-paneled hallway, and into a bright back room. In front of them, sunlight streamed through French doors that opened up onto a flagstone patio. Beyond the patio, Drew could see a putting green. It *was* some sort of a country club and he wondered whether tee times were difficult to get on weekends. At the same time, he craned his neck to look for tennis courts. Ten or 15 years would give him an opportunity to develop that two-handed backhand, he thought whimsically.

The officer re-frisked the pair, then removed their handcuffs. "Have a seat," he ordered, pointing to a tartan-plaid couch on the right, opposite the French doors. "But don't think about trying to leave," he added as he turned to leave, "because there are guards all around this place who have orders to shoot if you do." He said it as if to remind them that they weren't necessarily invited guests.

Drew wondered if there really were guards. If there were, their biggest task seemed like it should have been to prevent people from breaking *into* this place, rather than out. Why would anyone want to leave this country club of a prison? Could there be no skiing? Or maybe the coffee was instant? For shame.

They sat down on the firm, three-cushioned couch. To their right, on the far wall from the entrance, rose a handsome fieldstone fireplace with a thick, oak mantle. A collection of hand-carved three-mast sailing ships in delicate crystal bottles adorned the mantle. Above it, hung a painting of George Washington addressing the Continental Congress. It was something one expected to see in the White House or at Mount Vernon. Just where were they?

Mahogany bookshelves filled with leather-bound books were built into the walls on both sides of the fireplace. Whoever owned the place had quite a collection of what looked to be first edition books. On the walls throughout the room, plaques and posters hung, most of them political slogans from days long gone.

Directly opposite them, on the side of the room with the French doors, a large, S-shaped roll-top desk sat, its top open. It was a first class antique, Drew recognized, probably from the early 1800's, but maybe even earlier. In all of his antiquing treks, Drew had never seen a finer looking roll-top, nor one as old. Seeing a stack of papers on the leather inlay, Drew decided to

wander over and look them over. Maybe they'd provide a clue as to their whereabouts. As he reached the desk, he heard the door behind him open. Was the guard going to shoot him for leaving the couch?

He whirled to look.

So did Allie.

But there was no guard. Instead, a tall, athletic-looking man, dressed in a royal blue jogging suit with a round gold seal on the left breast, entered the room. Both Drew and Allie's jaws dropped.

FORTY FOUR

Reality can be beaten
with enough imagination...
--Anonymous

The tall, athletic-looking man spoke out heartily, "Hello Miss Morgan, Mr. Matthews."

Allie shook her head and blinked to make sure her ears and eyes weren't betraying her. It was President Jack Kurtz-- right there, coming through the door in his jogging suit, walking towards them.

As he walked towards Drew and Allie, the President extended his right hand in an offer to shake. A slight grin on his face made it appear he was pleased to see them.

Instinctively, Allie stood. Not knowing what else to do, Drew moved toward the President and grabbed his extended hand. He nodded slightly but said nothing.

Allie did the same.

"Welcome to Camp David," Jack added.

Camp David! Of course, thought Drew. All the cabins at Camp David were named after trees. Aspen was the President's main residence.

Allie and Drew looked at each other, neither knowing what to say.

Jack spoke out again. "Well, it's certainly a pleasure to finally meet the two of you face-to-face." Jack said it like he really meant it. "I was afraid that would never happen after your sailboat accident a couple days ago." Jack winked to signify he knew their secret. "Many times in my life I've wished I could just disappear like y'all tried to do. It was a good plan."

"How do you know about that?" Allie asked.

Jack rolled his eyes and laughed. "Because it's my job to know. You don't get to be President by being lucky. You need knowledge. Knowledge is power. Know your friends, know your enemies, and know the difference between the two. Sometimes that's the hardest

thing." Again he winked, as if to highlight that point, as if they might face that same dilemma.

"Which are we?" Drew asked, knowing the answer would go a long way to explaining why they were at Camp David.

"I hope we'll be friends," Jack said, simply.

"Why would we want that?" Drew asked.

"You mean besides the official Camp David windbreaker I give to all my friends at Camp David?" Jack paused to chuckle at his joke. He seemed loose and without a care in the world. That worried Drew.

Drew cracked a smile and nodded.

Before Jack could explain, Allie cut in. "Yeah? If you want us as friends," she said, making the quotes sign as she said 'friends,' "why were we brought here in secret, handcuffed in the back of a police car?"

Jack looked pained. "I'm sorry about that," he responded sheepishly. "But I had to do that. I had an important point to make."

"What point?" Allie asked curtly. She had all but forgotten she was talking to the President of the United States. She talked to him like he were common dirt, a murderer perhaps.

"The point that if I wanted to, I could have you arrested, tried, and convicted for kidnaping Tony Moretti. Maybe even murder. After all, you were the ones who put the Rophynol in him and handcuffed him to the bed."

"So why don't you?" Drew asked. He wasn't sure he liked the way Jack treated his so-called friends, windbreaker or no windbreaker. Somehow, Drew felt like they were about to be used.

"What good would that do?" Jack answered. "I don't want either of you to spend the rest of your lives in prison. Plus, you don't deserve that. You're better than that. I know you took Tony for good reason."

"Oh yeah, what's that?" Drew asked point blank. He wondered whether Jack Kurtz would admit aloud it was related to Melody Morgan.

But Jack didn't answer Drew's question. Instead, he continued with his original train of thought. "Unfortunately, you couldn't have known that kidnaping Tony would expedite his death and implicate the two of you in his murder."

Jack had said a mouthful there. Drew focused on the most salient point. "So you know Tony was murdered?"

Jack nodded. "Of course." But he didn't disclose how, or why, or the details of what he knew.

Drew decided on a longshot. "Were you the one behind that?"

The question caused an incredulous laugh to pop out of Jack. "Moi? Are you serious?" He shook his head at such a ludicrous question.

"Then who?" Drew asked, not amused by Jack's previous answer.

"The papers say it was a female brunette about 35 years old." Jack motioned to Allie with a push of his head. "Probably looked just like Allie but with a brunette wig."

Allie didn't like his answer. "I didn't kill him," she countered, her voice firm.

Jack smiled, hoping it would lighten the mood. He hadn't brought them to Camp David to fight. He decided to let them in on one of his secrets. "I know you didn't kill Tony," Jack responded, his tone now conciliatory. "And you couldn't have anticipated he was going to die when you took him back to that hotel room. 'Unforeseeable' is what Professor Quinn called it in Torts class, right Allie?"

Allie froze, unable to respond. She was transfixed, instead, on trying to understand how Jack Kurtz knew the name of her Torts professor at Georgetown.

Jack continued talking. "Tony was going to die no matter what. The fact you two got tangled up in it just made it that much more convenient and effective."

Drew spoke out, asking the obvious question. "If you weren't behind Tony's death, who was?" His patience was wearing thin and his voice showed this. "Who killed him?" he asked point-blank.

This time Jack answered the question without hesitation. "His classmate... Vic Graves."

Although Drew should have anticipated hearing this, there was no way to prepare for actually hearing the name said aloud, by the President of the United States, no less. Vic Graves! The Director of the FBI had killed the President's senior legal advisor. "How do you know Vic killed him?"

"Because I happen to know Vic Graves very well. And Vic's not a very nice man."

"But you are?" Drew asked. He wasn't satisfied with Jack's answer. It seemed too

convenient, and Jack seemed too smug, too self-serving.

"I think I am," Jack replied simply.

"So why was Tony murdered?" Drew asked. He wanted Jack to tell them that it was done to keep the secret about Melody Morgan from ever getting out.

"That's both simple and complicated," Jack answered, not tipping his hand in the least.

"Tell us and let us be the judge," Drew countered, once again unimpressed by Jack's answer.

Jack looked at Drew long and hard. "One reason was this: Tony knew too much and had to be silenced before you got to him. When Vic learned y'all were planning to isolate Tony, he put out the order to take him down." Jack's explanation was eerie sounding. He was talking like a Maffia don, not the President of the United States. He was also implying that Tony knew what happened to Melody Morgan and had to be silenced.

"Is that the simple answer or the complicated one?" Drew responded.

