

A SECOND CHANCE

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A Second Chance

BOOK I

REDEEMED

Prologue

Thirteen years ago the shingle read

“Hagar & Malek

Attorneys-at-Law

Sitting in the small library at one end of the conference table, Johnny Hagar was touching the right arm of Mike Malek, his partner. “I’m sorry, Mike. I have to do this. I’ve been, every week-end and most evenings, tinkering in my workshop. I have two patents registered and another in the works. My heart is not in the law. That’s not fair to you, friend.”

One could have heard the regret in Mike’s voice as he said “I am sorry to hear that, Johnny. You have a first rate legal mind along with a winning manner as a litigator. We have been a great team for these last ten years.

“I agree about the team. That is what makes it so hard to break this up. You have been more than a partner. You have been my personal counselor and a comfort when we lost the two boys last summer. By the way, I don’t think Jane has missed a day of visiting the grave site. She can’t seem to get past the tragedy.”

Mike asked “Are you absolutely sure, Johnny? You know how difficult it is to bring an idea to creation, even more to reap adequate financial rewards.

Johnny grinned. “That is the general rule, but the products I have, and especially my newest idea, are sure fire. Besides, Jane needs me close by as much as possible. I promised to be there for her full time.”

“Johnny, you have never mentioned this before. We certainly haven’t noticed any signs when the four of us have been out together.”

“She puts on a great front when necessary but you know that we have been involved in fewer social functions since the accident.”

“Yes, but when we’re together, she seemed fine.”

“I am sorry to say but she has long fits of depression, during which she stays in her room and eats less than half of what I cook for her during those periods. It has been

hard for me to leave her during the day when I am at work. On the week-ends, I can check on her and comfort her in between trips to the workshop.”

“Wow, you have kept this a secret for months. Helen will be angry with you. I hope it is okay for Helen to visit.”

“Oh yes. In fact Jane is in one of her better periods and would love to see Helen, I’m sure.”

Chapter 1.

Mike Malek, at six feet, two inches, two hundred twenty pounds, was looking like he was thirty-five, not forty-eight. He was in great physical shape as a result of a daily early morning exercise routine. A graduate of Santa Clara University Law School twenty-five years earlier, he enjoyed a brilliant law practice for eighteen years before embarking on a business career in the high tech arena.

His two older children, girls, were married but had provided no grandchildren to date, both involved with full time careers. His son, Michael Jr., was a senior at Santa Clara University, hoping to enter law school a little later.

Almost a year ago, Helen, the love of his life since they met as juniors at the university, had died of breast cancer. He had been devastated, sinking into a deep funk for a short period.

With some help from his friend and pastor, he managed to find some equilibrium, but did not want to continue in the same roles in the business world although they had served him so well.

One afternoon when the two friends were having coffee after lunch, his friend asked, "What triggered that idea, Mike? It is unusual to turn away from success."

"It was something Helen said during one of our last discussions. She was challenging me "Honey. God has endowed you with a good brain and lots of talent. You have found success and financial rewards. Have you thought about giving more back to the community?"

We never had the time to complete that conversation. I have been struggling with it ever since."

"Conclusions?"

"Not sure, really. I figured one way to start was to quit focusing on making money. I'm not saying that making money is bad, but, as Helen pointed out, we had more money than we needed. Life has been more than good to me."

"So do you have any specifics?"

"I'm getting there. I have been considering going back to my old profession, the law. There are a lot of people who find themselves in the midst of problems with limited resources to fight their way back. I think I can provide the help and therefore the opportunity for people to land on solid ground.

“That sounds good but it seems hardly enough to challenge the Mike that I know.”

“I’m doing a little politicking, behind the scenes. I do get called upon for ideas by the mayor and some county supervisors.”

“You are a good, kind man, Mike. Sounds like you’re off to a real start. Maybe that’s all you need. I see beyond that a new Mike, who will provide opportunities for people who need another chance.”

“I like that, Padre. You are good for my soul, my very essence. Thank you.”

He started planning ways to continue his involvement in community affairs and quietly in the political arena. He did not consider himself a mover or a shaker but it was amazing the number of community leaders who sought his counsel.

As he reflected through the months, he thought. “I need to find some additional activity that challenges me but contributes more directly to the welfare of others.

He had spent a great deal of time in introspection including dealing with memories of life with Helen. She had brought to the surface the loving and compassionate seeds that had been ingrained in them.

Six months ago, he opened his modest office, hiring a part time employee, serving as a general dog’s body. Her name was Susan who was just about to graduate from the law school at Santa Clara University. His practice took off with a bang. As soon as she graduated, Susan came to work full time. She needed to pay off her student loans and needed time to study for the bar exam.

In addition to handling all the office duties, she did case studies in order to give Mike the freedom to spend time with clients and appearances in court.

When Mike suggested she hire some help, she said “Boss, if you don’t mind paying the overtime, I would just as soon continue. I can use the money. Besides, my social life is nonexistent since I am in between boy friends at the moment.

Mike was delighted. He was fond of Susan, seeing her as completely trustworthy.

Chapter 2.

As word got around the town, friends dropped by, asking Mike to update their wills or family trusts. Several of his associates in community organizations asked him to take on their corporate work, but he tactfully demurred, pointing out that kind of practice was not his aim. As Mike explained “There are plenty of top notch attorneys for corporate work but I want to focus on individuals who have needs and few resources to help themselves.”

Using his influence with some of the business owners, he managed to get a few settlements for some minorities who had been unfairly terminated. He earned a reputation for being the champion of the more vulnerable members of the community.

Most of the cases presented little challenge but one morning changed that. In walked a woman, wearing a beautiful but well-worn two piece navy blue suit. A casual appraisal of her appearance showed that her black pumps were slightly worn at the toes, a bit scuffed and her purse showed a lot of wear.

As Susan started backing out of his office, the woman introduced herself. “Hello, Mr. Malek. I am Mary Komora. Thank you for seeing me.”

He smiled “A fellow Slav by the sound of your name

“Yes, by birth as well as by marriage.”

“How may I help?”

Without preliminaries she moved directly to her concern. “I have just been fired. I’m hurt, angry and desperate. My husband is disabled. We are about to run out of health benefits. We have very little savings. I believe I am an unfair victim and thought you might help me judge if that is so. If so, then advise me on some course of action.”

“I’ll be happy to try.”

“I have only a few dollars for a fee. I hope I can pay you over a period of time when my finances improve.”

“We’ll work out something, Mrs. Komora. Just start talking in any order. If you don’t mind, we’ll record your words so I can properly review the essentials.”

I promise not to roam. I have or had a lower middle management position at Silicon Industries. My supervisor was notified that he was being moved to another department. That meant I had a crack to replace him. I never had a doubt since my

record shows that I am head and shoulders above any others in the department. I also know that I am well liked by my associates.”

“Of course, I needed a recommendation from my supervisor, who is a bit of a chauvinist. He has constantly made little sexual quips and tells off color stories that are demeaning to women, but we have always ignored that because he knew his job and our department received occasional bonuses.”

“A major problem occurred on the day he was notified of his promotion. He asked me to go out to dinner with him, not very subtle about what he expected after dinner. He is married with three children. He knows that I am married with a laid up husband. I reminded him of both situations. He ignored the first, telling me I could use some nookie since my husband could not perform. I walked away in a huff, bumping into one of my female associates who saw the tears in my eyes. She said “That bastard’s at it again.”

“Two days later he fabricated a problem and blamed it on me. I denied it but he insisted in a raised voice, obviously to get the attention of others. I shouted back at him instead of remaining calm, to which he shouted, “That’s insubordination. You’re fired.”

She paused and waited. “That was very concise. Perhaps I can help. Do you think that the associate who first hired you might be willing to talk to me?”

“Probably. I can ask.”

“Ask if she can call me at five fifteen or so this afternoon. You can call me about nine the day after tomorrow. Meanwhile, give me any other details of instances you may have noticed about his improper behavior. ”

He had loads of paper work and some phone calls to his political buddies that would keep him busy. At a few minutes after five Susan said, “A Josephine Curio is calling.”

“Hello, Ms. Curio.”

“Mary asked me to call about her and asshole.”

“Do you mean her boss?”

“Who else?”

“I understand you witnessed the day he proposed an illicit meeting with her?”

“Yeah. I didn’t hear everything but enough to know it was what he proposed to me two weeks ago and to Helene. Both of us told him to stuff it. We remember how unkind he has been to Annie since she let him screw her.”

“You know I am trying to help Mary. Do you think that you and maybe the other two women might make a formal statement that would be used against the boss?”

“I will and I’m sure I can get Helene and maybe Annie.”

“All right." May I have your phone number?”

Over drinks, he shared the private info with Cynthia.

She asked “As editor of the major newspaper in town, is there any chance that could be happening at the Clarion?”

“I don’t think so but that is a good question. I think some conversation with Human Relations might start us on a discrete inquiry. Thanks, hon. Finished? I’ll take your glass. Relax. Dinner in twenty. You get to do the dishes while I set up the latest romantic Netflix disk.”

Two hours later both were wiping tears from each other’s cheeks. “That was tender and a good choice.”

In the morning he called Susan on his cell. “I’ll be in after the board meeting which meets at ten. Meanwhile I expect to be at Silicon Industries”

When he walked in the door, the receptionist said “Good morning Mr. Malek. You are expected. Francis will take you to the tower.

Francis knocked and opened the door to the executive suite. “Good morning, Mike.”

“And to you, John. Thanks for seeing me.”

“When you want to see me, it is usually for my own good.”

“This one is a little of both, good and bad, I think.”

A young lady entered with a coffee set up and a pot from which she poured some very aromatic hot steaming coffee.

“Let’s have the bad news first.”

“It’s mixed into one item. A recently terminated employee of yours is seeking my legal advice regarding harassment and unfair treatment in one of your departments and she seems to have a good case. I know this should go to your operational people or your legal department but I thought you should know. I don’t want to go public, and you know that this is pro bono.”

“I’m glad you came to me. We can do an internal investigation. If the complaint is valid, justice will be done.”

‘I know that, John. Why don’t you have somebody come in and take notes from the recording which I have?’”

A few minutes later a steno took his recording and a transcription was being made while they caught up on corporate affairs.

Mike had to rush to his other board meeting.

At five that evening he called Josephine. “Ms. Curio? I have made some arrangement with some higher ups at Silicon to look into certain matters. I would be pleased if you and the other women would respond freely to their questions. Just give them the facts, as you each know them about your own experiences. You will be doing Mary a great favor.”

The next morning he told Mary, when she called, that he had done some thinking and would be able to say more on Friday morning.

The next morning Susan was holding a steaming cup of coffee as he walked in the door “Yesterday was so busy that I haven’t logged everything. I need to hear what you want to record from both meetings and the lunch with Johnny.”

He handed her the transcript and she took additional notes about the meetings and waited for him to tell about lunch. He asked her a question.

Late that afternoon, Mary called him. Whatever you did was miraculous. I just hung up the phone. I have been reinstated. Some officer in Human Relations asked if I would be applying for the supervisor job. When I said yes, he arranged for an interview at nine-tomorrow morning. . I have to come in to thank you and make arrangement for paying your fee.”

He knew she had to preserve her dignity so he agreed to see her after work on Monday.

Friday he had a call from his friend John at Silicon. “Mike, I told you that your visits brought good news. We discovered two other situations and have prevented at least one lawsuit as a result. We are a better company today, thanks to you.”

“I promise the next time to come with only good news. Thanks for telling me, John. The young lady client is delighted with a chance to apply.”

“They tell me Mrs. Komora is a shoo-in, better than the one who harassed her and is now ex-Silicon.”

Two afternoons later, Susan handled the fee arrangement with Mary Komora and took her into see Mike. She wasn't effusive but gave him a heart-felt thank you after telling him with enthusiasm of her new responsibilities. Above all you make me feel like a liberated woman.

As she was leaving, she stopped at Susan's desk. “That was nice of both of you to charge me at that rate. My guess he is worth three hundred or more and he spent at least three hours doing this. I appreciate you guys, in more ways than one. ”

Susan could not wait to tell Mike.

In addition she had the feeling that they were now in the Equal Opportunity legal business.

Chapter 3.

In the middle of the morning, a gentleman about fifty years old, dressed in a nice but obviously tired gray plaid suit, entered. “How may I help you, sir?”

In a very shy voice, just a bit louder than a whisper “I wondered if it were possible to see or make an appointment with Mr. Malek?”

“I am sure something can be arranged. May I ask the subject?”

“Mike and I knew each other years ago. A product for which I have a patent is being manufactured without a license from me.”

“Have a seat, please. May I have your name?”

“Johnny Hagar, miss.”

She doubled checked the calendar, and then went in to talk with Mike who immediately went to the door “Johnny, nice to see you after all these years. Come in. Come in.”

“Really, Mike. You’re free to see me right now?”

“Absolutely.” Susan, rearrange my eleven o’clock. Susan, meet Johnny Hagar, my friend and former partner.”

She put out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Johnny.”

Mike let Johnny into his office. “Before you ask, Mike, it has been thirteen years. We were sure I was going to set the world on fire with my new ideas.”

I remember Johnny, wishing you luck even though I didn’t agree. You had and probably still have a first class legal mind, but the question is about the state of your being at present.”

“I’m sure you can see by the age of my threads that I’m living on the margin. One of my patents brings in a modest return, barely enough to keep Jane and me in a warm home and decently fed. To tell the truth, my medical bills are horrendous.”

“How is Jane?”

“Well enough, despite her battle with breast cancer. She has some good days but most are tough for her.”

“Come on, Johnny. Your voice is giving you away. Tell me more.”

Mike could hear the catch in Johnny's voice. "She is in constant pain, Mike, always in a state of worry. Since I have so little income and our medical bills are overwhelming us, she frets all the time. There are times when I am sure she needs to go to the emergency room for some relief but will insisting she does not."

Mike wasn't sure how to respond. Usually easy with the right responses, he found himself tongue-tied.

Finally he said "I'm sorry to hear that .Do give her my love. We'll have to do something about the financial side right now. ."

"She said to tell you how sad it was to hear that your Helen is gone."

"Thanks, Johnny. We sure did have some fun times together."

Johnny changed the subject and said apologetically "You must be busy, Mike. I'm hoping now that you're back in practice that you have the time to help, especially with all your business experience."

"You have my full attention, friend. I have nothing scheduled until two. Let's talk and have lunch, if that's agreeable. Now let's hear it."

"Three years ago I created a special electronic device and received a patent two years ago, I approached Damcor Electronics with the idea of licensing them to manufacture. Months of conversations with my hopes rising and falling with each meeting, just to hear them say six months ago that they were really interested but had to do some further research.."

"I approached several other companies, one of which showed real interest. I felt it only fair to let Damcor know I would be dealing opening negotiations with another firm. "

"Before I could place a call to them I had a call from Damcor saying they would not be continuing our conversation. They claim to have discovered a similar product that came on the market three weeks ago."

"Within two hours I had a call from the newest prospect calling off negotiations. I tell you Mike. I've had my down times during these last thirteen years, but not like this. I hit an all-time low, even wondering if a double suicide for the two of us was the answer."

"Instead, I decided that it was time to test a hunch that Damcor might be playing me. I had done my research fully and felt that no one had a product as good as mine."

I managed to get my hands on one of their units and upon examination I found it built to my specs exactly. They didn't even try to mask the product except for a few minor cosmetic variations."

Mike interjected a comment. "Sounds like highway robbery to me. Bring me all the data you have and a write up of what you just told me. I will get to work on it very quickly."

"Mike, I don't have any funds to retain you."