Jack smiled. "As unbelievable as it sounds, that's the simple answer."

"So what's the complicated answer?"

"The complicated answer is this: with Tony dead, there was one less person in the way to stop Vic from pulling off his coup."

A coup? In America? Allie repeated the thought in her mind. Coups happened in lawless dictatorial countries thousands of miles away. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Although it was nothing to smile about, Jack couldn't help himself. It did sound tongue-and-cheek to talk about a coup in America. "It's a long story," Jack responded. "But, in essence, I got myself in a little pickle. Both Tony and Vic wanted to be my VP. Two men, one slot. And unfortunately for Tony, Vic decided it was worth killing for. The bottom line was this: Vic figured the last man standing would get the job." Jack said it as if he were talking about a duel in the Old West. "The quest for power can do weird things to a person... especially a bad person like Vic."

"But not you, right?" Drew responded. He wasn't sure how to feel about Jack Kurtz... but he was convinced that Jack wasn't as choir-boy innocent as he tried to come across.

"I try my best to always do the right thing," Jack responded. "But, when all's said and done, and all the facts are out in the light, you can judge me for yourself. Sound fair?"

Drew nodded. A million or more questions were flowing through his head, but before he could verbalize even one of them, Jack was speaking again. "All this sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

Drew verbalized the thought that had been front and center in his head. "It's not as crazy as the idea of four Naval Academy midshipman killing a 24 year-old girl four days before graduation."

As Drew's words died, six eyes met at once. And the three brains behind those six eyes were all thinking the same thing-- the time was finally right to get to the heart of the matter, to the story of Melody Morgan.

Drew continued. "All this is tied into what happened to Melody Morgan on May 22, 1988, right?"

The President took a deep breath. He'd been waiting for this moment ever since that terrible night. He looked at Allie directly, as if to signify that his answer was more for her benefit, than Drew's. Then he nodded slowly.

As she watched the President's head bob up and down, in almost slow-motion, Allie felt a chill run through her. Then she felt herself go faint. Jack Kurtz was admitting his involvement in her mom's disappearance and death... point blank.

Drew thought back to the night he'd told Allie the theory about the four Middies and her mom. Was this some sort of trick? Why would Jack Kurtz admit to this? They had no evidence. He had to know that. Drew's heart took off. Perhaps Jack was admitting this because he knew he could admit it... because he wasn't worried about being held accountable... because Drew and Allie would never make it out alive to tell the rest of the world.

"Tell me what happened to my mother," Allie managed. Although she was light-headed, it came out almost like an order.

"It was an accident," Jack responded, his tone low, almost embarrassed.

"What do you mean *an accident*? What happened? I want to know everything."

"Then you better sit down." Jack motioned for Drew and Allie to sit back down on the leather couch. "Because it's a long story."

Jack pulled the chair from the desk and turned it around to face them. He sat and took a deep breath. Then he slowly recounted the story of that fateful night.

Drew and Allie listened wide-eyed as Jack described the partying at Rips, the set-up with the redhead, and the bet he and Vic made as they drove to the Thrift Inn. Finally Jack reached the part where they pulled over to help the blonde flagging them down on Collington Road.

“Her distributor was fried, so we offered her a ride and she accepted. We just wanted to help.” Then Jack’s voice became more subdued, like a man remembering an unpleasant memory. “Like many tragedies, it began completely innocent. We were in Tony’s camper van drinking beers, talking about war and peace and love. Your mom,” he said looking at Allie directly, “was fun and lively. I’ve never forgotten how relaxed she made me feel. You know how it is when you’re with somebody who seems to have life figured out— they’re carefree, like they know what’s really important. Anyway, that’s how your mom was. She had a way of putting you at ease.”

Allie nodded. She’d had always thought of her mom that way. At the same time, she was impatient with anticipation.

“So there we were,” Jack continued, “having fun, talking, drinking. Your mom even smoked a joint. She told us about the commune she lived on, the way everyone lived, and how peaceful and loving it was. Well, to make a long story short, the topic of sex came up, and Vic blurted out that Bob and I were still virgins. I guess he was trying to embarrass us or something, but the way it turned out, it backfired on him. Because shortly after that, your mom started coming on to me in the back of the camper.”

Allie interrupted him to clarify. “So, you were just riding around partying, and my mother came on to you in the back of this van after Vic Graves teased you about being a virgin?”

Jack nodded at her summation. “Your mother told me afterwards that she found virgins like me fascinating. I guess she thought it was special to be a person’s first,” Jack surmised.

Again, Allie couldn’t argue. It sounded like something she would have expected from her mother.

“Anyway, we were all pretty drunk, and one thing led to another, and, well ...” Jack hesitated to say it, “... your mom and I ended up having sex in the back of the camper.” Jack’s eyes honed in on Allie’s as if he were sorry that she had to hear that. “It was completely consensual, completely innocent,” he added quickly.

“And that was really your first time?”

Jack nodded uncomfortably and swallowed deeply. He didn’t like discussing his sexual history with the daughter of the only woman with whom he’d ever slept. *It was also my last time, he thought sadly to himself.*

Jack continued. “After your mom and I were done, she called Bob to the back of the van and they had sex, too.” Again, Jack felt embarrassed to tell Allie this.

But Allie wasn't embarrassed to hear it. All she wanted to hear was how her mother had died, and why.

“Again, I think it was the virgin-thing,” Jack added.

Allie nodded.

“So anyway, up to this point, it was like a fantasy come true that a 22 year-old can only dream about... at least for Bob and me. Whether your mom’s motivation was to conquer every virgin she came across, I never knew. All I can say is she really enjoyed physical love.” Once again Jack hoped he wasn’t sounding too base.

“I’ve heard my mom described as a free-love nymphomaniac,” Allie injected, as if to tell Jack that she didn't take offense with his description of her mother. Mostly, though, she said it to speed Jack up. She wanted to know how their fantasy love-fest had turned into the killing of her mother.

Jack sensed this and picked back up with the story. “Once Bob and your mom were done, Vic decided he wanted in on the fun so he went back there.”

Allie could envision Vic walking back there, expecting to do just what Jack and Bob had done.

“That’s when the trouble started,” Jack said, his tone even more subdued. “I don’t know exactly what went wrong, because I wasn't really paying attention to them. At one point, though, I did hear your mom say she wanted Vic. But as I’ve thought back to that night, I’ve come to the conclusion that Vic might have forced her to say that, probably to make sure we didn’t think anything was wrong back there. Anyway, the three of us were in the front of the van, talking, and listening to music, pretty much oblivious to what was happening in the back. I know I was still numbed by everything that had happened to me. Then, out of the blue, your mom shouted out... she told Vic to stop. When I turned and looked back, I heard Vic screaming. It sounded like he was going to explode. But before any of us could get back there and see what was happening, Vic hit her... hard.”

Jack paused. The hard part was coming up.

“Your mom’s head hit a sharp edge of a broken window crank and somehow it went into her, and ... she was dead, just that quickly.” He blinked his eyes noticeably as if to show how quickly it happened.

Jack left out the details of the window crank crushing through her eye and into the brain. That wasn’t something Allie needed to hear. He took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on her.

“It all happened so fast... too fast... and with the music so loud and all the beers we didn’t know what was happening until it was too late.” Jack looked into Allie’s eyes with pain

and sorrow. “The only thing comforting that I can tell you is that your mom didn’t suffer. She couldn’t have. It happened too quickly.” There were tears in Jack’s eyes. “I hope that helps.”

By now, tears had begun to stream down Allie’s face and Drew was holding her towards him. Just as Jack was describing it, she could envision her mother’s lifeless body in the van, never again to breath, or kiss her baby, or another virgin. What a terrible waste that was, all around. And she could see the four of them, too, gathered around her dead mother, scared and in disbelief.

“Did my mom stab Vic?” she asked.

Jack nodded. “I wish she would have killed him,” he mused.

And none of them doubted that Jack really meant that.