"Got a dollar? Give it to Susan who will give you a receipt. We can talk finances at some later time. You remember how it works."

Johnny choked up and looked away for a couple of minutes before he managed a "Thanks, Mike."

"Let's have brunch. It's a little early for lunch. The DeAnza, okay?"

"I don't think I've been there since we parted."

Susan had a file folder all set for Mike when he returned.

Monday afternoon Johnny and Mike spent three hours huddled in conversation with papers spread all over the floor Johnny, meticulously pointing out the key points of his drawings coinciding with the unit in his hand.

"It's blatant robbery, Mike, with no attempt to fool anyone. That is arrogance. I'm mad."

"You need to stay calm. No heart attack now. I know we have a strong case. . I'll have Susan draw up a standard continent contract with an eight five, fifteen split."

Mike, the standard is either twenty five or forty for the attorney."

"Johnny, I have more money than I will ever need. Your case is exactly what I had in mind as a service I might be able to perform. Anyhow, if I guess right, I will still make a bundle when we pull this off. Notice the words. When not if."

"Now, I want you to buy three more of these units, using my business credit card account. Have the wholesale supplier call me for affirmation and authorization for you to sign. I want that receipt in my name. Now I need some time to start planning our strategy."

"How do you think you will proceed?"

“I am almost certain this will never go to litigation. I’ll get your agreement on how we proceed. In other words, I want you to scratch the old noodle the way we did together so long ago. You develop the plan and the strategy. I’ll do the negotiating or the litigating.”

After Johnny left, Mike called Susan. ‘I’m thirsty. Want to have a coke with me while I fill you in?’

“In a jiff, boss.”

They sat at the side table, she with her notebook. When he finished dictating, she closed the book and took her first sip. Mike said, “Your drink got warm. Get another and rest your bones.

Tuesday morning Susan was typing up a simple will for the widow who had been Mike’s first client. She was smiling as she arranged the papers for signature later. Mrs. Fons had insisted on paying for the service and wrote a check for ten dollars. In the meantime, Mike had taken the call from Johnny and Susan was sure that they were discussing strategy.

Stepping out of his private office later he said, to Susan “We have a strategy, most of it planned by Johnny. I have some work for our investigator, Jimmy Jessup. See if you can get him on the phone.

Chapter 4..

Mike called for an appointment with the Chief Executive officer of Damcor Corporation.

The woman on the phone asked him to state the subject of his call. When he stated that he was calling regarding possible patent infringement, he was told that the CEO was out of town. Mike said to the young lady.

“Miss, don’t give me any bull. I have a date stamped photo of his vehicle entering your premises thirty-five minutes ago. I am not playing games. I am asking for a conference with him personally and anyone else he chooses to invite. That’s within forty-eight hours or I will file the papers regarding violation of certain patent laws.”

She said coolly “Give me fifteen minutes to get back to you. May I have your number?” Thirteen minutes later he had a date for two o’clock the next afternoon.

He went alone for the preliminary conversation.

Those present were the CEO, his Executive Assistant, the chief legal officer, the chief engineering officer and two others, not clearly identified. After stiff introductions, the CEO, in a pompous tone announced. “We are planning on recording this outrageous meeting.”

“Your privilege." I shall do the same and we can exchange unedited copies.”

“Of course, are you suggesting we might try to forge minutes.”?

“Sir, based on what I have discovered, I do not know what to expect”

The corporation attorney interrupted. This is Philip Fox, attorney for the corporation. I would suggest for the sake of clarity that each speaker identify himself or herself when speaking.

“This is Marcus, the CEO. Now, of what outrageous act are you accusing this corporation?”

Without hesitation. Mike responded “My name is Malek. The accusation is that this corporation with the knowledge of major executives has willfully avoided paying license fees to the patent holder of a certain product manufactured under the identification of 33245678. It will be further alleged that this was done after signing a promise not to do so along with a nondisclosure statement. The signing occurred prior to the times that full information on the product was discussed openly. The conversation took place over a two year period with executives and officers of this corporation.”

“This is Fox, chief engineering officer. This is ridiculous. The product referred to by number is a product created in our own laboratories.”

‘Malek, here “I can prove otherwise, sir. I am not going to argue the case here. That is what the courts are prepared to do. I am here giving you notice that we intend to file suit asking for some number in excess of five million dollars.”

Marcus sputtered then “CEO speaking. We will fight you all the way since there is no basis for this alleged action.”

“I suggest, sir, that you review my allegations with various members of your staff and let me know informally of your intentions. If I have no response by Monday at

nine A.M., I will proceed to file the proper papers with the Superior Court of the State of California. I bid you good day.”

A multitude of voices could be heard just a split second before he closed door on his way out.

Friday afternoon he had a call from Mr. Fox, the attorney. “Malek, the CEO is determined to make you go to court, contrary to my advice.”

“Fox, maybe he will reconsider if you tell him the following. I am sure that I can not only prove my case but that I can produce witnesses who will say that he and one other elected officer in addition to some executive employees knew of this fraudulent action. On that basis, I am recommending to my client to bring criminal charge against those certain individuals.

He could hear the sharp intake of breathe at the other end of the phone “That is truly uncalled for, Malek.”

“Listen Fox, Your board chair ought to be informed. I am holding back no punches. There are some scoundrels in the hen house and on behalf of my client I expect to collect, using all the power of my position to expose the practices of this executive team.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“If there is to be conversation of settlement, then I request the presence of the board chair or his deputy. I prefer no direct conversation with the CEO. He may be present as an observer if that is your decision.”

“That seems a little harsh.”

“It may be. I’ve been very frank. To me this is something more than representing my client. I recommend a full disclosure within your organization before we meet. Either we reach agreement or go to court. In the latter case I will be asking for either a restraining order regarding production and an accurate accounting of proceeds to date, which shall be placed in escrow pending the final results of litigation.”

“You’re making this very difficult. It may take some time to bring in the chairman of the board.”

“If you need an extra twenty four hours, let me know. My client will probably agree. In case I haven’t mentioned this, my client is still a member of the bar, although not practicing at the moment. Most of what is transpiring is his idea.”

Fox asked for the extra twenty-four hours, to which Mike said he would call back. . Two minutes with Johnny and he affirmed with Fox.

Susan walked in. “I have it all on tape, but you can’t use it since you did not tell him you were taping.”

“The tape is only for our records .Did you listen to the entire conversation?”

“I did, and I thank you. That experience was equal to a term course in law school.”

Susan was a graduate of Santa Clara Law School, preparing to take the bar exam. She wanted to say more but felt like it would be gilding the lily.

Johnny came in at eight thirty on Monday morning as he and Mike had agreed on the phone. Sipping coffee and nibbling on the Danish, Mike said “I expect Fox will call to ask for another few days delay.

Johnny cut in “I think you will agree with me. We need to go for the jugular. It’s our best strategy. From what you told me, you have them on the defensive and they have not finalized their escape plans.”

“Johnny, you haven’t lost your touch. I agree and will move accordingly.”

That afternoon Mr. Fox called asking for a week’s delay. Mike responded, “I’m sorry you’re the messenger but no give on this side. Unless we meet prior to four P.M. tomorrow, I will file the papers. I need to know by noon if such a meeting is scheduled for Tuesday or I presume the negative.”

“You’re hanging too tough, Malek.”

“Listen, I happen know the chairman is free. Certainly, he can learn enough to make a decision within twenty-four hours. I’ve worked with him on two other boards and I know he does not dilly dally I am only guessing but I feel that Marcus has not yet included the chairman in your conversations.”

The phone rang at four fifty that afternoon. It was the executive assistant to Max Kling, the chairman. “Good afternoon, Mr. Malek. Mr. Kling would be honored to host you at a private lunch in our dining room tomorrow. Is there room on your schedule?”

Mike didn’t hesitate. “I am available and will be pleased to join him.”

“Thank you. Someone will meet you in the parking lot to take your auto and provide an escort.”

Susan came to the door. “That sounds promising. For my information, why would he meet with you without his attorney present?”

“Max and I have found ourselves on the same side of several community issues in the past and developed a mutual respect. He wants to test the limits. If he is comfortable will give me a hint that we’re on track. It’s not unusual to use this way to keep our business private.”

“Do you think he had any prior inkling?”

“I am sure he had no inkling. He is not the kind who would stoop to a cheap trick to make a buck. He is very big time, hard but square.”

Max met him outside the door of the dining room. “Mike, it’s good to see you. Sorry it puts us on opposite sides for the moment. Maybe we come to terms over a drink and then enjoy lunch.”

“You’re looking fit, Max. Those arterial stents seem to be doing the job after that heart attack.”

“Come in, please. Yes, I am doing extremely well and getting on the indoor bike every morning. You look like you still work out regularly.”

“I do, with my new wife, who says she is not about to put on any weight.”

“Great match up for the both of you, Mike. She is brilliant and beautiful. I don’t always agree with her viewpoint but I have a tough time faulting her thinking.” He called to the waiter. “Jimmy, take Mr. Malek’s drink order and bring me the Perrier.”

They were into chitchat until the drinks were served.

“Mike, let me thank both of you for doing me the favor of uncovering this. I found out other skeletons in the process. The CEO, director of engineering and one other exec are now history. I’m serving as temporary CEO. Having to go back to that heavy load is less than pleasing but that’s it.”

“May I presume that I was right on about the CEO and his engineer?”

“Definitely.” Now what do you think is fair?”

Mike laughed “Oh, no. The ball is in your court. Keep Johnny in mind. Years ago he did perform a miracle for Damcor when he and I were partners. I remind you that he is in dire straits now.”

Max chuckled. “You are not only tough but are pulling on my heart strings, too. All right. With your approval I would like our legal department to offer a half million as our punishment, backdate license fees from the start date of manufacturing and, of course, a standard license agreement for the future, details to be determined.”

“Max, this is just like old times, two minds running down the same lane. One difference. Johnny has amassed a quarter million in medical bills. I think with that addition I have a good chance to get his approval.”

“That sounds fair. I am sorry to hear about his situation I appreciate what he did for us when you two worked together. So, it sounds like we are square. ”

Mike pulled out his cell “If I can reach Johnny we can put the final okay on it.” Max stepped out of the room until Mike called. “It’s a done deal.”

Max gave him a bear hug. “Let’s eat.”

They rehearsed some fun memories and regretted a few. Max teased Mike about marrying a good-looking younger woman just so he could stay younger.

Mike teased him about making too much money. “I just can’t help it when I see a good deal. Meg and I have set up a foundation. Now she has been making noises about joining Warren and Bill in this idea of giving away half our bundle .Meg says we need to give away more. The kids will still have a bundle and can make their own way.”

Mike checked his watch, stood to thank Max who asked, “Mike, would you consider a retainer fee to be available? Fox is pretty good but needs back up once in a while.”

“Sorry Max. I am limiting my practice to helping those who find it difficult to protect themselves. Like you, I can afford not to work for money but I would be lost trying to golf away my life.”

“I thought I would give it a try.”

“Max, for you as an old ally and friend, I will come running if you call.”

“Thanks. Here is Tony to escort you to the car which is waiting at the front door.”

Susan could hardly wait when she heard his familiar steps in the hallway. He gave her a big smile and thumbs up. She said “Coffee is ready and so am I when you say so.”

He spent the next twenty-five minutes on the phone with Johnny. Susan heard him say “Lunch tomorrow.”

She brought him up to date on the phone calls and some research she had done. “Tomorrow you have one board meeting at ten thirty and one at three plus the lunch date with Johnny. He must be pleased.”

“He is. All his years of hard work have finally paid off. His medical bills will be paid off as well as his mortgage. He told me he would have enough income to live comfortably.”

“You have someone coming in within the next ten minutes. Using my judgment as you suggested, I thought you might want to consider helping this woman. It will be pro bono, I think,”

Mike nodded. He spent a few minutes trying to get Susan to tell him about her new beau.

She stood “You’re a great boss even if a little too nosy but I wouldn’t trade you for the world.”

The next afternoon Susan was holding a cup of coffee as he walked in the door “Yesterday was so busy that I haven’t logged everything. I need to hear what you want to record from both meetings and the lunch with Johnny. You forgot to leave the tape with me.”

He handed her the transcript. She took additional notes about the meetings and waited for him to tell about lunch. He asked her a question. “How soon can we set up the adjacent office for our new part time associate?”

“Do we have a new associate?”

“Yes. Johnny is going to join us.”

“Boss, you are the greatest. Tell me about your meeting, if you feel free to do so,”

“It’s all on the tape. You will find some of it a bit emotional. I had to do some convincing. His legal mind is as sharp as ever and the size of the agreement sent him over the edge.

“That’s great. Quickly. I can do all but the phones by Monday. Sarah’s brother Jimmy is one of your business associates. He is a whiz- bang with computer systems. I’ll bet he’ll knock himself out for you. I can have the desk, tables and cabinets delivered by Tuesday”. She was talking at top speed.

“Slow down, Susan. He won’t be available until ten days from now. He and his wife are leaving for a week’s cruise to Mexico tonight.”

“Boss, you are the sweetest.”

“Thanks. Just remember, that I want all the details on Monday.”

“Details on what?”

“Don’t be elusive; the next chapter in the romance of the decade.”

She laughed and went to work.

Monday morning was cold and rainy with two fronts coming in, one from the north, merging with the pineapple express from the islands. She was ridding herself of galoshes, raincoat and umbrella when Mike walked in to do the same. “Boss, good morning, that is if you are a duck. Sorry the coffee isn’t ready.”

“”There’s a punishment for that but I’m too wet to remember.”

She came to his office later with two mugs in hand and a notebook under her arm. Ready to go boss.

At eleven thirty, Johnny Hagar breezed in. “Good morning, Susan.” He handed her an envelope. “Deposit this into Mike’s bank account. This is the bank receipt from my new bank account. Am I right that you are my temporary office and file clerk along with the myriad of other duties?”

She smiled “Your humble servant, sir.”

He headed for his own office and was back in a hurry gushing with thanks to her, kissing her on the forehead. “You are a wonder. The office is first class. Is Mike in?”

“Not until noon He’s over at the courthouse.”

She opened the envelope as he headed back to his new office. “Whew, Seventy Five grand. I better get this to the bank. She found the endorsement stamp and was soon

reaching for her coat. Mr. Hagar, would you mind answering the phone while I run to the bank?”

“Delighted to be of some help.”

Mike walked in and said “Welcome, partner.”

The End

BOOK II

Destiny

Prologue

Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, he began to describe his experience.

Patrol duty in Iraq was the riskiest part of our duties. We were never sure if the child asking for candy was carrying a small I.E.D. (Improvised Explosive Device) in her small handbag or if she was the sweet street waif, another victim of the raging civil unrest.

Our eyes were ever roaming over the windows and roof tops, where some hidden sniper might be lying in wait. Passing an abandoned rusty vehicle of any sort or other junk piles gave us the willies and kept us alert.

One late evening, we began our patrol just about the beginning of a full moon rise. We were patrolling the perimeter of the village. My radio receiver vibrated. The message was sharp and crisp.

“Max has met the enemy at Point Zebra. Proceed on the double.”

Max was the leader of a full squad, patrolling an area known to be hiding rebels. They had been engaged by an enemy group (strength unknown) on the outskirts of the village. We arrived in time to see a fusillade of fire emanating from the squad who had called for help. We took up a position just to the right of their spot, shielded by some scrub. I was the leader of our small squad of four. Mickey and Bill immediately began digging a fox hole while Joe and I joined in the fire fight.