FORTY FIVE

And when man faces destiny,
destiny ends and man comes into his own.
-- Andr'e Malraux

Silence and sunlight filled the room as the three reflected on the story. It sounded the way Drew had expected-- innocent fun turned deadly. That's the way life was-- fun until someone got hurt... or killed. It was just like the time the drunken Senator had driven home from a festive Christmas Party and plowed into a pregnant mother and her six year-old.

Finally Allie spoke out. "What did you do with my mom?" she asked, her voice flat, as if drained of emotion.

"Well, as you can probably imagine," Jack answered, "we were about as scared as scared can be. Four days from graduation, thinking we had the world by the tail, and there we were at 1 am with a dead girl in Tony's van, beer cans all over, a couple of left over joints, and Vic with a stab wound and fingernail tracks in his back. The fact that three of us had sex with your mom didn't make it look any better, either."

Drew and Allie could picture the scene.

"It wasn't too hard to figure out that we had done something very wrong. Getting kicked out of the Academy was assured. Most likely, we'd end up in jail... drug possession, rape, murder, maybe all three. At least that's the way we figured it when we talked through it. And, unfortunately, we couldn't bring ourselves to go to the police and admit what we did." Jack swallowed hard, clearly troubled by that last fact. "So we did the only thing that we could do to save ourselves... we buried your mom's body and hoped we'd never get caught." Jack's head was hanging in clear shame.

Once again, the sound of silence permeated the room as all three digested the drama of the moment.

Allie interrupted the silence. "You said it was unfortunate you didn't go to the police and admit what happened, right"? Allie asked.

Jack nodded.

“Do you really wish you had gone to the police?”

Again Jack nodded. “For two reasons— one right and one selfish. One, it was the right thing to do. And, two, because if we had gone to the police, I might still be married and I might have a family.”

Now Allie was confused. “I don’t understand the connection,” she said.

Jack’s face grew long and sad. “Ever since that night, my life has been filled with profound guilt and sadness. I could never forget what happened to your mom.” Jack voice was soft, his words sorrowful. “And ever since, I’ve been unable to, um, perform... you know, sexually. That’s what caused my marriage to fail.”

It was just as Drew had theorized. At the same time Drew felt an immense sense of respect and admiration for this man before him. Obviously Jack Kurtz was a man of deep emotion. Ninety-nine percent of the people who do bad things are able to move on as if the events never happened. Only that one percent keeps hold. It’s a terrible burden, but it says a lot about a person, too.

Drew was well past thinking that this man would murder the two of them. But why was he disclosing all of this to them? Gratuitous admittances weren't the norm for politicians.

Neither Drew nor Allie knew how to respond to this latest revelation and a third round of silence permeated the room. The scene had turned into unbelievable revelations followed by digestive silences. Finally Jack looked up and spoke out. "I know how terrible the story about your mom must sound, Allie, but I hope you understand it started out innocently. We stopped to help your mom. We didn't have any intention beyond that. We certainly didn't intend for her to die... not even Vic. But once it did happen, there was nothing we could do to bring back your mom." His voice was barely audible.

It wasn't enough to justify what they'd done, Jack knew, but he wasn't finished either. His eyes moistened. “I know about the tremendous pain and suffering it’s been not having your mom around growing up. And I know that growing up with your grandmother wasn't always easy.”

As his words filled her head, she came close to shouting out that he had no idea how hard her life was. But before she could, he was speaking again.

"Believe me, Allie, if I could have given you your mom back, I would have. But obviously I couldn't. But I hope you know, I did everything I could to help you and your grandma," Jack said simply.

A chill went through Allie as a lifetime of memories cascaded through her head: the dresses, the birthday cakes, the Thanksgiving dinners, the Christmas presents, her Easy Bake Oven! Jack Kurtz was indeed the one behind all that... as Drew had correctly theorized, Jack Kurtz, the President of the United States, was her guardian angel!

"Are you saying you were the one behind all those gifts and presents to me while I was growing up?"

The quickness of her question took Jack by surprise. He fixed his eyes on hers and nodded. His face was solemn.

The other mysterious happenings filled her mind. "And you were the one who got me the scholarships to Notre Dame and Georgetown and provided the money for my grandmother's nursing home and her eye surgery?"

Jack's eyes said yes to this too.

"Her funeral, too?"

Jack nodded modestly as his chest tightened and tears formed in his eyes. He let out a few deep blows.

Allie's head was spinning and she took a deep breath.

Jack explained. "After your mother died, I felt responsible for your well-being, Allie, and from that day on, I made a commitment to do everything I could to help you. I hope you understand."

She managed a slight nod.

"And I hope you know that one of the greatest joys of my life has been watching you grow into the person you are today."

Although a great mystery in her life was solved, Allie felt violated as well. The idea that Jack Kurtz had been watching her from the outside, her entire life, made her feel like a real-life Truman Show. But the feeling was completely overshadowed by her feelings of love and sorrow for Jack Kurtz. No doubt he was sincerely sorry for what had happened, and no doubt he'd done everything within his power to make it up to her. He was her real-life guardian angel, and as she'd always believed, her mother was the force behind that.

A sense of calm enveloped her and she took some more deep breaths.

Jack spoke out. "Allie, I can't sit here in front of you and claim complete innocence for what happened to your mom that night. I was there. Could I have done something different? Could I have been quicker to intervene? Those are questions I've been asking myself for 36

years. Obviously if I knew what was going to happen, I would have done something different. All I can say to you here and now is that I'm terribly sorry. I'd do anything to give your mother back." His voice broke up as tears fell from his eyes.

Nodding back at him, Allie felt the deepest pity imaginable. He'd obviously suffered immensely because of that night. She rose from the couch and began to walk towards him. As she approached, he stood up, unsure what she was going to do. He had a fleeting thought that she might grab the gold letter opener from the desk and stab him, just like her mother had been stabbed. If that happened, so be it, he thought. But deep down, he knew that was not his fate... nor hers.

A foot away now, Allie threw her arms around him and buried her head into his chest, hugging him like a daughter would hug her father. Weak-kneed, Jack hugged back.

Allie whispered into him. "I love what you did for my grandma and me. You saved our lives more times than you'll ever know."

Her words caused more tears in Jack's eyes to cascade down his cheeks and he erupted with more emotion than ever. As 36 years of penned up guilt and sadness were freed, his body lifted up, as if winged. The death of Melody Morgan was his saddest moment in life, but this was clearly his happiest.

Allie continued to hug him tightly. "It's okay," she said to him softly. "I forgive you. It wasn't your fault. I love you like the Dad I never had." Then she released herself and drifted a step back from him.

As he watched the two of them together, Drew was sure they were safe with Jack. This man loved Allie with the obviousness of a father.

"Whew!" Jack exhaled out as he sucked the air and wiped his face. "I knew this would be hard, but I never thought it would be anything like this." His emotions were in check now. "Thank you," he added, again choking up slightly.

Drew, who had been a silent observer in the wild chain of events, injected himself into the conversation. "Look, Mr. President, if I may, I'd like to --"

Jack interrupted. "Please call me Jack."

Why not? thought Drew. The night had been bizarre enough already. "Okay, Jack. Now I know Allie probably has a lot more questions for you, but I've got a few of my own that I'd like answered."

"That's one of the reasons I brought you here... to have your questions answered," Jack

replied. His emotions were fully back in check.

"Okay," Drew replied, "what about us?"

"What about you?"

"Why did you bring us here? And why are you telling us what happened to Allie's mom. Why now? Why here?" His tone was warm and friendly now. He couldn't imagine feeling anything else towards Jack Kurtz.

"I'm telling you because Allie deserves to know what happened to her mom. I've always wished for her to know. Why did I bring you here? Because I know you're safe here. Why now? Mostly because I want you to be here when the shit hits the fan."

"With Vic Graves?" Drew said.

Jack nodded. "Like I said, I believe Vic's in the process of putting together a plan he thinks will force me out of the presidency and him into it."

"I don't see how Vic Graves can blackmail you," Drew stated, "especially since he's the guilty one." Drew couldn't help but wonder whether everything Jack Kurtz had told them was entirely true. Was it possible that Jack was cleverer than they could have imagined? Could he be telling them a false story about what happened to Melody Morgan? Lying about everything?

Jack shook his head and gave them a canned answer. "After we buried her, I felt pretty secure that she'd never be found. What scared me was the fact that three of us knew where she was buried. That made us vulnerable to each other." As his words trailed off, Jack laughed aloud, as if he knew a secret.

"What's so funny?" Allie asked.

"What's funny is the way everything has worked out because of that."

"How's that?" Allie asked.

Jack went on to explain the chain of events with Tony's blackmail. What was more important, however, was what Jack didn't tell them. He didn't tell them that allowing Tony to blackmail him had set in motion the chain-of-events that would lead to this future that was happening...

"I always knew there was something wrong between you and Tony. It all makes sense now," Drew remarked. Drew thought of it another way. "What about Bob?" Drew asked, changing the conversation.

"Are you asking if Vic killed Bob, too?" Jack responded.

Drew nodded.

“Having known Bob almost my entire life, I know he would never kill himself,” Jack answered. “But, obviously I don’t have any proof.” If I were betting, though, I’d say Vic forced Bob to tell him where we buried Melody and then he killed him. Vic knew that with Bob and Tony both gone, there would be nothing to stop him from blackmailing me.”

“Did you ever think Vic might do something like that?”

Jack shrugged, and followed it with another canned answer. “I guess I never wanted to believe that Vic would go that far. But I should have known better. Because one thing’s clear: Vic Graves will do anything to become President. The man has no conscience, no regard for others. And he’s a smart little ambitious shit, too-- smart in the sense that he always manages to land on his feet and get what he wants. He knows he’s not electable on his own. But he also knows I’m unbeatable. I hope that doesn’t sound too conceited, because that’s not my point. The fact is, this next election is a lock. And Vic intends to do more than just ride along on my coattails... he thinks he’s going to take the coat from me.”

On its face, it sounded unbelievable. But then again, everything about the past three weeks was unbelievable. And two of the highest ranking officials in the government were dead... that was fact. When they factored that into the equation, Jack’s prediction didn’t sound so unbelievable anymore.

“And there’s nothing you can do to stop him?” Allie injected.

Jack flashed a wry smile her way. “I hope you listened carefully. I said Vic *thinks* he’s going to do all that. The truth is, he’s going to fail miserably.” Jack didn’t seem the least bit worried about Vic.

“How do you know?” Drew asked.

Jack smiled. “Because the two of you are going to show Vic that there’s no way he can win.”

“How are we going to do that?” Drew asked.

Jack explained the plan he’d formulated. At the end, he smiled at Allie. “I was there when we buried your mother, Allie. Vic wasn’t. Don’t forget that. I know what happened that night. Vic doesn’t. And that means a lot, a helluva lot. Just wait and see. I told you, Vic doesn’t know shit. Just watch as I prove it. Trust me, okay? I know what I’m doing.”

What choice did they have? Anyway, Jack had everything to lose. They were feeling

lucky to be alive to see the climax.

Then an even stranger smile came across Jack's lips. "The one thing about Vic is that he hates to lose a bet... especially to me. That's because he's never won a bet with me... never. In fact, sometimes I think he's doing all this out of spite and revenge as much as greed. He just can't stand the fact that he's never beat me. And this is how he intends to get revenge, by beating me at the ultimate bet."

Drew and Allie listened in disbelief. Would a man kill two classmates and blackmail his way to the Presidency out of spite and revenge?

"Unfortunately for Vic, he won't win this time, either," Jack said with supreme confidence. "Then, the shit's going to hit the fan."

Allie was even more confused.

To Drew, it sounded like some penultimate Pandora's box of a sting... too outrageous to believe, yet too tempting to walk away from... as if Jack were giving Vic no choice but to take the bait, and then slamming shut the box with Vic locked in it and Pandora's secret remaining safe. And while they didn't understand the details, both Drew and Allie knew they'd never bet against Jack Kurtz.

"I'm still not exactly sure how this is all going to work out, Jack," Drew said, "but I'll do whatever you ask."

Jack looked at Allie as if to ask if she was in it with them. She nodded. Then Jack escorted Drew and Allie to the cabin next door-- Maple.

"You should find all the amenities you'll need," Jack stated like a bellhop. "There are sandwiches and fruit in the fridge, beer, and even a bottle of champagne. If you need anything, just pick up the phone and my staff will take care of you."

Jack led them through the kitchenette and into the bedroom. "You've got fresh clothes in the closet," Jack said motioning to his right, "and toiletries in the bath behind you."

Drew nodded as Allie leafed through the closet. "Where are the windbreakers?" she asked with a smile and a wink.

Jack returned her smile. "When this is all over, Allie, believe me, you'll have enough memories of Camp David to last you a lifetime." Only Jack could understand the significance of his prophetic words.

Jack looked at the beds. "I hope the two single beds aren't going to be a problem. This was Hillary's cabin. She had it remodeled after the Monica-thing. She wanted to make sure Bill didn't get any ideas and try and slide in next to her."

“We’ll manage,” Allie responded, walking over to the beds. She pushed the one on the right against the other one, making a single bed. Then she winked at Drew. “Don’t fall into the crack,” she commanded.

“If I do, you’re coming with me,” he responded. “Because I intend to never let go of you.”

Jack smiled back, happy for Drew.

“You two get some rest and come see me later.”

They each smiled at the man who had affected their lives in ways they could never have imagined.

Then Jack went off. Jack had other business to do. He had a helo trip to take.

FORTY SIX

Life is not always a matter of holding good cards,
but sometimes, playing a poor hand well.
-- Jack London

They made wild, passionate love that afternoon, like lovers who intended to erase all regrets from their past, present, and future.

“Wow... that was even better than the first time,” Allie remarked, never happier.

Drew smiled at her. He couldn't remember ever being happier. After all they'd been through he even felt Lori would understand. “If *Washingtonian* magazine gets word of my improvement, I might move up the list,” he said. “That should make a lot of women in D.C. happy.”

Allie perked up. “Hey now, Drew, don't go talking like that. From this moment on, there is only one girl in your life, and I am her. Don't you forget that.”

Drew sat up in the bed and held Allie's hands in front of him. “Allie, I never thought I'd ever say these words again in my life. I love you more than anyone and anything in the world. Will you marry me?” Tears welled in his eyes.

Her own tears fell down her cheeks before the reply came from her lips. “I love you, too, Drew. And yes, I'll marry you. Anytime, anywhere, anyplace. Thank you.” She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. *Thank you, mom*, she whispered softly. *Thank you for being the voice inside me.*

She released herself. “So where's the ring?” she asked, her mood now different. She sounded almost bitchy.

He was shocked. “What ring?”

“My engagement ring. Don't tell me you don't have a ring with you.”

He looked at her like she'd grown a second head, this one bitchy. “When have I had a

chance to go engagement ring shopping? The past three weeks I've been running around with you, drugging the President's Chief-of-Staff, running from hotels with dead men chained to the beds, drowning in the Bay with you, and taking a death ride to Camp David with you." He was smiling.

She laughed.

And they made love again and fell into a deep, dreamy sleep.

Later that day, Drew startled awake like a man who'd heard rain and remembered leaving his car window down. Only there was no rain outside, nor his car. He sat straight up and looked at his watch. It was 7:40 pm. They'd been in bed for nearly five hours.

Allie tossed when she heard him get out of bed. "What's the matter?"

"I need to call my Dad," he responded, stepping into his boxers. "I forgot all about him."

She nodded as Drew picked up the phone next to the bed and punched out the ten digit number. He heard only rings. And with each successive ring, Drew grew increasingly nervous. Finally, after four rings, the answering machine kicked in. Not knowing who might later listen to the message, Drew hung up without leaving one.

"No answer?"

Drew shook his head. He was visibly upset. The Old Man was home nine out of ten days at 7:30 in the evening, usually watching Big Bang reruns. Drew went to the closet and put on a pair of the Camp David sweats.

"Where are you going?"

"Over to talk to Jack about my Dad."

"Give me a minute," she said, getting out of bed, "I'll go with you."