The shooting quieted down. All remained still for about a half hour. Joe and I got out our short handled spades and helped complete the foxhole. We were using the dirt to build a barrier on the cusp of the foxhole.

The moon had risen about twenty degrees and was bathing the scene with what was almost daylight. Suddenly a burst of fire erupted from the hidden enemy, sending us scuttling into the foxhole. Just as suddenly, the shooting ceased and silence fell over this piece of semi-arid landscape.

. We hadn't moved for twenty minutes. I had to appraise the situation as the squad leader. I decided to wait another few minutes before slowly emerging. A sudden burst of gunfire erupted. Slugs tore through my arms and hands that were gripping my

rifle. In that moment I didn't feel any pain but I was horrified to see the stumps and the blood. I passed out. I'm told that the medic who had been in the other bunker was outstanding. He probably saved my life since all arteries were severed and the flow needed to be stemmed quickly to save my life."

"I woke up in a field hospital, heavily dosed with pain medication and probably heavy sedatives. I was shipped to Germany where most of the repairs were done.

As best as I could remember, the first days were filled with fog of trying to figure out what had happened. As the fog began to dissipate my mind became a jumble of questions. When I was able to comprehend the full extent of my injuries, especially the knowledge that my hands no longer existed, I couldn't help feeling sorry for myself.

I visualized two steel claws holding a knife and fork at the dinner table. I was sure that Janet, my fiancée, would understand a thought that did much to help me keep my sanity.

I had a recurring dream for three or four days. In the dream I was still in high school. I was sitting on a stool in Jose Monza's Creamery near the school. Outside on 24th street a long black low rider convertible was leading a parade of low riders. Sitting on the top of the head rest was the most beautiful girl in the world. I was aching to run out to take her away from the gang that was showing their muscle and ill-gotten riches.

I wanted to rescue her, fearing she might end up dead, shot during one of those gang fights over territorial rights.

I had too much free time in between surgeries and therapy sessions. I spent some of it worrying. I wondered what kind of employer would be willing to give me a job. Will I be the subject of pity or a sight from which people will avert their eyes? It was maddening and I began to sink into a deep depression, sure I would be a lost soul in society.

What is to become of me? For what life am I destined? What did fate have in store for me?

Chapter 1,

The case load was heavy since Johnny Hagar came aboard as a new associate.

The plaque on the outside now read

Malek & Hagar

Attorneys-at-Law

Mike and Susan, the future partner, agreed that she needed help with the office functions so that she could work more directly with her two bosses. Besides, she needed some time to study for the bar exam. She had been delegated to find her new assistant.

She was delighted with her find and was smiling to herself as she prepared to introduce Tomas Flores to the boss. Tommy was a close friend of Junior Malek, Mike's son, although Tommy was in his last year at law school while Junior was in his first year.

Tomas was a disabled veteran of the war in Iraq, although looking at him; one would be hard pressed to see the disability.

Susan rapped gently and opened the door. "Got a few minutes, boss?? I want to introduce Tomas Flores, our newest office associate."

Mike noticed the gloved hand and after the briefest hesitation, put out his hand. "Welcome aboard. I am sure you will find us entertaining at the least."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Malek. Our family is indebted to you and has been for many years."

You're Jose's boy? This is a double pleasure. Susan, I think I need a couple of minutes. You and I can pick up a little later. Now Tomas, tell me about your family. Is your father well?" Hearing the replay he said "I'm sorry."

Mike was up to date when Tomas left.

Susan couldn't wait until she got the whole story from Mike.

"Mostly, we talked about the family. His Dad and Mom are both deceased. You know he has a purple heart with two clusters along with a few other citations for bravery. His dad had worked as a janitor in our offices during my first years in practice

and was wrongfully accused of theft. Actually, he was set up by two others who realized they were about to be caught.”

“So you took off from other work to defend him?”

Mike blushed “Don’t make a big deal of it. It was one of the easiest of cases I ever handled.”

“I read you; boss and I love you for it.”

“Ready for a change of pace? With Tommy, as he would like to be known, on the job, I want you into looking up case histories for this new undertaking. It probably means some parts of Saturdays, since my son, Jay, will be working with you. You, of course, will guide him and tutor him if necessary. For all that extra time I want to put you on a salary as a sort of paralegal.” He handed her a note denoting her monthly salary.

“Boss, I am not worth that much. You can get an experienced paralegal for less.”

“I know that but I am betting you will be accepted to the bar. You will also be working off your, you know what.”

“Thanks. You know I will give back all that you need and more.”

Mike called a meeting of the entire staff for a Saturday morning. A special request for the firm’s services was the subject for the gathering because their work load was about to increase significantly.

“First, I need an evaluation. Let me lay out the request and then let me know if this has any negative ramifications. This action may cause some problems in the community, not that it will keep me from doing what is right.”

“Some weeks back I was approached by five Latino women who claimed that they have been ripped off by their employer, denied opportunities and often harassed. We’ve seen this situation at previous times, but there is a twist in this case”

“The Latino women are employed by a corporation entirely owned and managed by Latinos. We can expect criticism that I, as a gringo lawyer with connections, am wrongly attacking one of the few successful minority owned businesses in our city.”

“I’ve spent a lot of personal time investigating and have employed my favorite investigator to do some snooping. Both of us feel the women have reason to complain, although we have more to learn before we can be assured of a favorable outcome.”

Susan asked “Boss, why is this not a case for the EEOC?”

“Good question. I double-checked the women’s statement that the EEOC is so understaffed that it will take forever before they can get action. I think we can get attention of the courts in a shorter period. As in previous cases, there is always the possibility of a settlement without litigation.”

Tommy cut in. “Mr. Malek, I don’t think you need to worry about any public outcry. Of course, there will be that at the beginning, but if we are talking about Northern Mexico Industries, you have little to worry about.”

“That is the firm.”

“I can assure you that most of the Latino community has nothing good to say about them.”

“Are you saying that we can count on public support for our position?”

“No question about it. I might even get some inside information from other employees that will either substantiate or might prove me wrong.”

“Tommy, I promise you that what we want is information whether it helps or hurts this case.”

“I’ll be happy to do some nosing around.”

“Just a minute. I have heard some hints about the owners that they play hardball. I can’t have you taking any risks.”

“I promise you that I will very careful.”

“If you get any leads, give me the names. My investigator has a Latino associate who can follow through. Promise?”

“I promise.”

Junior, who preferred to be called Jay, asked “What do you see for me in this situation?”

“You and Susan will be my researcher’s, under the guidance of Johnny, that is Mr. Hagar. I need you to dig deeply into as many EEOC cases that dealt with both gender discrimination and harassment issues. I need to have the legal case nailed as

well as the details of the company behavior in hand so I can initiate conversation and possible negotiations with management. I have a list of cases for starters. How does that sound?"

Susan and Jay nodded.

"Okay. We are off and running. Thank you. I already have a better feeling about this."

Susan asked, "Tommy, may I give you a ride? It's not out of my way."

"Thanks, Susan. I need another fifteen minutes to close up the office."

Most evenings during the cocktail hour or dinner, Cynthia as editor of the San Jose Clarion liked to pick Mike's brain. She had appreciated the bonus of his brilliant mind that came to her as a wedding present when one of the sweetest men in the world took her to the altar.

Mike seemed to be deep in thought throughout the meal. She figured that eventually he would bring her into his thoughts. When that did not happen, after dinner, Cynthia asked "Michael, are you working on something new? You seem to be a bit distracted with hardly a thing to say at dinner. I am not really into monologues. Talk to me, sweetie."

"Okay, but as usual this is like pillow talk, private ears only."

"Of course."

"I've spent a lot of time investigating the basis for action on a gender and harassment charge against a Latino owned successful business. Things are heating up. We are gearing up and looking to prove the allegations."

"Could you by any chance be talking about Northern Mexico Industries?"

"What a great guess? How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Here is my secret. Minnie, my ace investigative reporter has been digging into the same allegations for months and is absolutely frustrated. Each time she thinks someone is about to give her some information, they suddenly clam up."

"What a great coincidence. I wonder if she would like to work with us. Maybe working with us will get her an inside track for her story while we bolster our case."

"I certainly can talk to her although I never insert myself into her work unless asked or when she is ready for publishing her findings."

“Let me suggest that she might open a conversation with Tomas Flores, a member of a well- known family on the east side. Tommy works for me part time, subbing for Susan and wants to help on the search for information. If she is satisfied, then she can decide to talk with me or not.”

“It certainly is worth a try. I’ll get back to you.”

“I had planned to talk with my friend, Phil, your other ace reporter, to see if that company had ever crossed his radar. Do the two of them ever work together on a story?”

“Once in a while. I think they clear with each other so that they don’t cross wires. Hold off on the Phil thing until I chat with Minnie tomorrow.”

Cynthia invited Minnie in for a cup of coffee about tent thirty the next morning. “How is your big story coming, Minnie?”

“It’s coming but rather slowly. In fact I just had coffee with Phil to see if he has time to work with me and he has agreed. He has nothing big on his plate at the moment since he is ready to submit his investigation story for approval.”

“What do you think of your chances?”

“Pretty slim at this point. I have been thinking of putting it on the back burner and hoping for some break that might bring it back to life”

“This is strictly off the record but it may be helpful. Michael is considering taking on a complaint from some women who feel overlooked intentionally and are being harassed when they make complaints over the heads of their immediate superiors.”

“How can that help me?”

“I think he may be open to an accommodation in which both of you may benefit.”

“That sounds interesting. How can we hook up?”

“He has a part time employee whose family is well known on the east side, Tomas Flores.”

“I knew his dad who is now deceased.”

“Michael says Tommy, as he is known now at law school, wants to help but Michael is worried for him if word gets out that he nosing into their business.”

“So, Michael thinks that Tommy would be a good starting place?”

“Yes and if you feel like some joint effort is worthwhile then he would welcome a chance to do some exploring with you.”

“This is almost exhilarating, possibly breathing new life into this story. I am sure I never met Tommy, although we may be about the same age if memory serves me. He must have been late starting law school.”

“Yes, I think Mike mentioned something about that.”

“How do I reach him?”

“You can call the office late afternoon tomorrow. He will be answering the phone. I’ll get word to him to expect your call.”

“Boss, thank you. One more reason for me to tell the world what a clever boss you are. Not now, but there will be a time in the future.”

What Minnie did not tell Cynthia was that she had fantasized about Tomas when she was a teenager. That evening while having a glass of wine after dinner, she found herself ruminating about her confusing thoughts about life when she was a junior in high school. It was that year that she would find excuses to walk by Tomas’ house after school, just to see if she might run into him, by chance. Not that she ever did. ‘

She was remembering that it was a critical time. She recalled that she was a good student, loving her teachers and the classes, especially English composition and social studies. She asked herself “how and why did I get tied up with the “Black Jacks” the most powerful gang on the Eastside?”

Tomas was the kind of boy she wanted to be with, instead of Julio and he tough gang into which she had been drawn. It had been a time of introspection, knowing she had to break with the gang but at the same time, wondering what lay ahead after the break.

She had heard stories of some gang members wanting to quit but never could because of threats from Julio. “Julio says he loves me but I wonder what he would do if I told him we were through.”

She recalled lying awake after the family had retired, trying to find a way to separate herself. “If I do that, what is my next step? Even if I do, what can I do after high school? If I can’t marry a guy like Tomas, will I just have to settle for a dull life here in what amounts to a ghetto? There must be something better”

As she looked back at that year and the ones immediately following, she thanked God for her dad and Father Jim. “Because of them I have been blessed with a good life. The past is the past.”

Minnie called Tommy Tuesday at five thirty, then deciding to invite him to share dinner after his shift. They met at a pizza parlor near the office and chatted for over an hour. Near the end of the conversation “Tomas, I should have talked to you weeks ago. How do you get all this dope and stay under the radar?”

“We have our ways, we of the old guard here in the neighborhood. So what do you think?”

“I’ll try to see Mr. Malek as soon as possible. Perhaps we can get to the real story. Now, how would you like a ride to your rooms?”

“Thank you. That will save me some time. I have a lot of study ahead of me tonight.”

Wednesday at four saw Minnie joined Mike for a discussion, agreeing to share full information. “Minnie, you have to understand that this could take time because I have to have a firm case ready before I move.”

“I understand but I think with Phil joining us, the three of us have a chance to gather evidence much more quickly. In the mean time I can center in on two other stories I have been considering.”

“Looks like we have a deal, Minnie.”

She rose and put out her hand “It’s a deal.”

Chapter 2.

Ten minutes after Minnie departed; five Latino women were sitting around the conference table in Mike's law office. Sitting outside in the waiting room and in some chairs in the admin office were eight women. Maria, the spokeswoman for the original five said, "Mr. Malek, these additional women would like you to represent them in this case. Their complaints are very much like the ones you will hear from us today."

"Thanks, Maria. First, we need to take depositions from the five of you. I will set those up for you next weekend but today I just need to hear your complaints informally. There will be news for your other friends today. We can tell them that if I am satisfied with the statements from the five of you then I will interview each of the others after we take your deposition."

"I understand, sir."

"Now, I need to ask. Are there any of you that speak little or no English. In other words, should I have an interpreter today?"

"If this is informal, as you say, then not today but two of the women probably should give their statements in their native Mexican language."

"Good. I will make arrangements for next Saturday accordingly." He noticed that the other four had paid very close attention to his conversation with Maria.

Maria went to tell the others in the outer office but they decided to wait around so they could hear the result of today's conference.

Three hours later Mike had recorded the claims of all five women. It was a little chaotic at some points. "Me, too or Si, Si" some would shout when her story was similar in nature to another.

Three of them had been passed over for promotions twice. Each of the five had serious delays receiving their paychecks and each had some special deduction for special but unexplainable corporation services taken from their paychecks all five attested to some form of harassment after they complained to their department supervisors. This seemed to take the form of being assigned extra duties by their foremen near the end of the workday that kept them after hours without overtime pay.

Maria and Mia had gone over the head of their supervisors to the division head that pretended to listen and said he would investigate. As far as they knew, no such investigation ever took place and both found themselves with implied threats of being terminated.

The one common complaint in addition to the ones listed up to this point was the extra overtime for which they were not paid. . During the past six weeks each had kept a written tally of dates and times because Maria had suggested it.

When all of them had spoken, Mike began with a series of questions mostly looking for holes in their stories. He paused for a minute during which time Maria asked, “What do you think, Mr. Malek?”

“I have heard enough to take the case. Now I need each of you to sign this simple form appointing me as your attorney and give me a dollar bill as a retainer.”

Mia protested. “But we have five hundred dollars to start paying you because we know there will be expenses.”

Thank you, Mia. Hold onto that. The dollar will make it official. There will be a small fee attached to the deposition proceeding next week. I will give you a bill after that.”

When they were leaving, each woman took his hand and thanked him for taking their cases. It was a moving moment for Mike. The babble of women was fading as they left his office space. Maria had stayed behind for a more conversation.

“Mr. Malek, There are some facts that you should know that were not talked about. Two of the women did not tell you that they were forced to have sex with one foreman. They are the only income earners in their families and desperately need their jobs. Continuing work was at stake.”

“That is terrible but not the first time I’ve heard about such happenings. I’ll make sure we get their statements into the record during the depositions. It should be easier for them since no others of you will be present during those individual depositions.”

At the Clarion offices Minnie and Phil put their heads together to plan some digging to help to uncover background and/or substantiate the claims of the five women. Minnie had received some edited notes from Mike’s first meeting with the five.

“Phil, do you think you can get a general look inside and meet some of the top people by using the same approach you did on the Valley Manufacturing story? That was well received by our readership and might be impressive enough to get you in the door.”