She threw on a pair of the sweats and the two made their way to Aspen. A secret service agent opened the door for them.

"We'd like to see the President," Drew stated.

"Yes, sir. He instructed me to direct you to the back room, where you were earlier. Do

you know the way?"

Drew nodded. "Thank you." He and Allie walked through the paneled hallway to the sunlit back room where Jack had surprised them earlier that day. They heard laughter and then Jack's voice through the cracked door.

"I knew you needed that Queen, dammit."

As they reached the doorway, Drew knocked firmly.

"Who is it?" Jack called out in a female voice.

More laughter came from inside the room.

Drew poked his head through the doorway and looked in. What he saw almost caused him to fall down.

"There's my boy," Jake called out toasting his glass of scotch upwards at Drew. "Did you have a nice nap?" He winked.

"Dad!" Drew rushed in and threw his arms around the Old Man.

Jake hugged him back as Allie joined them in the room. "Let go of me, boy. She's the one I want to hug." He threw his arms around Allie and drew her in to him. "I sure missed you," he said as he squeezed her.

"How the hell did you get here?" Drew asked.

The Old Man released Allie and motioned to Jack. "A helicopter landed in my backyard a couple hours ago. Scared the shit out of me. I thought the goddam Russians were invading so I ran into the den and grabbed my .22. When I got back to the deck, President Jack Kurtz was stepping out of the helo waving a white flag." Jake laughed. "I tell you, Drew, you ain't lived 'til you've seen the President stepping out of Marine One in your backyard waving a white flag at you."

Everyone was smiling, picturing the scene.

"I didn't know what to think. I mean, was he surrendering to me? Arresting me? Or kidnapping me?"

"You mean old-man-napping," Drew clarified.

The Old Man smirked, then continued explaining. "So anyway, I put down the gun, we sat down on the patio, and Jack told me the whole story... point blank... no bullshit. Then he told me you and Allie were up here and he wanted me to come up, too. I'm thinking to myself, if this

man is lying, at least he's got balls doing it. Being 75 years old, what the hell did I have to lose? So I grabbed my camera, jumped in the helo, and here I am. Three scotches later and I've got the Wizard of Washington 45 points down." Jake took a breath. "He may be a helluva President, but he's no gin player."

Jack jumped in. "Don't get too far ahead of yourself there, Captain. The night's still young." Jack looked at Drew and Allie. "Two more scotches and I'll have him right where I want him."

The two were talking like old shipmates.

"Well I'm just glad you're safe," Drew said.

"I feel the same way about you two," the Old Man replied. "After hearing what happened to Bob yesterday, I was wondering if I'd ever see you two again." There was a pause. "You ever heard of a telephone, boy?" he asked.

Drew looked embarrassed, like a teen scolded in front of friends. "I forgot," he answered, using his same lame excuse from when he was a kid. "We got a little busy," he tacked on.

The Old Man shook his head, just like he used to do when Drew was a boy. "I heard what you were doing," the Old Man shot back. "My gin opponent filled me in. But what about earlier this afternoon? You could've called before that helo scared the shit out of me. Do you know how close I came to unloading my .22 into the President? That would've put me right next to Oswald in the history books."

Drew continued to look embarrassed. "I was busy this afternoon," he said, motioning towards Allie.

The Old Man winked at his son. Allie was as good an excuse as there ever was.

Allie spoke out. "Drew and I are getting married," she announced. Her smile was as wide as her happiness.

"Get over here young lady and let me be the first to congratulate you," the Old Man shouted, unable to contain his happiness. His eyes misted up as he hugged her. "I'm so happy for both of you."

Jack offered his congratulations as well. "This could be one of the happiest endings I could think of," he stated, "so long as everything goes right with Vic."

Vic. There was still Vic.

Drew looked at Jack directly. "Any word on Vic?" he asked.

"I sent for him an hour ago, when I got back up here with Mr. Gin Rummy. Vic's on his way up as we speak. My source tells me he's never seen Vic so happy."

"That's bad," Allie responded.

Jack shook his head. "No. It's good. Because the happier he is, the farther he'll have to fall." Jack sounded confident.

For almost an hour, the four talked, about nothing and everything-- love and marriage, friends and families, and what they would do when this was all over... the future. Though Jack purposefully steered the conversation away from Vic, he did provide some direction. They were all to stay clear of the room, except Allie. "This is between Vic and me and Allie," he told them. "Trust me." Then he whispered some words to Allie that made her face scrunch.

Drew watched her. She was deep in thought about whatever Jack had whispered to her.

As for Allie, while she trusted Jack, she was also scared by what he whispered. She also thought it ironic that, other than Jack, she would have the only other role in this last scene. Her comfort was grounded in the fact that she wouldn't have to be an Asian waitress or a sexy author. She just had to be Allie Morgan, daughter of Melody Morgan, and most importantly, future wife of Drew Matthews. And her only actions would be to do what she felt-- no acting, no pretending. "You're going to help me finish what your mom started," Jack had whispered in her ear. "Don't think about it, just follow your instincts... you'll know what to do. Trust me. You'll know."

About an hour later, a call from the front gate informed them that Vic Graves had arrived. Jack smiled as if looking forward to the confrontation.

"Places everyone," Jack announced aloud, sounding like a movie director. Everyone left the room and went into the adjoining dining room, out-of-sight, but within hearing range. Only Jack, it seemed, knew the script.

Without knocking, Vic opened the six paneled front door of Aspen. "Where's the President?" he asked the secret service agent who greeted him.

"He's back in his office, sir," the agent responded, noting the FBI Director's access badge. "He's expecting you."

Vic nodded and walked down the paneled hallway to Jack's office. His mind was racing

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with excited anticipation-- the prospect of ruling an entire country powerful. He couldn't wait to see Jack's face when he described the location of the body and disclosed his knowledge of the buried rings. Then he'd make it clear that he was to be VP. It was either that or Vic would cut a deal and expose the secret for all to see.

The door to the office was cracked open and Vic entered without as much as a knock. He found Jack sitting with his feet propped up on a corner of the desk, gazing out the French doors onto the patio and putting green in the background. He looked to be daydreaming.

Hearing footsteps from behind, Jack startled, as if he couldn't imagine anyone so bold or ignorant to enter his office without so much as a knock. He swiveled around to see the bulldog figure of Vic moving towards him.

Vic stopped a foot short of Jack's desk.

Unfazed, Jack motioned towards the tartan couch. "There you are. Have a seat, Vic." Then, wasting no time with small talk, Jack said, "So, you went and killed Bob, too, didn't you?"

The question shocked Vic. Just what did Jack know to ask a question like that? Was it some sort of trap? A recording device in the room, perhaps? None of that mattered, Vic told himself, he intended to play it cool... very cool. After all, he was in control. He had the evidence.

"I don't know what you're talking about?" Vic responded, innocently enough.

Jack laughed. "Oh come on, Vic. Give me a break and don't play games with me. I know everything."

"You know nothing," Vic shot back, forgetting about keeping his emotions in check.

"So I'm supposed to believe that Bobbie-boy went up to your cabin and blew his brains out all by himself?"

Vic nodded. "That's sure what it looks like."

"I'm sure that's *what it looks like*, because I'm sure *you* made it look that way."

"Look, Jack, I came here in good faith. But I don't like your tone or your accusations. If anyone should be accusing anyone, it should be me accusing you."

"Explain that one to me, Vic."

"If anyone killed Bob, it was you, Jack. You may not have pulled the trigger, but you

might as well have. You drove him over the edge."

"You sound like you have it all figured out, Vic. So, tell me, why would I want to kill anyone, much less my senior legal advisor, my classmate, my boyhood friend?"

"Perhaps because he knew a dark secret about you and you were scared that secret might get out?" Vic suggested.

Jack laughed as if to show Vic he wasn't scared. "What secret, Vic? The one of you killing Melody Morgan?"

Vic laughed back at Jack as if trying to trump Jack's laugh. "Me?" Vic responded incredulous. If there were a recording being made, he wanted to sound shocked, as if he'd just been struck by lightning. "You wish it were me, Jack. I know all about what happened that night 36 years ago... you and Tony and Bob raped that girl, murdered her, and then buried her body. And I can prove it."