“That’s a good idea. I might find out something about the individual executives that can be fruitful.”

“Good.” Meantime I need to finish winding my way through the several corporations that seem to be the principal stockholders. The complexity I am seeing makes me think we may have some not so nice people involved, either gangs or, I hope not, Mexican cartel money.”

“Minnie, tread carefully. No story is worth your life.”

“I will. When I get a smell of something dangerous, I promise to hand it over to Mike’s investigators.”

On the Saturday morning of that same weekend Tommy decided to visit his sister in the old family neighborhood on the east side. He enjoyed lunch with Sis, her husband, Jose, and their two-year-old Mariana. Sis took him for a walk around the neighborhood to say hello to some of the families who watched him grow up on these vary streets. They stopped at the city park, sitting on a bench licking soft ice cream cones

“Sis, have you heard any stories about women who work at the North Mexico plant?”

“That’s the main gossip topic here. There is talk of anti-women bias, shortage in paychecks, harassment and even a rumor of women being forced to have sex with bosses in order to keep their jobs.”

“Is it just talk or is there truth to the stories?”

“Do you remember old Max?”

“Yeah, but he isn’t that old.”

“Right. Well I hear that he recently quit his job as a foreman because he didn’t like what he saw happening there. He is now working at Silicon Industries.”

Tommy changed subjects but tucked this tidbit into his noggin for keeps. He switched subjects. “When are you going to add to the family?”

She blushed a little as she said “Within seven months.”

On the way back, Sis pointed out a young mother pushing a buggy. “That’s Anna Rocha. The story is that she is one of the women who have been forced to have sex with her boss. She needs the job desperately. Her husband has been out of work for six months, having been hurt in an auto accident.” Tommy added her name to his mental list.

He left just after they arrived back at the house, needing to put in at least four hours at the office before hitting the books at home. His email to Minnie contained the information he received from Sis and was copied to Mike.

An hour later he had a call from Minnie. “Hi, Tommy. I’m on my cell a couple of blocks away .Do you have time to chat if I come over?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you at the outside door.”

He met her and ushered her into the conference room. “I appreciated the email and thought you might want to know how I plan to handle it.”

“I’m eager to see any progress.”

“Good. I have just made arrangements with Jaime, a member of Mike’s investigator’s firm. We are going to interview Max .If he has significant info, Jaime will test his willingness to testify if and when”

“What about Mrs. Rocha?”

“I plan to see her personally as woman to woman. I am sure that would be more acceptable.”

“Probably.”

“Jaime and I will keep you posted as usual. I understand that you are in charge of recording and saving all the info we gather for the whole team. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

She switched subjects abruptly.” Did we ever meet when I lived in the neighborhood, Tommy? I knew your folks from Church activities”

“I don’t think so. When we were in high school, you ran around with a different bunch of kids.”

She laughed. “I am damned lucky that I split from that gang early. Almost all ended up with the Twenty Fourth Street gang, some ending up in Juvenile Hall and one killed. I owe my life to Father Jim, who plucked me out of that group and pointed me in the right direction with great books to read and some chores for the nuns. That was the big turnaround for me.”

Tommy nodded. “Father Jim got to me a little earlier which is why I never got caught up with that gang. My dad also kept a tight leash and held my nose to the grindstone.”

“I’m pleased to see you in law school. Took you some time to get there, didn’t it?”

“I needed a few extra years to get my undergraduate degree plus my time in the military. When my father was ill and then deceased, some of the load shifted to me.”

He shifted the conversation. How did you get to this level of journalism so quickly? You are young for the position, right?”

“A little. I was the whiz kid at San Jose State University and caught the right eyes including some employees of the Clarion. By the way, how much longer do you have to work this evening?”

“I’ll be done in another hour, then a bite before I hit the books.”

“I have an errand to run. Would you like to grab a bite together? I can drive you home later.”

“I’d love that.”

“Good, I’ll call you on my cell to see if you’re ready.”

The pizza place was busy but mostly for takeout. They had a booth quite removed from the waiting crowd.

“Do you have girlfriend, Tommy?”

“Not at present. How about you? I figured any woman as pretty as you would be gobbled up by now, but I don’t see any rings.”

“Thank you. I was close once. Fortunately, the day I accepted his engagement ring, I decided, just for fun, to run a background check on his family and discovered reasons to go another direction. Since that time I have been totally engrossed in my work, which is exciting.”

“That’s too bad. You must have been hit on. You are so beautiful.”

“Thanks, Tommy. I have, but many of the good ones are gone by the time they get to our age. How about you?”

“I was engaged right up until the day I got home from the Mideast. Although she knew the seriousness of my injuries, she could not fathom what my hands looked like. She simply could not take the idea of the unreal hands touching her. I was deeply disappointed but I understood. Most people would be repulsed.”

“Well, I am not. Here, take my hand in yours. See, I told you. You have a soft touch. If I didn’t know and wasn’t aware of the thin gloves, I would not know the difference.”

“That’s kind of you, but not really true.”

“Close enough. If you have time from your studies, I would like to spend some time with you. It’s great sitting with a nice guy and able to talk about real life.”

“I’d like that. Why don’t we exchange cell numbers?”

What was running through her mind was “What I want from him are his lips on mine.”

At his apartment house, he got out of the car, walked around to her window. Although it felt scary, he leaned in and gave a light sweeping kiss. “Thanks for the pizza and a great evening. I would like to do this again.”

“Me too, Tommy. Good night. Call me.”

Minnie was disappointed after their next pizza date again when she parked the car in front of his apartment. She was hoping to be kissed as a woman should be, but was disappointed when he leaned in the door and did a repeat of last night. “He’s driving me crazy.”

Chapter 3

The following Tuesday at four thirty, Mike called a meeting of the entire work group, two investigators, two journalists, two law students and one about to be attorney.

Tommy handed out notes of all the information gathered to date. Mike gave a report on the substance of the depositions. Minnie reported on the interview with Max who stated his willingness to testify and had given them the name of another ex-employee who had quit in order working for another firm, His reasons for quitting were the same as Max

Phil reported on his research and visit to the executive offices. “I have only been able to trace the ownership of approximately twenty five per cent of the stock. That stock is in the hands of two Mexican companies, the principals of which are well hidden. This definitely smells like mafia or cartels. I’ve spent hours on the Internet with little to show for my effort.”

“How about your visit to their offices?”

“The welcome mat was definitely out with a charming press officer and his lovely associate whose cleavage ran a little deep. I managed to talk with a senior vice president, but I would guess he is more a flunky than a true exec. All kinds of excuses were made for the unavailability of the two top executives. No dates that I suggested met their schedules, the usual run around”

“Minnie, are you making progress on the financial reports?”

“A little, Mike. Tommy and I are planning two work sessions around his class time do some research on the Internet. If necessary, I can get to the Pacific Stock Exchange where the stock is listed.”

“Good. Is there anything else that should be on the table and in our notes?”

Susan spoke up. “Jay and I have completed the research assigned to us and have all our notes transcribed. They are stored electronically, backed up off premises, of course.”

“Tommy, be sure that her comments are noted for the official file Thanks everybody. Good meeting. Minnie, your work has the highest priority while Jaime will pick up your work with Max and his friend.”

Susan invited Minnie and Tommy to join her and Jay for dinner. “It’s on the firm’s expense account at the DeAnza. Both, Jay’s fiancé, Cyn, and my beau, Jon will meet us there.”

Since the other couples were paired off, that left Minnie and Tommy to do the same, which was very pleasing to Tommy. He had very warm feelings from their previous times together. When they were seated next to each other he moved so that his shoulders and arms were touching hers. It felt so good. He was aware that she did not move away, giving him an encouraging smile.

Tommy took Minnie’s hand in his, getting another smile ““That’s a nice feeling. Tommy. Sorry I can’t transmit my reciprocal feeling to you.”

“You actually do, Minnie. I didn’t mention it, but I am the recipient of a “smart hand” for trial purposes. Electrical messages are sent from my new fingers to nerve endings. Your hands are soft and pliant and your knuckles smooth and small. You have petite hands.”

“My gosh. She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed it softly. She heard him say, “That is so sweet. I always wondered what that would feel like Thank you.”

“You are sweet, Tommy. I am glad we managed to meet after knowing of each other for all these years.”

They were interrupted when Susan called, out, holding her glass high. “Here’s to a great team engaged in a great humanitarian enterprise?” She was greeted with an enthusiastic response. She went on “Order anything you want from the menu. This is a celebration with no other agenda. It is Mike’s way of making a down payment for services being rendered to those less fortunate than we.”

After a few responses, it was just the two of them again. Minnie, at Tommy’s request, recited some of her favorite stories that had run in the Clarion and a few that had been published in the San Jose State University Spartan Daily.

“What was your favorite story?”

“It was the one I told you of the old man, who, each Christmas put a special gift on the porch or doorway for each child who lived on his street. It took years of scheming by the parents to discover their Santa Claus. He was not wealthy but skimped on his own needs in order to have funds to give to each child, at least one gift that they wanted. He did this by carefully constructed conversations with the children during the entire year. When a gift was beyond his means, he would con a friend to make the contribution. He was a real life Santa.”

“That is a sweet story of kindness and selflessness.”

“Tommy, do you think you can tell me about how you were wounded?”

He was silent while she could feel his hand in hers beginning to tremble. “I’m sorry. It must have been terrible. Please forgive me.”

“That’s all right. I haven’t been able to tell anyone at home that story. Someday I may tell you but not tonight. This just isn’t the time or place.”

“I understand. Hey, we have to decide on dessert.”

He turned the conversation back to the case. “What are you planning next, Minnie?”

“I’m hoping to find another ex-employee to add to our list of witnesses but first you and I need to spend some time on the Internet. Are you free at all, this week?”

“I’m free after three tomorrow and after seven on Thursday and then most of Friday. We have a part time temp helping me while we are working this case.”

“Good. That gives us plenty of time. Would you like to bring your laptop to my office about four thirty tomorrow? That will give me time to clean up all my work at the Clarion and then have access to any number of their computers. Cynthia has given me permission to use whatever in order to get this story. She, of course, has a double reason for success.”

“I’ll be there. Now I need to leave. I have some cramming to do before I hit the sack.”

“I’m ready to leave. Let’s say our good byes to the gang. I’ll give you lift.”

During the drive her mind was racing ahead. I wouldn’t mind getting another kiss, a real one.” She decided, if need be, she would take the lead.

Twenty minutes later she pulled up in front on his apartment. He had taken her hand in his and was fiddling with her fingers .She was hoping that he was trying to figure out the logistics. She took his hand and put it to her lips and saw the smile on his face. She said, “The last time I left you, I got a nice thank you kiss. I wouldn’t mind saying good night the same way.”

“Stay where you are. I’ll be right there.” This time he opened her door and took her hand to pull her to her feet. His arms embraced her as she responded with her arms about his neck. It was long warm kiss with just enough promise to stir their souls. She

felt a tenderness blooming within, which was beyond anything she had ever known. She was quivering but managed an “I liked that, Tommy. It’s a nice way to say thanks.”

She saw the blush as he leaned over to kiss her hand. “Good night, Minnie. I loved the evening.”

Me, too. See you tomorrow.”

When he arrived at the Clarion offices the next day, he was shown to her location this is your office? You must really rate.”

“Hardly, we can go to my office later. This is a special computer with a large screen so that we can work together instead of separately, unless you prefer separate.”

“Oh, no. This looks great.” He thought he might be able to feel her warm thighs and knees brush his on occasion. Just like he pictured last night before sleep arrived.

Minnie was all business. She downloaded the last quarterly filing of the financial reports and the last annual report. “I have easily available to us the previous annual figures and the report for each of the last five years. Why don’t I split the screen? You take the left side, the current quarterly. I’ll take the right side of the last annual. Make some notes and then we can talk.”

After concentrating for about forty minutes, Minnie said “Time for a break, there’s coffee in the little room over there. If you don’t mind being the errand boy, I’ll set up the screens for the next round. I like mine black.”

“Delighted. They moved to a side table but when he settled in, she sat down beside him instead of across the table. He wasn’t quite sure if it was deliberate until her body heat was being transmitted to him. Her expression was one of interest in her notes and belied her internal feelings. “What notes did you make?””

“I presumed we were looking for anomalies. It seems to me that payroll is very heavy, higher than standard for their class of business and even more askew is their reported subcontract work, most of which is to subcontractors who work on their premises.”

“Those are the same notes I have along with some minor variations, too small to consider. We can look to see how these compare to two years ago and five years ago, but let’s take a few more minutes to rest our eyes.”

“Okay with me.”

“How did you sleep last night? You look a little done in.”

“Sleep kept drifting away. I don’t mind telling you that kiss had me dreaming of more.”

“That’s nice to hear. Me, too, Tommy. It was like I was getting a promise for more. I found myself with a fantasy of a repeat performance. Maybe we can try again when I drop you off tonight.” She giggled and he smiled.

“I’m willing to try again.”

“Right now, we had better focus on our search.”

An hour later, she leaned back, arching her back and reaching with her arms to rub her lower spine “Let’s compare notes and call it a night.”

They moved to the table into the same chairs with knees bumping, she giving him a warmish smile. “I have the same notes for the previous year and the same questions.”

Tommy looked at his notes to say. “These ratios are more in line for the industry averages. That is quite a difference. I wonder what happened in the interim.”

“Hold it a minute. Let’s look on your screen at some of the foot notes.”

Five minutes later she said “Major change in management some time during the interim. We need to dig some more. When are you free again??”

“Thursday.”

“That’s good. I have a full day on two other stories tomorrow. This can hold until then. Let’s knock off and get some grub.”

“I’m ready.”

On the way to her car, she found her hand in his and liked the idea, giving her another idea.” How about we drop by my place for some bacon and eggs? It’s a quick meal and feels good to me.”

Tommy’s heart took a little leap. “Sounds like a lot of work for you, but I’m game if you let me wash the dishes afterwards.”

“Wow. A gal can hardly refuse that kind of an offer.”

He was at her car door to open it for her in the gentlemanly style of a more romantic past. “Thank you, kind sir. That deserves a reward. She meant to give him a warm kiss but it turned into a heated meeting of two sets of hungry lips. She finally

broke off, saying nothing. Her stomach was roiling and tightening She felt like her knees were unsteady so she took his arm, leading him to the door of her condo.

“Drop your jacket anywhere while I slip into some domestic type clothes. Grease will be of little help for this blouse”

He shed his jacket and went into the kitchen, reaching into the refrigerator for butter, eggs, jam and bacon. He was facing the counter when she entered. “Look at what I brought home, a man who looks like he wants to cook me a meal.” He laughed but kept arranging the food.

She reached over and found an apron, which she slipped over his head and tied the bow in back, then put her arms around his waist and leaned her head on his back. “You, Mr. Flores, seem like a keeper. This is so romantic.”

He turned and wrapped his arms around her waist, looking into her soft brown eyes. “It will cost you three more smooches like the last one if I continue.”

“Soldier boy, Here is a down payment.”

Dinner was a brief affair. They laughed and joked as they cleared the dishes, then headed for the sofa. She was cradled in his arm sighing with pleasure at the way the last hour of her life had opened up. During the last ten minutes she had paid his price with gusto and now was trying to comb her hair with her fingers.

“Let me do that.” His fingers ever so gently moved the strands back into place before he brought his lips for a bonus. “This is the best evening in the last fifteen years, Mia”, uses her given name.”

She was still a little breathless. “I think I can say the same. I love your using my real name. It sounds so intimaē.”

“I’d love a repeat performance in the near future.”

She laughed. “You mean cooking me dinner?”

“Sure or even buying you dinner if I can count on the same reimbursement.”

“Listen, man. The way you kiss, you can collect without any slaving over a hot stove.

She looked at the watch on his wrist. Since it’s time for you to hit the books, here’s a sample of things to come.”

Coming up for breath five minutes later, she said. “Get your jacket and my coat. It’s time to get you home.” To herself “Before things get out of hand.”

Being unable to find the sandman very quickly that night, Minnie was reviewing events of her past life, not liking but remembering her wild days with the neighborhood gang, many of whom were still involved in illegal activity. She remembered envying some of the other girls whose folks dressed them in nicer clothes, not that she would ever have dressed so conservatively.

She envied them more because of their boyfriends who were much nicer than her male friends. She found herself talking to herself. “I

Remember the rough way Juan kissed. There was no passion in my response as it was tonight.” Her mind lingered on her memories of looking longingly at Tomas. He was handsome and a good student, usually being eyed by the girls but paying little attention to their flirting.

“God, he was a girl’s dream and still is.” She felt herself shivering wishing he were wrapped around her at this moment.

Since they did not have access to the big computer the next afternoon, they decided to work with their laptops and her desktop in the tiny cubicle she called her office. Her neighboring workers heard giggles and quiet laughter on occasion when their movements caused bodies to rub against each other and a silence when their proximity called for a grazing of lips.

Despite those brief interruptions, they had a fistful of notes to deliver to Mike before the end of the afternoon.

He was thrilled with their findings. “I would deduce that there are a lot of non-taxable dollars flowing through out of their coffers. A full investigation might even find some money laundering. Great work, guys. You’re building a strong story, Minnie.”

“Thanks Mike. It feels good to see results after fruitless digging for hours. I’m off then.” She walked over to Tommy and in a low voice, asked, “Tommy, do you need to hit the books?”

“No. I mentioned that I was free all day.”

“How about a walk through the park and then a brief shopping trip. I need some girlie things.”

He reached for their jackets and took her hand. It felt so nice to have her hand in his.

“Mia, tell me whatever you feel free to share about the years since high school. I have this need to know more about you.”

“Are you sure? Some of it isn’t too nice.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to bring up unpleasant memories.”

“I really don’t mind, since I want to have you know the real me. Well, I managed to finish in the top ninety-five percentile in my class. I noticed, by the way, that you were the salutatorian of your class. Nice going. I did manage to turn my life around.”

“The gang experience was exciting at first. I was the queen, the girlfriend of the big bad man. He loved feeling me up but never demanded sex. He took those pleasures with one or another of the groupies.”

“He was typical of Latino men. Their mothers, sisters and special girl friends were held in esteem while all other female were there to meet their needs. At least, that is how it seemed to me.”

“I loved being the look out when he and the guys were into stealing at the corner store or at the five and dime store. I must have had a dozen of those cheap diamond imitation rings, bracelets and earrings. He loved giving me large flashy earrings.”

“He had converted his convertible to a low rider and wanted me to sit on the top of the seat, to show me off, announcing to the world what a beautiful girl friend he had. It was damned exciting until I began to see that I was going no place. The priest and nuns were helpful once I quit fighting them.”

“My dad had a cousin who lived over in the valley. Dad sent me away for the summer, which was the way I escaped the gang. Up until then I was about to become one of those tough broads. While I was gone, a new queen was installed and I was free.”

My dad had a long talk with Father Jim. Somehow I was accepted into the Catholic School and away from the old gang.

“I was strictly a nerd during my college years at State. I can remember only three dates, one to the senior prom. Those college kids had only two things on their minds, booze and sex. I can’t stand booze so I managed to stay celibate.”

“That sounds like my college career.”

Mia continued “Since I was tops in my class and had been writing for a couple of local throwaway neighborhood papers during my senior year, my professors were kind enough to give me very high accolades to accompany my resume. That’s how I landed a spot as a cub reporter here at the Clarion where I worked off my tail.”

“Did you have to borrow much money in order to get through? I know your dad had a good job, but you also had a number of siblings.”

“Oh, yes, but I have managed to retire those loans and I am helping my youngest sister with her personal expenses. She’s at Cal, Berkeley”

They emerged from the park and were headed down a lane featuring a number of boutiques. She stopped in front of Lisa’s Secrets. “Are you brave enough to come in with me?”

She saw the slight blush as he said “Just as far as the door.” She giggled and said to herself. “I wonder if he is still celibate, as hard as it is to believe at our age, not that I’m much practiced. There is an innocence hiding under that façade that is very appealing.”

He opened the door, followed her in, taking in displays of almost life like models displaying brief but beautiful cloths covering their private place and some very daring bras that lifted but left little to the imagination. He could feel the blood rushing to his face and thankful that Mia was not looking at him.

During the twenty-minute wait he managed to see a lot of things he had not even imagined before this day.

Mia had noticed his discomfort but steeled herself to avoid laughing and was moved by his behavior. “He is such a beautiful innocent.”

Outdoors, he took the package from her and took her hand in his again. “The other day you said something about almost marrying. Is it something you can talk about?”

“I love the way you are so discrete. I have not ever told anyone about that experience, but here goes.

“Bernie Rocco is from one of the valley’s well-known old families, a graduate of Bellarmine and Santa Clara University, the badge of success in this valley even now.”

“We were very recent grads and very much in love or at least I was. By the third date he was pressing me for sex. For me, it raised a lot of issues, being Roman Catholic. I did not want to lose him but in addition to worrying about sin, I did not want to get pregnant. Of course, I was not on the pill. Hey, you look uncomfortable Am I embarrassing you?”

“Sort of, but I need to hear this.”

“I had a frank discussion with him saying that I needed time to get on the pill and furthermore that I was not comfortable unless we were engaged. He promised to get me a ring and said he could protect us. Well, I knew of two girls at State who thought they had been safe and got pregnant, so I stood firm.

Figuring that his promise was enough, he began to press me, unbuttoning my blouse despite my protestations. I tried to stop him “Bernie, Please.” I was beginning to shake but his deft fingers had my blouse open in just a few seconds He slipped his fingers under the shoulders of the blouse, reaching for the snap on my bra.”

“Tears were streaming down my cheeks as I sort of squeaked “Bernie. Please, Please.”

“The look on his face frightened me There was no doubt in my mind that he was about to force me. He paused and looked into my eyes.”

“Minnie, I was sure you wanted me but as disappointed as I am I will buy the ring.” He stepped back and allowed me to rearrange my blouse. He said “Promise me you will go to see a doctor real soon.”

“For some reason, probably because of my fright, I decided to do a background check on the Rocco family and discovered that despite their public image, the family was heavily invested in two companies, known to be governed by the brotherhood, the mafia. Bernie, in fact, was listed as a vice president of the company widely known for its less than honest dealings in the valley, to put it nicely.”

“I wrote Bernie a nice note and said that I thought it best not to pursue our relationship. I thought I might find him obstinate and insistent but I never did hear from him.”

Tommy took both her hands in his, looking deep into her eye. “God. What an experience. That last time with him must have been terrifying.”

“She moved forward and lay her head on his chest. “Just hold me for a bit, Tommy. Your arms feel like a haven at the moment.”

“I’m sorry I put you through that again.”

“Don’t apologize. I had to talk with someone eventually and right now you were the right person. Thank you.” She lifted her head asking for his lips.

Deciding to go to her place for a drink, they walked to her car and sped off. On the way he asked “How about Chinese take-out. My treat.”

“Sounds good. More time for talking. I need to hear whatever you are free to talk about from those same years.”

The house was warm, just what they needed after the long walk. Sipping their wine but still holding hands, Tommy started in talking about his college years and being straight arrow. “I had to take an extra year because of long working hours to help the family. I had no time for dates or proms, missing, I’m sure, an important part of university life. I managed to get my degree before being called to active duty. In order to make extra money, I had joined the marine reserves.”

“A few months before I shipped out I began seeing a young woman from the neighborhood. She was younger than we so I don’t think you would know her. She insisted we get engaged before I shipped out.

I think I mentioned her revulsion upon seeing the prosthetic devices. I was sad for her but sort of relieved that she wanted to break off. Years in combat changes one’s view point. . It probably would have been a poor marriage.”

“You’re saying that the ending was a good ending?”

“Definitely.”

“Would it be too painful to talk about your injury?”

“I’ll try.”

Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, he began.

“Patrol duty in Iraq was the riskiest part of our duties. We were never sure if the child asking for candy was carrying a small I.E.D. (Improvised Explosive Device) in her small handbag or if she was the sweet street waif, another victim of the raging civil unrest.

Our eyes were ever roaming over the windows and roof tops, where some hidden sniper might be lying in wait.

We had just received an order to assist another squad, who had been engaged by some enemy group on the outskirts of the village. We arrived in time to see a fusillade of fire emanating from the squad who had called for help. We took up a position just to the right of their spot, shielded by some scrub. I was the leader of our small squad of four. Mickey and Bill immediately began digging a fox hole while Joe and I joined in the fire fight.

The shooting quieted down. All remained still for about a half hour. Joe and I got out our short handled spades and helped with the foxhole.

Suddenly a burst of fire erupted from the hidden enemy, sending us scuttling for the foxhole. Just as suddenly, the shooting ceased and silence fell over this piece of semi-arid landscape.

. We hadn't moved for twenty minutes. I had to appraise the situation as the squad leader. I decided to wait another few minutes before slowly emerging. A sudden burst of gunfire erupted. Slugs tore through my arms and hands that were gripping my rifle. In that moment I didn't feel any pain but I was horrified see the stumps and the blood and I passed out. I'm told that the medic who had been in another bunker was outstanding and probably saved my life since all arteries were severed and the flow needed to be stemmed quickly to save my life."

"I woke up in a field hospital and was shipped to Germany where most of the repairs were done.

There were times when I thought it better to be dead than to be dependent on others to feed me and take care of me. For instance, it's downright embarrassing to have others take of one's hygiene needs. Of course, I wasn't being logical. Emotions blocked out logic."

I had a recurring dream for three or four days. In the dream I was still in high school. I was sitting on a stool in Jose Monza's Creamery. Outside on 24th street a long black low rider convertible was leading parade of low riders. Sitting on the top of the head rest was the most beautiful girl in the world. I was aching to run out and take her away from the gang that was showing their muscle and ill-gotten riches.

That dream seemed to be followed by a nightmare in which our whole squad took a direct hit from a mortar. I woke up each time drenched in my own sweat.

My savior was a German nurse, Elsa Mosel. She had worked several dozen cases of amputees and seen the eventual results. She was loving and caring like my mother had been with all of us, encouraging us, because her experience could predict our futures beyond the current pain. Of course, like my mother, she was right. I write her regularly to tell her of my life. She will be delighted with our news and will want pictures."

He felt her tears on his cheek at that moment and opened his eyes. The look on her face was one of excruciating pain. Her empathy reached deep into his heart. He pulled her into his arms, kissing away her tears. "That was a long time ago, honey. I have made the transition and even forget at times that my hands are not my own."

Slowly her sobbing eased but somehow the tears continued. Eventually she ceased, looked up “Tommy, your shirt is soaking wet. I am so sorry. Take it off and I’ll put it in the dryer for a few minutes.”

“If I do that, you will have a first look at what a bionic man looks like.”

“That’s fine. I’m ready. I figured I would get a look at some time when I got you undressed.” She started to giggle and couldn’t stop. “I guess I gave myself away.”

He stopped unbuttoning his shirt. “You mean that?”

“I do because I am falling in love with you Tomas Flores and I can’t help it. The shame is that I have wasted all these years. . I used to dream about you in my senior year, wishing I hadn’t been trapped earlier with that gang.”

“Wow and I used to see you as that beautiful but hot tomato who I thought were sleeping with the leader of the gang.”

“You did? Was that my reputation?”

“I don’t think so or at least not sure, but it was how this innocent adolescent must have visualized you.”

He slipped off his shirt and heard a small gasp accompanied by her compassionate words “Oh, Tommy, it must have been so painful but I am glad to hear you say that is only a reminder of a bad time in your life. Your forearms look fairly real but I see those are your real biceps. No wonder I feel so good in your arms.”

She loved it when that faint blush hit his cheeks. He whispered “I had given up the idea that any woman would ever say that to me. Mia.”

She said “And I quit believing that a man like you might even hold me in your arms.”

She pecked him on the lips, took his shirt to the dryer, returned with a large bath towel to warm his upper body. She couldn’t help staring at those rippling muscles before she draped the towel over his shoulders.

“I better get to the kitchen and put the take-out in the microwave.”

She started to rise but he caught her into his arms. “Food can wait a few minutes. I need to tell you that I am hopelessly in love with you and I want to hear you say again how you feel.”

“Tommy, it seems inconceivable that this has happened to me. I knew I was falling for you the first evening we spent talking. There was no way to deny it. I kept

telling myself that this was silly and a brief flirtation but there is no denying it. My love for you must be something hidden deep down all these years until we met again. I love you, darling.”

“And I love you. I am ecstatic and befuddled. We need to talk about how we go from here.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around him and laughed. “Love does not assuage the hunger in my belly. We can talk while we eat. I am famished. Why don’t you get your shirt while I heat the food?”

One doesn’t get much talking when struggling with chop sticks so they adjourned to the sofa where she pulled him down to lie with her as they talked.”

“One of the first things we need to talk about is expressing our love with our bodies. I’ve been dreaming of making love with you and I am not insisting on engagement with you before we do.”

“I’m glad. Sleep has been hard to come by when I was visualizing you in bed with me but you need to know that I am very inexperienced, Mia”

“I can’t be very far ahead of you. I fumbled my way with a guy after I broke off with Bernie He jumped my bones, had his climax and rolled off before I even breathed very hard. I guess we can learn together.”

“I guess. Damn, I’m shaking just thinking about it. It’s been a while since I have even read anything on the subject.

“Since I knew I was falling for you, I did a little research. Come on. Carry me to the bedroom where we can start undressing each other. That should get us into the mood.”

They began to laugh as Tommy fumbled with the hook on her bra and actually blushed when he had to slip off her panties She teased him into laughter when led him to the shower.

“Mia, I love the way you keep me laughing. I never thought of having sex as fun.”

“Well it might get more serious as we go along.”

Laughter and smiles were very present during breakfast the next morning but Mia noticed a somber look on his face as she refilled his coffee cup. “What’s up, soldier boy?”

“I was just thinking about those early dark days in the hospital, in Germany when my future seemed so bleak. I felt lost and could see no future.”

She put down the coffee, stood behind him, put her arms around his neck, snuggling her face in his hair. “Last night before I slept, I gave God thanks for rescuing me during my teen years and saving me for this chance at life with you.”

Tomas rose, took her in his arms. “Amen to that and thank God for Father Jim. I have the answer to my long standing question about destiny.”

The Tuesday evening meeting of all participants started at five. Mike was pleased with the report from Minnie and Tommy.” There is enough data here to go forward. We can prove money tax evasion and probably money laundering. We have them cold on the harassment and other EEOC violations. The FBI thinks this case will break open one or two others involving the Cartel and the local mafia.”

“Now, however, the final piece from Phil. It is the clincher. You’re on, Phil.”

“I was able to identify two of the major players in this corporation. As I reported earlier, I can confirm that a quarter stake belongs to a set of corporations closely tied to the Mexican cartel. The single largest stakeholder is the surprise. The Rocco brothers own at least thirty percent of the stock. The CEO is a distant relative of the Rocco’s imported from New York and the second in command is a Mexican national. What we have here is a marriage between the Mexican Cartel and the Italian Mafia.”