Jack sensed that Vic was putting on his act for the benefit of any recording devices in the room. "You can stop with the Academy Award performance Vic," he said, "it's just you and me in this room, no recording devices, nothing."

"I'm just telling the story like it was told to me, Jack... by Bob. And I've got the evidence to back me up."

Jack played along. "Humor me, Vic. What exactly did Bob *tell* you?"

Vic was enjoying the way things were going. Jack had fast-forwarded the meeting to everything that mattered. In just minutes, Jack would be back-peddling, maybe even groveling.

Vic answered. "On Saturday night, four days before graduation, you and Tony and Bob picked up a girl whose car had broken down outside of Bowie. Then, you and Bob had sex with her. Tony wanted to, but she refused. So Tony forced himself on her while you and Bob stood by and did nothing. A fight broke out. Tony hit her. She hit her head and died. Then the three of you buried her body and hoped you'd never get caught."

"Come on Vic, that's a bunch of crap and you know it. We both know what happened that night. Do you really believe anyone's going to believe you?"

"They will when they see the supporting evidence."

"And that would be?" Jack said with a leading tone.

"The body, and the three Academy rings buried with it," Vic said, supplying the answer. He raised his eyebrows and smirked.

Jack laughed again. Vic didn't expect a laugh out of Jack right then. He had expected Jack's face to fall.

Jack spoke out. "What'd you do, Vic, put the gun to Bob's head and force him to tell you where her body is?"

Vic shook his head sideways. "Bob told me because he was scared of you, Jack. That's why he went and hid out in my cabin. He was afraid you were going to kill him. He told me the whole story, in case anything happened to him. He said it would prove you had a motive."

Jack laughed. Vic was turning the world upside down and inside out. He was the innocent one, and everyone else was guilty. The time had come, Jack decided, to return normalcy to the world. "I guess you don't know about my ring, do you?" Jack said.

"What about your ring?"

FORTY SEVEN

“Plastics.”
--The Graduate.

Jack eyed Vic like a man who knew a good secret he just couldn't wait to share. “Oh, that's right... just like Bob and Tony, you never knew that part of the story. When my ring came from Balfour before Ring Dance they screwed up the engraving of my last name... they put the “z” before the “t” in my last name.”

Vic was confused, trying to understand Jack's point. So what if his name was misspelled on the underside of the ring. It still would have said, ‘Jack Kurzt.’ That was close enough... beyond a reasonable doubt.

Jack continued to explain, “Balfour sent me a refund to have the engraving fixed. Funny this is, after the jeweler in Annapolis grinded out the name, he told me his engraver was on vacation and wouldn't be back 'til the following week. And to make a long story short, I never went back. I already knew it was my ring and it saved me 50 bucks.”

Vic felt ill. Was this a bluff? If so, it was a helluva bluff.

Jack continued, “You know what else is amazing, Vic? You and I were both born in September, so we have the same birthstone— a Sapphire. So, that ring down there without any name in it, with the blue Sapphire, could just as well be yours... funny huh?”

Something wasn't right with Jack's explanation. Vic seized on it. “If that's true, then how was Tony able to blackmail you?”

Jack smirked. “Tony was never really able to blackmail me.”

Vic's face scrunched, not understanding. “You said Tony blackmailed you for years.”

“You know what's funny about blackmail, Vic?” Jack asked rhetorically. “Sometimes the blackmailer doesn't know when he's the one actually being used.”

Vic was most confused. Jack had never used Tony.

Jack continued to explain. "Tony *thought* he was blackmailing me, Vic. But the fact is, I let him think that. He thought he could blackmail me... so I let him think that. Get it?"

To Vic, it sounded like convenient, circular bullshit Jack had fabricating in his mind. Of course Tony was able to blackmail Jack. Vic didn't respond. His mind was running.

"The truth of the matter is," Jack continued to explain, "I never had anything to fear from Tony. But I felt sorry for him, mostly, so I helped him out. If he had just come to me nicely and asked for help, I would have helped him. But he figured blackmail would be better. Truth is, in the end, I used him more than he ever thought he was using me."

"Bullshit, Jack. That's complete unfettered bullshit and you know it."

"Call it what you want Vic. But it's the truth. I used Tony and in the end I got to see his true colors... and yours, too. I always knew the two of you were unworthy shits who never deserved to wear Academy rings."

Vic felt his world falling apart. But he stayed on the offensive. "You're just trying to wiggle out of a situation that doesn't have any wiggle room. I've got you and you know it."

"I don't need to wiggle out of anything," Jack responded, "because if the secret of Melody Morgan gets out, your life is as good as over."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means this: the only one who could ever get hurt by disclosing the location of Melody's body is you, Vic."

Vic scoffed a laugh. "Right, Jack. You're bluffing... and lying."

"Me? Bluffing? Lying? An officer and a gentleman like me? Are you sure, Vic? Maybe we should bet? Just like we bet on Herndon? Remember? And that redhead at Rips? And getting laid first? You sure you want to bet? You know you're track record betting against me isn't real good." Jack was smiling that way Vic hated. It was just how he'd smiled after Herndon, and the redhead, and Melody.

Unsure how to respond, Vic had no recourse but to play the cards in his hand... win or lose. He couldn't fold... not to something this ridiculous. If it were seven card stud, Jack's four up cards would have looked something like 'ace high and nothing else.' Jack was obviously bluffing with his three down cards.

Vic reached inside his jacket under the right lapel. As he did, Jack's eyes followed his hand, wondering if Vic would pull his gun. Instead, Vic pulled his cell phone out.

He held up the phone before Jack's eyes. "One phone call, Jack. That's all it would take. With one call I could have an FBI team, with the press in tow, out to where you three buried her body."

Jack just shook his head. "You mean where *you* and Tony and Bob buried her body. In fact, that's why you know where her body is... because you helped bury her."

"You're bluffing, Jack.

Jack shook his head as if pained by Vic's lack of trust. "You know what?" he said. "I knew you'd never believe this. So, I was forced to do something else that you'd have no choice but to believe."

Vic felt himself dizzy. What now? What else could Jack have possibly done? And what could have possessed him to do something more? It didn't make sense.

Jack continued. "Remember the movie, 'The Graduate'? Remember the most famous line of the movie?"

Vic wasn't amused. His blood was boiling and nothing he could say seemed good.

"Plastics," Jack said simply, answering his own question. "That was the advice that old man gave Dustin Hoffman about the future... 'Plastics', he said."

Vic mind raced. *Plastics?* So what? What did that have to do with anything?

Jack continued to speak. "Plastics were the future. And you know why, Vic? Because plastics never wear out."

Vic still didn't understand.

Jack put it in real terms. "You really should have been there with us, Vic. It was the scariest, saddest moment of my life... the absolute worst. There we were, at 3:30 in the morning, digging a deep grave to bury an innocent girl you killed because you wanted to stick your dick in her and she didn't want you to. But you weren't even there... no, you were back at the Thrift Inn, all pissed off, trying to stop the bleeding in your back. But I was, I was thinking to myself how fucking crazy it was. We were supposed to be officers and gentlemen. We were supposed to be the ones who did the right thing, the ones who swore to protect and defend. Yet there we were, out in the boonies digging a grave to bury that girl. And it was all because of you, Vic... you and you alone. You had to force yourself on that poor girl, you just had to hit her."

Vic listened impassioned. All he cared about was this thing with plastics.

Jack continued, "Bob and Tony were just about finished digging her grave when I went

back to the van to get her body. And the whole time I was thinking how much I hated you... for what you did, for what you are, and for what I knew you would become. And then I saw it... right there in front of me, right next to her body-- that huge wad of blood-soaked towels. Remember Vic? Remember the ones Tony and Bob used to soak up all the blood from your back from where she stabbed you while you raped her?"

Vic felt himself weaken in the knees.

"So I thought to myself, this just isn't right. Vic shouldn't be able to get away with this so easily. He's the goddam guilty one. And that's when it hit me: Plastics! I remembered 'Plastics' were the future. Plastics last forever!"

Jack paused to let Vic stew and twist and turn and grill. "And I remembered that Tony always kept a big roll of those plastic garbage bags in the van."

"What are you saying, Jack? That you put those bloody towels in a plastic bag and buried them with her body?"

Jack didn't answer directly. "At the time, I wasn't sure how long something sealed in plastic would last," Jack responded, "but since then, I've done quite a bit of research. Did you know if you seal something in a plastic bag it can keep for over 50 years? And by double bagging you can almost double the time? And if it's kept in a relatively cool environment, like, say, ten feet underground, the contents can keep almost indefinitely? That's why plastics are such a problem in landfills, Vic. And that's why plastics are such a problem for you, Vic. The evidence is in that grave, Vic. The evidence that you killed her. And you know what, I'd be happy if you'd make that call to Jay McGovern... the sooner the better. In fact, when I met with him last night, I told him you might be calling. Would you like me to make the call for you? After all, Jay works directly for me... but you don't know that, do you?"

Vic was weak now. It was all falling apart. If Jack was bluffing, it was as ballsy a bluff as he could imagine. The un-engraved ring was one thing; the B.S. about allowing Tony to blackmail him was one thing. Maybe those things were, indeed, a big lie. But the plastic bags with his blood on the towels-- Vic didn't doubt that for a second.

Jack sensed Vic had reached the point of desperation, where stupidity would sound smart. That meant Jack was in real danger. He spoke, "So Vic, can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't have the secret service agent stationed in the tree outside put a bullet through your head?" Jack said it with seriousness.

Vic turned quickly towards the French doors and looked out among the maples, oaks, and evergreens. It was too dark, and the leaves too thick, for him to make out anyone in them.

Jack spoke as Vic stared out. "Wave to them, Vic. I told them we would. They'll flash a

red infrared light back at us. That's how you'll know they've got you in their sights." Jack laughed sardonically and waved at the French doors.

Whatever Jack was up to, Vic wasn't about to wave or make any overt action that might be misconstrued, either.

Just then a pencil-thin red light flashed from the evergreen. It's red laser pin-pointed at their feet.

Vic's heart took off, as if expecting the shattering of glass and a bullet to strike where the laser had illuminated.

There was a deathly silence, and after some soul searching, Vic shook his head sideways, seemingly beaten. "That fucking bitch," he finally groaned, "all she had to do was lay there. Why did she have to stab me?" He seemed lost in memories.

As Vic's words echoed in the air, the door to the room flew open and a fireplug blonde shot through. "Who are you calling a fucking bitch?" Allie shouted out with hard anger as she bee-lined towards Vic.

"Who the hell are you?" Vic reacted, snapping back from a nightmare memory to his present nightmare. He quickly recognized Allie from the picture on the DUMP web site. Obviously she hadn't died in that sailboat accident. What the hell was happening? "I, uh, I thought you were dead."

"Yeah? Well you thought wrong, asshole. And my mom was not a fucking bitch," she spit out with impunity and vile and hatred.

The blood drained from Vic's face and he didn't know what to say.

"You remember my mom, right?" Allie said. "She was a little taller than me, blonde hair, blue eyes, drove a Dodge Diplomat, lived on a commune, liked virgins... didn't like you."

Allie paused to grab air. She could see Vic hyperventilating.

Allie spoke again in rapid fire hatred, "Remember... she stabbed you in the back while you were raping her. Remember her fingernails in your back? You probably still have the scars."

Vic played dumb and shook his head sideways. "Look. Whatever happened to you mom, I didn't have anything to do with. You should be barking at Jack. He's the one who killed her."

Her eyes pierced him like disbelieving lasers. And Vic knew he had lost.

Scared and desperate as the world crashed down around him, Vic searched for a way out. His pounding chest struck his gun, as if a reminder he still had that. It seemed to be the only thing left.

Swiftly and surely, he reached and drew the gun, making sure he kept Jack between himself and the red laser-pointing sharpshooter in the trees outside. "Get your hands up," he yelled, pointing the gun at Jack.

Allie screamed out.

Instinctively, Vic drew a bead on her. "You too," he yelled, "get your hands up."

Both Jack and Allie complied.

Then a strange smile came across Jack's lips and he spoke out, "Great plan, Vic. Now what are you going to do? Kill the two of us? That'll look real good."

"Shut up, Jack," Vic barked at him. "I'm sick of your know-it-all voice and your smirking shit-eating grin. You're nothing but a back-stabbing cock."

Jack shook his head, unfazed. "Oh, come now, Vic. I'm more than that," he replied calmly. "I'm also the one thing separating you from that secret service agent out in the trees." Jack seemed at peace. "So you better be careful with me."

"Fuck you Jack. If I die, you're dying, too." Vic pointed the gun at Jack, poised to pull the trigger at a flash of red laser light. His eyes scanned out through the French doors, looking for it. If he saw anything, Jack would die. "If you move so much as one inch, I'll shoot," he told Jack.

Jack believed that much. "Nobody has to die, Vic," Jack said, almost too calm for someone in the sights of a madman's gun. "There's been too much killing already."

"Get your hands up and put them behind your head," Vic commanded as he inched toward Jack, carefully keeping Jack between himself and the outside. The President of the United States made as good a human shield as there was. "Turn around," he barked "so your back's facing me. I don't want to see that shit-eating grin on your face."

Jack slowly rotated around until his back was to Vic and he faced the French doors. He could only wonder what Don Meacham, up there in the trees with his laser-sighted AR-15, was thinking. He hoped Donno wouldn't try any 'James Bond- golden gun' shot. *Just do as I told you, Donno,*

Vic stuck the gun against the base of Jack's neck and pressed it firmly against him. "It's

your call, Jack," Vic responded. "If I die, you're going with me."

Allie watched in horror, just four feet or so away from the two men. It didn't seem real-- the Director of the FBI had his gun planted into the base of the President's brain, and in a heartbeat, America's greatest President could join JFK in history. And there she was to witness it, seemingly powerless. She thought of her mom, seemingly powerless under Vic as he thrust into her without regard, and her blood boiled.

Her mind took off. If the two of them died, it would be a clean sweep-- all four Middies involved in her mom's disappearance dead. Three weeks ago, she would probably have thought that would be justice. But not today. That's not how it was supposed to end now! Jack was one of the good guys, the father she never knew. She couldn't lose him, too, she told herself. That would be a crummy ending. Was Jack's solution to go down with Vic in some sort of heroic Pyrrhic victory?

With her mind buzzing, she whispered a prayer to the heavens. As she did, she remembered the words Jack had whispered to her just an hour earlier, before Vic the Madman had arrived. "You're going to help me finish what your mom started," Jack had whispered in her ear. "Don't think about it, just follow your instincts... you'll know what to do. Trust me. You'll know."

When Jack had said it, she didn't fully understand what he meant. But now, she did. At the same time, she felt her mom's presence in the room, speaking to her: *You can't let the man who killed me get away with this, too, sweetheart... no matter what. He killed me. Don't let him kill the man who watched over you when I wasn't there.*

That's when Allie knew what she had to do.

Her eyes strayed to the left, to the antique desk, until they found what they were supposed to find. Set atop the stack of envelopes, the sharp, knife-like, letter opener glistened like a golden ring. She could reach it, she calculated, with one quick large step, or a series of small ones. Those were her choices-- swift and surprising, or slow and surreptitiously.

And that was just the first thing.

Once she had the golden knife, Vic was still two leaps away. Only then could she finish what her mom had started... just like Jack had told her. As she thought of his words and the idea of avenging her mother's death, she felt a surge of strength and confidence. It would be fitting, she told herself. It would be memorial. But most of it, it would be justice... sweet poetic justice.

She decided on the swift and surprising approach, remembering Drew's words about surprise being the most important element in warfare. Like a lioness, she pounced towards the desk and reached out for the golden letter opener, seizing it in a death grip with her right hand. In a flash she turned towards Jack and Vic.

Vic turned when he heard the movement, and as he twisted around to see what was happening, his gun lagged ever so slowly behind.