The room was abuzz for the next five minutes, Mike not even trying to bring order to the meeting. Minnie finally spoke up. So how do we proceed?”

“I think the case should now go to the government. I have already talked with the resident SAC of the FBI. He and I are meeting with the chief of the EEOC for this district, who is expecting to put this case at the top of the list. IRS is sending a representative to the meeting. You should be free to go with your story as soon as we know the results of that meeting and the date of their proposed action.”

Just before they closed the meeting, Mike called “Minnie, do you have some other news for us?” Minnie was surprised and started to say no. Mike interrupted her. Don’t try to say no because all the evidence is before us.” She began to blush but Mike said “Please put your left hand forward and spin that ring one hundred eighty degrees.”

When she did, the women rushed forward to hug her and eye the diamond. After the rush and the babble, Mike said “anyone want to guess who the lucky fellow is?”

There was not a single guess until Susan noticed a faint blush on Tommy's cheeks. "Why, Tommy, you clever and silent operator. The silent type gets the girl." Congratulations were in order.

Mike then said. I have saved another bit of good news for the last. Susan has the floor first."

She lifted a piece of stationery above her head. "This is the message I've been waiting for, news that I am now a member of the bar."

Hugs and kisses abounded for a flushed Susan. When the noise abated, Michael held her hand and said "I want you to know that Susan is now officially an attorney on the staff of Michael Malek and Associates. We came to terms this afternoon." The clapping and bravas resounded through the whole building.

Mike then suggested they celebrate the announcements with some champagne at the DeAnza and then remembered to announce that Mark was definitely serving his clerkship next summer in their offices.

"On second thought" said Mike "let's celebrates with a dinner. This can be our holiday celebration as well. Mark, call Cyn. . Susan, give Jon a whistle. I'll call Cynth who is still at the office. Tommy, you can call the DeAnza dining room Tell them it's a special party."

Mike called Minnie late Wednesday afternoon. "Hi, Minnie. The FBI and Treasury are serving papers and collecting evidence at ten A.M. tomorrow. You are free to do your thing as of Thursday if you choose and I suspect you do. I set up an appointment for you with the press rep from the FBI at eleven tomorrow, if you want to call." He gave her the number.

"I'll make that call right now. By the way, Mike, weren't you involved with Wilton's campaign for congress?"

"Yes I was. Why do you ask?"

"Were you involved with some others helping to get some young Turks elected?"

"Where did you hear that?"

She laughed, "You know better. Reporters never give away their sources."

"So?"

I just picked up a story from Washington. It seems that thirteen young newly elected congress men and women have given notice to the Republican leadership that they will not be necessarily voting the Republican bloc on all issues. They want to see action beyond political ideologies. Quite a statement.”

“How did they give notice?”

“I understand that the our recently elected congressman, Wilton, and some others took a message from their caucus to the House Speaker saying they would oppose a vote to do away with the Health reform bill that was passed, but were willing to address amendments. Strange, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is.”

“There’s something in your voice that tells me this is not news. I’ll be damned. Why am I surprised? You, man, are connected beyond Silicon Valley. What, no response?”

“You are a smarty pants, young lady.”

“That’s why I get the big bucks.”

“You certainly earned them on this last story.”

“Thank you, for a great story and Mr. Matchmaker thank you for what appears to be the start of a great romance. I first loved him from a distance when we were teenagers. You are a smooth catalyst.”

“You are welcome. Don’t stay away now that this project is over. My door is always open.”

“I will. I promise. I know those women will be delighted. You, Michael Malek are indeed the champion for those who need another chance.”

The End.

BOOK III

Where IS MY MOTHER

Chapter 1.

Michael Jr. and his fiancé, Cyn, came to a resting place after three hours of hitting the books in the law library. “Jay”, as she called him “What do you know about your dad’s Cynthia?”

“No more than you do. Dad only hit me with the highlights last weekend, including the fact that she is the Editor in Chief of the San Jose Clarion. She opened up quite a bit tonight, I thought.”

They were discussing his dad’s friend, the first woman he had dated since mom’s death almost a year ago.

“I thought she was warm, open and very charming. I love her. I believe she will be a great role model. I’m looking forward to seeing her again. Do you think they would come here for drinks and dinner? I know this apartment is a little tight, but we could move some of the furniture and make it roomy enough.”

“You know, we could host them at the family house. They are going to be living in her apartment so they will not be living at the house and I still go home occasionally.”

“That would be nice. Will you do that?”

He laughed “Only if you’re good to me tonight.”

She giggled. “It’s a deal since I am good to you almost every weekend night.”

He pulled her to the sofa for a little snuggling. She seemed a bit remote, very unlike her, “Something serious on your mind. Hon?”

“It’s probably silly but when she walked into the room, I couldn’t help but think of my real mother, whom I have never met, of course. I was so taken. Natural blond at her age. Skin coloring like mine. We are the same height with the same taste in clothing. If she were fifteen or sixteen when I was born, it would be a natural fit. I just can’t get rid of it on my mind.”

“Oh, Hon. Don’t set you up for a fall. Do you know the odds?”

“Of course I do, but you know that I have just started the search for my birth mother and have my folk’s blessing to try. Sometimes I think it is crazy since I have had such a great life with my adopted parents. . In fact, I remember how heartbroken I was when I was told. I didn’t even want to think that they were not my real parents.”

He pulled her head to his chest and kissed the top of her head. “We’ll do what we can. I’ll check with Dad so we will have them to dinner. Besides, I need to make up some lost time with Dad. I was closer to my mom while the girls were closer to dad.”

“Jay, you are everything a woman could ask for. Are you willing to wait for dinner?” He smiled as he pulled her closer.

Monday afternoon at Mike’s office, Sarah’s voice interrupts his thought. “Junior is on the phone. Line two.”

“Hi, son. This is a pleasure. Sure I can join you at my club at six.” Laughing he asks “Looking to sponge a free drink?”

“Something likes that but I also have some questions.”

Mike said “You’re on.”

Junior was waiting in the lobby when Mike arrived to escort him to a table. He decided to plow right in. “Some very strange thing happened this past week end for both Cyn and me. First, my seeing you twice recently made me realize that you and I have never made a really solid connection since mom died. For whatever reason I was always closer to momma and you seemed to be with the girls. I would like to change that if possible during the coming months.”

“Junior I would love that. Just to show you how I misjudged you, I thought that you, not Julie, would be the most difficult to accept my Cynthia into our family.”

Junior burst into a big smile. “I’m happy it turned out the way it did because this has been on my mind for a couple of months. In fact, I had planned to call you to meet my Cyn when things changed at the party. I wanted you to meet her before Julie and Marie did.”

Mike reached across to take his sons hands in his. “Dad, Cyn wants to invite you and Cynthia to have dinner with us. Do you think next Friday or Saturday would work?”

I’m sure it would. We have not been making dates on the weekends, using that time to get to know each other.”

“Great .She was going to have you come to her apartment, which is a little shy on space. I suggested we might use the house but she is more comfortable in her own kitchen.”

“It will make no difference to us. Casual, I presume?”

“Definitely.”

Mike laughed, “That will give us a chance to return your Cyn’s jeans which Cynthia borrowed last weekend. She soiled her own while we were looking around the attic. Any particular reason for the invitation?”

“I’m a little bit hesitant to even mention this but we were so taken with the resemblance between the two of them. Cyn would like to explore possibilities of any relationship. She was adopted and is starting a search for her birth mom. Above that, she was so impressed with your Cynth that she wants to develop a possible friendship.”

“That is indeed a real tribute. I’m looking forward to the date. You should know that I was impressed with your gal, or should I say woman. I expect both of you to make the law review, when it’s time. I just missed, mostly because of my interest in local politics.”

“All right. I have to run, Dad. Friday it is, unless you call.”

Michael Malek, attorney with a large practice in San Jose, California, was six, two, with dark brown hair, facial features and an athletic build that seemed to draw a second look whenever he entered a room.

He was a power house in the community having been active in community affairs and behind the scenes politics for over twenty years.

Mike, a widower, had lost his wife, Helen, to cervical cancer almost a year ago. A few months ago he had met and fallen in love with Cynthia Talent, recently appointed Editor in Chief of the San Jose, Clarion, the largest daily newspaper in the San Francisco Bay Area.

He was a little late arriving at their apartment after having drinks with his son, Michael, Jr., called either Junior or Jay, depending on who was calling him.

Cynthia was opening the door “Hi, big guy. Working late, tonight?”

“Naw. I had a drink with Junior after a call out of the blue. We are invited to have dinner at Cyn’s apartment on Friday unless you want to beg off. Apparently she was impressed with your openness and hopes maybe the two of you could set up a bi-generational friendship.”

“I wouldn’t miss that for the world.”

“Junior said she was so taken with the resemblance between the two of you that she wondered if there was any possible family relationship?”

After a brief hesitation while she was pouring the wine, she said. “Sounds exciting. I love getting to know the younger set, particularly your kids.”

When they finished the dinner dishes, Cynthia asked, “Do you have work to do this evening?”

“Nothing that won’t wait.”

“Let’s go to the sofa and talk. I have a couple of things on my mind.”

With his head in her lap she was caressing his chest and then leaned over to drop her gentle kiss on his lips. “I’ve been trying to find a way to share another event which I find difficult to discuss. Silly way to act with you, but it has been roiling around at the funniest times, never when we are in any of our confidential or intimate conversations.”

Her voice quavered and stopped. He pulled her head down, “Would it be better if you were lying here with me?”

Without replying, she scrambled down, cozied herself inside the sofa with Mike on the outside. She buried her face in his chest and began to sob. Mike held her tight while he used his hankie to help wipe the tears. As the sobs slowed down, he lifted her face and kissed away the tears.

“Oh Michael. You are such a dear. Meeting Cyn triggered my resolve to talk with you. Seeing the resemblance made me think of a daughter I never had. Remember I told you that I slept with two men during my university years. Well, that is not totally factual.” She stopped to take another breath. “The second time occurred because I was raped, raped right on the campus lawn at night, thirty feet from a walkway with students going to and from classes. I can’t give you details at this moment but will someday if you want.”

Her voice was quavering. She paused to hear his response. He just nodded for her to continue as she wanted. “I can tell you that in some way and for reasons unknown. I endured and moved through the severe trauma within a relatively short period, but it was unrelenting while it lasted. I had nightmares that involved bits and pieces of that evening. . The headaches were oppressive as was my fear that he might find me to try again.”

My parents, actually my mother, wanted me to keep the child, she being strong prolife Baptist, but I could not. I went for counseling to Planned Parenthood and eventually gave up the fetus.” She began to sob again, wetting Mike’s shirt since she needed holding and he wanted her there in the cradle of his bosom.

It was another ten minutes before she could continue. “Going to Planned Parenthood was a great decision. My counselor was outstanding, making it possible for me to get through with minimal recurrences of those symptoms.” She paused, gulped twice and then went silent for a long moment before continuing.

“The doctors made it possible for me to still bear children, which were important for me in my first marriage. It probably accounted for my anger when my husband said he wanted no children.”

“Poor Cynthia. What a load you have been carrying. I am glad that you finally felt free to let it out.”

“When I came to the realization that I was slipping past the age where I might want a child and no possible husband on the horizon, I had myself fixed so that I would not accidentally get pregnant.”

“What has happened is past and nothing is to be done. I have accepted that, but it was that I had not shared that secret that was driving me wild since things became serious between us. I wanted so much to tell you but could not find the entry, thus keeping up the good front for you.”

“Well, if Cyn is an adopted child, and I am guessing she is, then I shall have to disappoint her even though we are strong look-alikes. Oh, Michael, I am a basket case. Are you sure you want me hanging around your neck with the problems of my past?”

“That’s history and it has shaped this wonderful loving woman who had crept her way into my life without even trying. No way will you get rid of me. Besides where would I find another hot lover who has been able to turn me into a young stud?”

Giggling, she said, “You are a dear. Just hold me. Your arms and breast do provide a safe haven for this woman.”

It was one thirty when Mike whispered. Cynthia, I will carry you to bed. We’ve slept for hours.” He lifted her in his arms and started down the hall.

“This takes me back to my early years when I would fall asleep in our living room and my daddy would carry me upstairs and tuck me into bed.”

“Did he kiss you like this?”

“Not with that kind of fervor, but you can keep testing.”

Chapter 2.

The youngsters decided to host them at Cyn's small apartment. Junior called to give them directions. They found a parking space within a block of Cyn's apartment building and were greeted at the top of the stairs by both young folks.

During a brief cocktail time, Mike led the conversation so that both women were led into telling stories of their past, his way of getting them to warm up to each other.

The wine was premium and the Wellington Beef expertly cooked. Cynthia complimented her. "You can probably make a good living as a chef and have more fun than you will practice at the bar."

"Thanks for those kind words, but Jay expects me to be both chef and law partner but he knows that we will be partners in every aspect of our life, including the kitchen. He's learning fast."

Junior was grinning. "She has me hogtied as her slave. What can a guy do? Any advice, dad?"

"Don't get me in trouble. You spent a long time watching your mom run my life. I'm just a patsy for the woman I love, especially a tall blond I met recently."

"I guess I'm hooked since I fell in love with her younger twin."

After he got the laugh he expected, a silence fell over the group allowing for Mike to pick up the slack. "Cyn, Junior or Jay, as you call him, mentioned that you wanted to see if you and Cynthia might have some family ties."

"It's a little more than that. I was so taken with you the other night, Cynthia. I saw some of myself in you now and some hope that I might get to know you better in the future.

As to physical similarities, I happen to be adopted and have started a search for my birth mother. Since we all were stunned with the uncanny resemblance between us, I wanted to know if someone in your family or extended family may have put out a child for adoption and if I had found a clue."

"I'd love to say that you are my daughter but I can't be of any help. Neither, I, nor anyone related directly to me that I can think of has ever had to do that. I would have been proud to claim you as my daughter."

"We knew it was a very long shot but. I just felt I had to try." She giggled as she said "Well, when you and Jay's dad are married, I will become your daughter."

Cynthia blushed a little, quickly changing the subject. "I'm glad you asked about family ties and I would love to help in any way that I can, Furthermore, I hope we find ways to see each other often. Michael and I love loafing weekends and want you to call when your studies allow you. Promise me that you'll call."

Michael piped up. "I see some dessert over on the counter but it looks like we need to clear the table first. Why don't you gals retire to the living room while Junior and I handle these chores?"

Junior was already on the move, laughing, "Even my father conspires to enslave me."

Twenty minutes later the women were serving up homemade pie and coffee. Mike was commenting on the neat layout of the apartment "but it's a little tight for two, isn't it?"

Cyn chortled "Only Friday evening until Sunday at nine. He can handle his own domestic chores five days a week. We have three study nights at his apartment or the library."

Junior popped up. "Dad, she is a tough disciplinarian. No hugging, kissing and such except on weekends."

Mike laughed. "You're living your dad's life all over again. That's the way it was with Helen and me. Good for you, Cyn. "

"Cyn, if Friday evening is good for you, plan to have dinner with us two weeks from today."

"Thank you. We'll be there. By the way, our wedding is set for the second Saturday in October, back yard at the family home, ceremony and reception. It will be small and private with thirty four guests only .I hope I can count on my new family for some help."

"Don't worry, Cyn We six will be there when you call."

On the way home, Cynthia said. "What great kids. I am feeling so rich and blessed with the way your family is adopting me. . What's on for the morrow?"

"I have a few phone calls to make on the political front. Remind me to tell you about it at lunch."

"I have to start looking for a dress and accessories, but you won't be of any help."

“Why not call the girls. You can take them to lunch after they help you choose. Just remember I want to see something not matronly, something that will say “Down boy.”

She busted up and said. “You have sex on the mind.”

“You betcha, while I’m still young.”

Cynthia and Michael had invited her family for visit before the wedding, so that they could meet Michael. They arrived earlier that day and now they were finishing lunch on the balcony of Cynthia’s condo. Although it had been a long time since they had been together, it hadn’t taken long to reestablish warmth that had been there earlier in their lives. Her mom was relaxed and not being judgmental as was her occasional manner.

Michael had a few phone calls to make and the Talents continued their conversation, talking mostly about family history. When Cynthia felt the moment was right she asked “Mom or Dad. Do either of you know within our extended family whether any aunts or cousins ever gave birth outside marriage and had the child adopted?”

Her mother immediately said. “Our family never talked about things like that.” Cynthia thought that her mom was in too great a hurry to dismiss the subject. She turned first to her brother. “You ever hear any gossip like that?”

“I don’t think so, but why do you ask?”

“You will meet a young woman who is in the wedding party that will make you do a double take. She could be my young sister. She has started a search for her birth mother, she, having been adopted as a newborn.”

She kept looking at her mom on the sly and thought she saw her mom’s lips working.

“I promised her I would help her, using the resources of the paper to what extent I could. She has the blessing and understanding of her adoptive folks who love her very much, of course.”

She looked at her dad, who was trying to send some message to her mom. He finally said. “It can’t hurt, Mary. That happened about twenty years ago. Besides, this is only family, but wouldn’t it be wonderful for Jeanne if it were to be so.”

After a long period of silence, her mom said, “You have a cousin, Jeanne Talent, my youngest brother’s daughter who had a baby out of wedlock. She was under age, still subject to her mother’s control. My sister-in-law insisted she bring the baby to

birth but then refused to help her, banishing her from the family for bringing shame on the family. Jeanne, alone without a future she could count on, decided to give up her baby.

She went into deep depression until she met up with her Jim, a loving and kind man. They now have two children of their own. My brother Gerard was heartbroken but felt he had to side with his wife.”

“Do you think Jim knows about the baby?”

“I have no idea. My sister-in-law cut us out of their lives but I do hear from my brother at least twice a year either by post card or a short note. I recently got his email address.”

“Where did this all happen?”

“In Washington, D.C. where my brother still lives, although I know nothing about Jeanne. I get the idea that he keeps in touch on the sly.”

“Do you think Uncle Gerard would talk with me about Jeanne if I were to visit him? Just between us, Michael and I are honeymooning in the northeast, planning to see the colors, and then driving down through New York to D.C.”

“He probably would. He doted over you as a baby until his Jeanne was born. . I’ll give you his address and phone number. I’ll write him a note while you are on the road. Just don’t get your hopes up. It is a long shot. Now, tell us all about this man of yours. He is a little older than you, isn’t he?”

Cynthia waxed eloquently for a couple of hours, answering all their questions. When they were ready to leave, she said to her brother. “The car is yours for as long as you stay. Take Ellie and the folks to San Francisco. The house is at your disposal until you are ready to leave. We will be gone for about ten days.”

The last two weeks had been a marvelous honeymoon period. Five minutes after settling into their suite at the Willard Hotel in D.C., Cynthia was dialing and making a date to visit Uncle Gerard.

With his arms enfolding Cynthia, Uncle Gerard had no way to wipe the tears of joy at seeing this grown woman, who had been his precious joy before the arrival of his own Jeanne. “We haven’t seen each other for about twenty years, maybe a little less. Am I right?”

“Just about, Uncle G. Remember when I called you that?”

“Oh, yes. That started a round of reminiscing that went on for an hour. “We better put on the vittles. You look so beautiful and Sis says you were a gorgeous bride. You are absolutely glowing.”

When they were almost finished eating, Gerard said “Sis says you want to talk about Jeanne. How can I help?”

She told him the story of the two Cynthias and the close resemblance. Mom finally gave in and told me about Jeanne, the family secret. I was hoping to chat with her or even with you to see if this was an avenue for my friend to pursue I know it’s a long shot but that is better than not trying”.

“If asked, I am sure Jeanne will be willing to talk with you, Her Jim knows the story. Maybe I can tell you enough so that is not necessary. If it leads to something then perhaps your friend can talk to her directly. How does that sound?

“Fair enough.”

Over the next hour he told her all the facts surrounding the whole affair, even a description of the young man as best as Jeanne could remember. She made copies of the info he had regarding the hospital, the dates and other details of which he was aware. Cynth felt she had enough information for Cyn to pursue. They had another cup of tea while she waited for the cab. They promised to write each other.

The bottle of Chardonnay was chilling in the ice bucket along with an assortment of cheeses and crackers. Mike was wrapped in one of the hotel terry cloth robes. Hers was lying on the sofa waiting for her. She says, it would be nice to have you undress me and slip me into that robe but only the first part would happen. I would never get to the robe part. I choose to have the wine just as I am. She plopped herself down next to Mike while he filled her glass.

“Tell me about your visit.

She spun out all the details of the visit with emphasis on the Jeanne part.

“That sounds like it is worth following up. Do you have a plan for getting the info to Cyn?”

“Not yet. I figure we can work on that while we fly back. What is your plan for tomorrow?”

“Your choice. “

“Since you still have a lot you want to see at the Smithsonian, I think we ought to do that and then wind up at the Mellon Museum, that is the National Gallery.”

With a grin about to burst out in a smile, he asked “Hungry?”

“Not for food.”

After a full day of visiting museums, in the cab on the way back to the hotel, Mike said, “I think I have now had enough museum fare to last me a while.”

The two honeymooners caught the 2:10 from Dulles for San Francisco, the next morning.

Cynthia called Maggie, her administrative assistant, the morning after their arrival. “I’ll be in about ten. No calls, please. I need a good briefing from you and a date with the big boss if he is available. Assuming the editorial board is meeting at two let them know I plan to attend as a listener. I am still officially on leave.”

That was the plan but Maggie with encouragement from Mr. Sparks, the publisher, set up a welcome back party for ten o’clock, with as many staff members as could fit in the Great Room. Signs blossomed during the short lead-time along with some silk ribbons found in someone’s desk. Her boss, Dave Sparks, had reached Mike and enticed him to show up a few minutes after ten on the pretense of some important information that had come his way. Someone rushed to a bakery, several blocks away, to pick up several large white cakes, getting the baker to ice it with outlines of a wedding couple.

It was a short but warm celebration. No speeches were made. Congratulations were offered individually and a tenor from the pressroom sang a love song.

It had been a nice way to start back into her routine. After the board meeting, She invited her associate editor in for a drink at her desk so that she could thank him and commend him for a job well done, telling him of compliments she heard of his performance.”

That evening, with Michael’s approval she called Cyn. “How would you like to join us for that dinner date that did not happen so many weeks ago?”

Getting an affirmative response she went on. “Good. Why don’t you have Jay call his dad? We can use some of his muscle to move a few things into the house while you and I do some cooking and baking. It’s strictly casual. I can tell you all about honeymooning while we cook.”

Cyn and Jay arrived early. The men decided to put off cocktails until their work was done. The two Cynthia’s donned their aprons, started preparing the scalloped potatoes with ham, the spinach salad and a special desert. Cynthia said, “Cyn, we can

talk about the honeymoon at dinner but for now tell me how you are doing in your search for your mom?”

“Nothing yet. I am just starting.”

“I have a squeak of a lead for you to follow. It may be nothing but you will get some experience and learn how to follow trails.”

Cynth saw the spark of hope spring into Cyn’s eyes. “It’s not much. I want you to relax. The lead will take you across the country and since your folks live in California it seems unlikely.”

“What is it?”

“Remember I said that I had no knowledge of any possibility with my extended family. Well, when my mom was here, I managed to squeeze out a family secret. My mother was most reluctant. She considered it a shameful sin that put a mark on the family name. Between my dad and me, we got her to give in. It seems that a cousin of mine, a little younger was raped and gave up the baby for adoption somewhere on the east coast.”

“Her dad, my Uncle Gerard, one of my favorite relatives, agreed to talk with me while we were on our honeymoon. I had a grand visit with him. His wife will have nothing to do with the daughter although she would not give permission for an abortion. She, like my mother, is a stiff-necked Baptist Right to Lifer. She threw out her daughter once the baby was born.”

“Do you think I might be able to find her and talk with her?”

“Possibly, but first I will give you some information so you can do some preliminary research. If, after that, you still feel like proceeding, then you can talk to her dad, who has stayed in close touch. He is willing to talk with her about proceeding when and if it seems proper.”

Cyn reached for her hankie in order to stem the tears that were escaping. “Even if it is a blind alley, I thank you. I can’t believe that you took time on your honeymoon to do this for me.”

“My heart is out to you for this effort and I had a nice benefit, a good visit with Uncle Gerard.”

They were interrupted by the entry of two tired furniture movers who were pushing the drinks trolley through the kitchen doorway.

Cyn called her the next morning. “Do you have time for a quick bite of lunch, my treat?”

“Tell you what. Bring some Chinese takeout at 11:45 to my office. I have a one o’clock, unusual but on the docket anyhow.”

Cyn apparently agreed. “Good. I’ll leave word at the reception desk to have you escorted to my office.”

They spent little time on small talk. Cyn was eager to tell what she learned “I talked with my folks last night. They continue to give their blessing but are hoping I give it up. They did share two important pieces of information. . They picked me up in the maternity ward of a hospital in northern Virginia and were aware that my mother had been raped by a young man in his early twenties, white, Nordic appearing, according to the description given by my mother.”

She paused to read the reaction that might emanate from Cynthia’s face. Cynthia made a real effort to appear neutral although she felt an inner excitement. . To herself “Wouldn’t this be something? What would you like to do?”

“I’m too emotional. Please give me a clue.”

“All right, let me make some phone calls. I’ll call you this evening if I can get some ideas from Uncle Gerard. Now let’s dig in before the Chow Mein gets cold.”

She took a chance she could reach Gerard without his wife listening in. and hit it right. “She’s gone to some church meeting. So tell me.”

She explained Cyn’s findings and her state of mind.

“Give me her phone number at home. I will try to call her tonight at eleven which is eight your time. Call me if the timing is not acceptable.”

“You are still the sweetest uncle in the world.”

“That’s true, but let’s not shout it out too loud in this house. After a chat with your friend, I plan to talk with Jeanne. I know she has told her Jim but she may have reservations about what she tells her children.”

“I understand. Thanks again. We’ll stay in touch.”

Cyn was breathless when she answered the phone. “Hi, Cynthia, I’m just in from my one class for the day.”

“If eight o’clock is convenient, you will get a call from Uncle Gerard. Any future movement is in the hands of you two. I hope you will keep me posted.”

“Oh, I will, without a doubt. I owe you big time.”

Gerard listened to her tone of voice; her almost pleading for help, concluding that she had a firm determination to find her mother. He understood the tightness of her voice as she hesitatingly told him what she knew.

He promised nothing except a phone call within the next three days. She wasn't sure about her feelings when she put down the phone.

“I wonder what it means that he gave me no clue. That doesn't sound like good news for me. What is good news at this point? I may find out it is she, but she will have nothing to do with me. God, this is scary”

She called Jay. “Honey, are you free to spend the night?” After a long pause she said, “Ten will be fine. I'll try to do some reading until you get here.”

She was in tears by the time he arrived. She felt like she was trapped with no light in view and no hand holds to grip until her Jay had his arms around her. When he released his embrace he saw that she was shaking, rubbing her arms as though she was cold. Jay was afraid she was going into shock.

He fetched her robe and turned up the gas wall furnace. He took her to the sofa and lay with her in his arms until he sensed she was not shivering. She continued to lie close with her head on his chest and her arms encircling his waist.

“Honey, I'm all twisted up. My brain reminds me to be calm but I can't.”

“Start at the beginning.”

She pulled her thoughts into line and began. She told him about what Cynthia had done for her when in Washington. “I then talked to dad and mom and discovered that I was born in a hospital in Virginia, about thirty miles from D.C. I went to see Cynthia to help me decide what next step to take. I could tell she was hesitant to give me advice. I respect that since I know that she is empathetic and loves me.”

“She put the ball in my court by arranging for Uncle Gerard to call me. I knew he was listening for more than just my words. He was testing me. It was when he told me in a neutral tone that he would call within the next three days. That is when I lost it.”

“What would you like me to do? Is there anything I can do?”

“I can't think of anything specific. You do have a way of keeping me calm and getting me on track when I get carried away just like you are doing right now.”

“What is running through your mind now?”

“Should I continue to search or forget it? My folks think I could find something devastating.”

“What does your heart say?”

“I need to meet my real mother. I know it will not spoil my relationship with mom and dad.”

“Suppose nothing comes of this lead.”

“I guess I will try to find other leads. I can talk to a few women who have done this successfully. They are available on the internet.”

“Have you set any kind of time limit?”

“Yes, I have. If I have no solid lead by Christmas, that’s it.

“Sounds like you have a plan.”

“I guess I do.”

“So?”

“Follow this lead the best I can and quit fretting. Let it happen since it is not in my hands. Daddy always said, “Be diligent but don’t spend a life time following a dream because it may only be a dream.”

“Lie here. I’ll make us some hot chocolate.”

Later she asked “will you spend the night?”

“Of course. I plan to keep you warm and safe all night.”

“Jay, I am so glad we found each other. You are my rock.”

He laughed “And sometimes your lover.”

“Oh, yes, that too.”

Chapter 3.

Gerard placed a call to Jeanne and Jim. “Jeanne, I came across some information that you may want to know. Can you meet me half way tomorrow evening, both of you, so we can talk?”

He listened for a minute then “I’d rather do it in person. I assure there is no danger, no risk and no I am not at death’s door. Tomorrow.” It was obviously with reluctance that they agreed.

Both cars pulled up at the same time in the restaurant parking lot. Jeanne ran to her dad “Daddy, it is so nice to see you. I am sorry that we can’t do this more often and openly. Mama would have a fit. Damn her.”

They walked to the door arm in arm with Jim trailing behind. Gerard waited until their orders were given to the waitress.

“I guess there is no soft way to start but I will. What would be your reaction to the possibility of finding your daughter?”

“Wow. That came out of left field. Believe it or not, such a thought never entered my mind with all that secrecy stuff and the need to protect the child.”

“Does it ever cross your mind, that is, the idea of one day meeting her?”

“Yes but not often. I did quite often until the day that Jim listened to my story and said he still wanted to marry me. The incident faded away down deep or far away. With the arrival of our two children, thoughts of my daughter began fading.”

Gerard looked at Jim when he said “I picked up some information recently from your cousin, Cynthia, who lives on the west coast that might lead us to your daughter. How would you feel about talking with the young lady to see if it is truly your daughter?”

Jim reached over to cover Jeanne’s hand and exchanged looks for a few moments. It was Jim who spoke. “My only worry is that if the children were to know, it would mean that Jeanne would have to talk to them about the rape. I can’t even imagine the impact of that within our family.”

“How old are the girls?”

“Sixteen and fourteen. Both are pretty sophisticated. They are both very worldly and knowledgeable about sexual relations. The papers run a story every week about a woman being assaulted. They might be traumatized to find out it had happened to their mother.”

Jim said. "There is no way to know, dear. If you would like to follow up, you know I will support you. We can deal with whatever is the result."