With a giant step towards the twisting FBI Director, she leaped through the air and thrust the six-inch letter opener at him like a human powered arrow, focusing on where she expected the middle of his chest to be when he completed his turn.

Seeing the golden knife caused Vic's eyes to pop out and he pulled his arm around quickly, training the gun in her direction. As he started to apply pressure to the trigger, the blow from Jack's backwards punch knocked Vic forward and down-- towards Allie and the golden letter opener.

Off balance and falling, Vic pulled back on the trigger in rapid succession. Vic's falling body and Allie's thrusting letter opener met in the middle, with the golden blade penetrating Vic's eye like a sharp-edged window crank. It didn't stop until it was completely embedded into his left temporal lobe, its handle where Vic's eye had been, and in a sweet thud, Vic hit the ground squarely, with Allie right behind, falling on top of him.

The sound of gunshots in the President's Camp David office brought running secret service agents like the jingle from the Good Humor Man's truck brought running children, and in less than ten seconds, two agents, Drew, and the Old Man were running through the doorway. They saw a grizzly scene none could have fathomed: the smell of a freshly fired gun filling the air and President Jack Kurtz kneeling down next to two bodies slumped on the ground atop a pool of red blood.

Drew was the first to reach Jack and the two bodies in the middle of the room. "Allie?" he cried out when he saw the mass of red blood soaked on her blouse.

"Get an ambulance," Jack called out to the secret service agents.

The lead agent nodded, turned, and ran back out of the room.

As he looked down on the woman he loved, Drew felt part of himself die. *Oh God, no... not this... not now... not ever!*

Allie turned her head slowly and looked up at Drew and Jack. She smiled softly, her breathing erratic. "I did it," she whispered, "I finished what my mom started." She felt like a proud daughter and a proud future wife and she wondered whether she would live to see the latter.

Drew stroked her brow, smiling back. "I love you sweetheart. Just stay still, everything's going to be alright."

Despite her throbbing shoulder, she felt it would be alright, too. Her eyes met Jack's. "Is this how it's supposed to end?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Jack shook his head sideways. "This is just the beginning," he answered with a reassuring smile.

FORTY EIGHT

Now this is not the end.
It is not even the beginning of the end,
but it is perhaps the end of the beginning.
— Winston Churchill

As he looked down the long aisle and watched the procession proceed slowly and solemnly towards him, Drew appeared calm. Deep down, however, he wasn't... not in the least. His biggest fear was that he would erupt in the middle of the ceremony. What would everyone think if he started wailing like an orphaned baby whale? Would they understand? Could they understand? Could anyone who hadn't been through what he'd been through understand what he was feeling? Plus, it wasn't as if this were his first time. He'd been in the church once before, watching the procession, feeling his emotions ready to unleash. But never in his wildest dreams, did he think it would happen again.

He could feel Lori's presence there with him... and she was smiling, approving. Drew looked up at the huge Rotunda and through the skylights along the outer circle he saw the flock of seagulls flying by... they were Lori's favorite. She was there!

As the organist struck the booming first chord, every head in the crowd turned toward the back of the Naval Academy chapel. Then, like angels without wings, they appeared, framed by sunlight that streamed through the rear doors behind them.

Drew felt his chest heave and his eyes well. *Hold yourself together*, he told himself.

The pair walked down the aisle like a father and daughter should. He held her firm, but not too firm. She held him proud and happy.

At about the halfway point, he whispered to her. "You are the most beautiful bride I've ever seen."

She squeezed his arm three times, each squeeze a word-- I love you.

Now just steps from the altar, Drew couldn't contain his emotions and tears ran down his

cheeks, tears of the deepest joy imaginable. At ten feet away, Drew stepped down the two steps to meet his bride and the father whom she had met for the first time just a month earlier. Though blurry through his tears, they were the most beautiful pair he could imagine. Her veil was lifted, her cheek kissed, and there was a whisper between the two that Drew couldn't make out.

Drew put forward his hand and shook the hand of President Jack Kurtz.

"I know you'll take good care of her, Drew," Jack said fatherly, as the two men clasped each other with free hands.

Drew nodded. "I will, Jack. Thank you for everything."

Jack released from the handshake and reached over to take Allie's right hand and join it to Drew's left. Before he could, though, Allie pulled away as if to say, 'Not yet.'

Jack was confused. This wasn't how they'd rehearsed it yesterday.

At the same time, Drew turned to his ring bearer. "The ring, Dad," he said simply.

The Old Man pulled a small purple velvet pouch from his vest pocket and handed it to Drew. With a sly grin, like someone who knew a good secret, Drew opened the drawstring and pulled out the shiny golden ring. He held it out to Jack.

"Allie and I had a duplicate of your Academy class ring made, Jack. If anyone is worthy of wearing it, it's you."

Taking the ring from Drew, Jack fought back tears as he looked it over: the Academy crest on one side; the class of '88 crest on the other; and on the underside, his name engraved clearly: Jack Kurtz. As he slipped the ring onto his finger, a sense of pride welled within him, a sense of worthiness. And for the first time in 36 years, he felt like he really did deserve to wear it.

"Thank you," he said simply. Then Jack took Allie's right hand, joined it with Drew's left, and squeezed their hands together. And as he took his seat, Jack couldn't have been happier about the present... or the future. He was especially looking forward to seeing the look on Allie's face when he asked her to be his VP. He couldn't imagine a better wedding gift... or a better VP. Hopefully, he laughed to himself, Drew would make a half-decent trophy hubby.

Hand-in-hand and heart-in-heart, Drew and Allie faced the altar and proclaimed their everlasting love. And outside the chapel, shined and polished, Melody Morgan's 1977 Dodge Diplomat sat ready and waiting to whisk away the newlyweds.

--The End--

Please turn the page

A NOTE TO READERS FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed reading “Four Middies and a Dead Hippie.” I did not write this book to make money, and it will always be \$1 to anyone who wants to read it, and all proceeds will be donated to charity (however, for legal purposes, I must note that I have copyrighted it and retain all legal rights). If you enjoyed it, please tell your friends, relatives, and even enemies. Please also consider making a donation to a deserving charity. Two that I love are: St Jude’s Hospital (www.stjude.org) and Feed My Starving Children (www.fmsc.org).

I have 3 other books available that I hope you will check out. They are:

The Ant Shepherd

Trey Cooper’s life hasn’t turned out the way he intended. He’s supposed to be a pro golfer living in a big house with a big, happy family. Instead, he sells construction equipment and lives alone in a shack, separated from his wife Kristie and mentally-challenged 15 year-old son Nate, who spends most of his time playing with ants. “The Ant Shepherd,” Trey calls him, his voice filled with frustration. Kristie was so wrong-- there is no God and no great plan for their lives. Now, on the eve of his 46th birthday, Trey is ready to solve his problems once and for all-- he just needs to turn the key and start the flow of deadly carbon monoxide from his truck’s exhaust, through the dryer hose, and into the shack. Fortunately, God does have a great plan for every life, and He loves to use the least to make the most. Best of all, God really loves shepherds.

Rock God

Scratch Hatchet, aka The Rock God, is the planet’s most famous rock star. In his arrogant, irreverent world there is no room for any other God, and especially not a God who allows innocent children, like his brother, to die of cancer. But when his Learjet suffers a catastrophic failure at 25,000 feet, Scratch makes a last second plea to God. What follows is a glimpse into the mystery and majesty of God, an unforgettable journey to a place of dreams, and a second chance to get life on earth right.

The Devil’s Au Pair

From the outside looking in, they are the perfect American family-- the Naval officer husband, the lawyer wife, and the two perfect kids. But on the inside, the MacDonald household festers with hate, blame, and secrets. Husband Jeff hates being stuck in a loveless, passionless marriage. Wife Susan blames Jeff for ruining her dream life. In the middle of their drama is Krista, the family's 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair. Not only does she know all the family secrets, but she has quite a few of her own. Indeed, if the devil ever birthed an Au Pair, her name would be Krista. She'd have a killer body, an erotic attitude that could make any man squirm, and a thirst for money and power. Oh, and she'd know how to set-up a secret video camera, too.