"Oh, Jimmy, just this conversation is causing this old ache to find out how her life has turned out. It's scary and somewhat risky but I think I have to find out. I wonder how I will feel if I meet this young lady, like her and then find out she is not my daughter."

Gerard said "I don't think you should meet her until we have at least a ninety eight per cent assurance that she is the one. I am willing to handle all the negotiations"

Another look passed between Jeanne and Jim. He nodded and then she did.

"I have the date of the birth. Was it the Community Hospital in Manassas?"

"I'm not sure, dad, but I think so."

"Did you talk with adoptive parents?"

"No but through the attorney I gave them some ideas for names I was considering."

"What names?"

"Deborah, Marie and Cynthia."

"How do you remember so clearly?"

"I don't know why but I remember the process. Deborah for Deborah Kerr, the movie stars. Marie for my best friend and Cynthia because of my cousin who was so beautiful."

Deadpan although surprised he asked "Anything else?"

"The attorney's name was John Severn I think that is all the pertinent information."

"I'll call you on a night when your mother is at church."

The rest of the meal conversation centered on the grandchildren and Jim's job and the fact that Jeanne had gone back to work as they parted, Gerard with tears in his eyes said "Kiss those grandchildren for me. God, I wish I could be close to them."

Gerard decided to try for any information he might get from the hospital in Manassas. He was frustrated when he could not find a phone listing through AT&T

information. “Jeanne only thought so and must have forgotten the name of the hospital. After all, it was so many years ago.”

He called the Manassas News to see if they could shed any light on the subject. The receptionist said she had no idea. “The only hospital here is Good Sam that is Good Samaritan. Why don’t you call back in an hour when the editor is back He has owned this paper for thirty years? Maybe he can help you.”

Gerard hung up, frustrated. “Her adopted mother couldn’t have forgotten the name of the hospital where she first saw her new daughter.” He paced and spent a fruitless hour trying to figure it out.

“Hello, is this the editor? Good. I am doing some research, which included the name of a Community Hospital in Manassas but cannot find a record of its existence. Your young lady says as a longtime resident that you might help.”

“I think I can. The Community hospital had a major fire seven years ago. This community did not have the funds to bring it back up to code so it was sold to a national chain and renamed Good Samaritan.” He continued, giving more info to Gerard who had the patience to wait him out.

“Do you know if they lost their records?”

“I know for a fact that they did lose some, maybe not all. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No thanks. It’s a private matter. I do appreciate your help.”

To him “That’s a break. For a while I thought the thread had snapped”

At the archive department of the hospital, he found the archivist willing to help. Together they searched through the old records. Both were feeling desperate when, dusty and begrimed, they finally found the records for the year and then the actual file of the adoption.

His next disappointment came when he reached the records department archivist said regretfully “Sorry that file is sealed and will require a court order to be opened. The order must be sought only by the name on the file.”

“Thank you.” More frustration. He decided to call Cynthia at the paper only to find she was tied up but was promised a call back within the hour.

“Hi, honey. I need a little help even if I promised to leave you out of this. Your friend should hire an attorney. She can get the sealed records open only with a court

order. I don't know if she can afford one or whether she has the drive to see this to the end. Help."

"Of course I will do what I can. Do you think it's worth it?"

"I do. I had better call you to keep this from you-know-who."

"Tomorrow about this time."

She waited until five to call Cyn. "Hi, Cyn. I just had a call from Uncle Gerard. He must think it is worthwhile. Can you come to dinner? Sure, bring Jay."

She dialed Michael as she walked out of the office. "Honey, I'm just leaving. Would you pull the pork roast out of the freezer and start defrosting in the microwave and turn on the oven to preheat at 350 degrees. Jay and Cyn are coming to dinner. I'll be in your arms in twenty minutes."

When the children arrived, Mike poured drinks and herded them into the den. Dinner will be another hour or more. Cynthia's changing. Oh here she is."

Five minutes later she asked, "Cyn, how are you doing?" She saw the dark shadow under her eyes.

In a tight voice she said "Not too well. I am dying to hear from Uncle Gerard. I've been going through hell and had to call on Jay, making him stay every night with me. I even doubt whether this is worthwhile."

"Do you mean the search process or even getting to meet your mother?"

"Both." She reached for Jay's hand.

Cynthia said "Let me say this much. The few words and the tone of my uncle's voice say this trail is worth following if you have the courage. Those are his words."

"What does he want in the way of response.?"

He says you need to get a court order to unseal the hospital record. He will know you are committed if you choose to do that .I can offer a speculation. I think he has permission from Jeanne to move ahead. That is pure speculation on my part, however."

"You really think that?"

"I do. He plans to call me tomorrow to get the answer."

Cyn's face brightened and her body language said, "I can handle this." Aloud "I have saved quite a bit of money although I have no idea about costs of attorneys but I am willing to borrow the money if necessary."

Mike said, "My fees are very easy to meet." All three faces swiveled to see if he was serious. "What? Don't you think I am capable?"

They all laughed. Jay said "Capable? Definitely, but Virginia."

"I want you to know I can practice in all fifty and in D.C."

Cyn could not believe her ears. "You mean you will do this for me?"

"Hand me a dollar and I am your attorney of record," She reached for her purse while Mike scratched out a receipt for her. "Cynthia, I want you to have Gerard call me collect after he calls you. In the meantime I will look up the phone number of my classmate who resides in Arlington."

Cyn burst into tears when Mike handed her the news from his friend in Arlington. Jay wrapped her in his arms and ought her heaving to face close to his. Mike and Cynthia stood by waiting for Cyn to recover her composure. The good news was almost too much to bear.

Several evenings later, all the legal requirements behind them, Gerard was on the phone to Jeanne. "Honey, it looks sure fire. When you are ready, I think your daughter, Cynthia, will fly to meet you. I just talked with her ten minutes ago I told her you were eager but the timing had to be arranged. Okay. I will call tomorrow?"

Jeanne answered the phone. "Hi, dad. It's all settled. We had a family powwow last night with tears, laughter and total acceptance. The tears came mostly from the girls, hurting for me and their sister, Cynthia, and the pain we both have endured."

"I am so happy for you, Jeanne. At long last. How do we handle the arrangements? They can come any day you choose"

"A week from Saturday. I would like to meet with her alone for a while, maybe at the hotel and then bring her home to meet her family. Who will be with her?"

Her fiancé and her father-in-law to be, who is also her personal attorney but really is her friend."

"Does the plan sound okay to you?"

“Fine. I’ll make the hotel arrangements. I’ll tell the battle axe that I’m taking off for the weekend.” He laughed before he hung up.

Chapter .4

Jeanne waited in the small anteroom off the lobby watching for their arrival. She saw a Lincoln Town Car pull up and saw a handsome young man emerge and run to the right side. Uncle Gerard stepped out of the rear. She took a deep breath as Cyn emerged. “My God, she is the spitting image of Cousin Cynthia twenty years ago. Finally, out of the back seat slid her cousin gorgeous Cynthia. This was unbelievable.

She used her hankie to dry her sweaty palms and, sat down to calm herself. Her mind was racing, a million thoughts and images that found their way from the depth of her memories for the last two decades. Her breathing was rapid and she knew she had to calm down quickly.

It seemed like ages before she heard a light knock and the turning of the knob. She stood, tears streaming from her eyes seeing through the mist another set of tears. They stood for just a moment before the young woman rushed to her opening arms.

They stood in a warm embrace for minutes before Jeanne said. I’m so sorry, dear. The trauma was just more than I could endure. Forgive me.”

“Hush, mama.” I know the story. Gerard has been terrific. There is no need for forgiveness. I am sure I would have done the same. I need to know the story of your life for these twenty years.”

“And I need the same from you. Tell me about your family and then about growing up.”

It was almost two hours later when Jeanne asked, “Do you think you could come home with me to meet the savior of my life, Jim, and your two sisters. I know they are dying to meet you.”

“I was hoping that would work out so that I could.”

“With your approval we have planned a big family dinner which will require one extra place since I saw five of you emerge. I hadn’t known Cynthia was coming. Looking out the window I thought I was seeing two sisters getting out of the car.”

“Mother, if I may call you that, we owe much to Cynthia, who has become my dear friend.”

“So dad told me. According to him, you move with powerful company.”

“Yes, but they are definitely old shoe. I can say the same for daddy and mama; Daddy is a powerhouse in the outer world while a pussycat at home. They do love me, mother, and worried that I might be disappointed.”

“Maybe someday we can meet so that I can thank them personally.”

“Let’s be sure to work on that.”

Cynthia rushed to sweep Jeanne in her arms in the lobby. “Dear cuz, I had no idea why you had vanished. I missed you so in those early days.”

Jeanne said “Come ride with the two of us while we lead the other car. We are going to party tonight.” They did.

At some point in the evening Jim asked Cyn “Can you stay a few days? The girls and I want to get to know you and I am sure you and Jeanne are not talked out.”

“I can, Jim. Jay and his Dad have several days of business in Washington. I’m sure we can work it out.”

“The only thing is we don’t have a spare room.”

Cyn laughed. “A sleeping bag in the girls’ room will be fine. We’ll probably not bother with sleep since they have a basketful of questions that I haven’t had time to answer.”

It was close to three A.M. before the girls dowsed the lights. The subjects ranged from sleeping with your boyfriend, how hard are college studies, what do girls wear in California, is Cousin Cynthia a real big shot, how come you two look alike, and a myriad of other subjects.

Tuesday morning they had Jay and Mike to brunch before letting them go. There had been solid promises of letters, emails and phone calls plus occasional texting among the young ones.

There were two sets of adoring eyes on Jay throughout the brunch. “God, Cyn, he is a hunk.”

“I know. You two study hard. It’s worth it. Jay and I plan to open our own law practice as partners. I do not expect to be too helpful since I want to have a baby shortly after I pass the bar.”

Two young ladies and their mom wept openly as the Town Car pulled out of the driveway.

The End.

Book IV

Carl

Six Months ago

Carl Peterson and I were having breakfast at the small cafe around the corner from the Recovery House, the place where I brought him after one of his drinking sprees. This was the fifth time during the last two and half months that I had driven him to the House. On the previous occasions he had not called me when leaving the House but had called a taxi. He never wanted to discuss the incidence with me, probably out of embarrassment.

Eight days ago, a bartender had called me at some ungodly hour in the morning to pick up a thoroughly soused Carl. As usual, I brought him here to the Recovery House. It was the place where he came to “dry out”, as he called it.

On the drive Carl, totally out of control, berated me for taking him forcibly from his favorite drinking establishment. He had no memory during the ride of having been out, stone cold, and having to be carried by the bartender and me to be dropped into the back seat of my car.

He had awakened about half way through the trip and began his vituperation and actually, but feebly, tried to strike me before falling back into a stupor. His language was foul and would have been insulting in any other circumstance.

This morning, after a second cup of coffee, Carl finally lifted his eyes, looked directly at me. “Mike, I need help. You have always been understanding about my drinking bouts and never tried to offer advice but this time I am asking.”

“What are you asking, Carl?”

“First, I need you to tell me how I had been behaving during each spree that you have witnessed. Fortunately for me, Justine has never ever seen me drunk, although she has been aware of my problem. She has been willing to hear but I can’t ever remember enough and probably would be too embarrassed to tell her. Life has always been tense for a few days after these events when I have been absent for six to eight days.”

“Carl, it is really brutal. In talking with the bartender, who has witnessed this scene a few times, he tells me that you lose any sense of responsibility to yourself and the people around you. You drown with the influence of alcohol which turns you into a Mr. Hyde. Everyone around you sees and resents your negative alcoholism behavior. As the evening progresses and

you continue to drink, apparently you do not realize that you are going overboard! The bartender says you seem to be sober but increasingly get moody.

When the bartender cuts your supply, you get violent. He does not call the police for two reasons. He is a virtual giant and can handle you. I have asked him to call me instead of the police.”

Carl let out a huge and deep sigh and said: Oh hell.”

I continued. “There’s more. Although you have no strength, you do try to fight with me. Your language is about as crude as a stevedore on the Oakland pier. I am never as happy as the moment I arrive and those two large attendants take you gently into the House.”

Carl hung his head to avoid looking at me “Mike, I apologize but I can’t believe that is the way I behave.”

“I would not have believed it, myself. You, who have the attributes of a Dr. Jekyll, seem to transition into a Mr. Hyde.”

“That is so damned hard to believe, Mike. That is not who I am.”

“I know that. Your friends know that and your wife, Justine, knows you as a gentle person and a successful business man who usually operates at a very high level.”

“Mike, it hasn’t always been that bright. Before I moved to the valley, I was a constant drunk, particularly on the weekends, just like Ray Milland, the actor in the movie, The Lost Weekend.” Now I mostly go as many as six months before losing control.”

I said “Carl, look at me. I need to be as frank as possible. You know that while your behavior has changed, you have to consider the fact that you are an alcoholic.”

Carl hung his head, then raised his face and said to me “I do not consider myself an alcoholic. I was an alcoholic those years ago when I drank three martini lunches daily and got lightly soused each night but drank myself blind on the weekends. Now, I lose control once every five or six months.”

“If that is how you see yourself, why are we having this discussion?”

“Well, I needed to know how I behaved during that spree and you did give me the brutal facts. Now that I know, I feel sure that I have to avoid people, especially Justine from ever seeing me that way. I can strengthen my resolve and beat this thing. All I have to do is visualize that horrible picture. That will stop me.”

I sighed. “Carl, I believe it will take more than that. Since you raised the subject, I will offer a suggestion. I believe you ought to consider A.A. and perhaps see a counselor, a psychologist, who can help you travel the road that you want to take.”

“I appreciate your suggestions, Mike, but I don’t need to go that far. Look at the history of my progress during the three years I have been married to Justy.”

“Carl, I totally disagree. There is something rooted in your past that is suddenly triggered, sending you overboard. I don’t have the knowledge to help you. Besides it takes someone outside the circle of family and friends to help you discover and deal with the problem or problems, whatever it may be.”

I could sense the heat rising in Carl as he said “I’ll prove you wrong, Mike. As long as I have Justy and you in my corner, I can do this.”

“I hope you are right. I worry that your great marriage to Justy might get tested in some way that neither of us can see at present.”

We never ordered breakfast. Carl wanted to get home to Justy and seek her forgiveness, as he had on previous occasions.

Tuesday Morning

I was seated in my regular booth in the DeAnza hotel dining room awaiting the arrival of my friend and client, Carl Peterson. The room was abuzz with patrons arriving for the lunch hour. A group of four men and a woman at one end of the bar were laughing and shouting after each toss of the dice of their usual dice game of Queen Bee.

A line had formed at the entrance waiting for the hostess to usher the guests to tables. There was little doubt that this was the place where many enjoyed fine cuisine and negotiated their affairs during a power lunch five days a week.

Across the room at a corner table sat the mayor, his favorite councilman and two Japanese gentlemen. I presumed they were officials of the Japanese airline which was considering putting into operation direct flights from Tokyo to San Jose.

Two tables away were two women, whom I knew to be from Adobe, the internationally known software producers. They seemed to be in a heated discussion with a highly profiled executive of Apple Corporation.

I spied the maître d' just closing the curtain of a booth across the room. I was sure I had seen the back of Phil Max, the renowned playboy, who was probably courting one of the beautiful women sales reps who called on his firm.

Although this story is about Carl I probably should introduce myself. I am Mike Malek, at six feet, two inches, two hundred and twenty pounds, feeling more like thirty-five, not forty-nine.

I've been a long time resident of Santa Clara Valley, now known as Silicon Valley. I graduated from Santa Clara University Law School over twenty-five years ago., I had enjoyed a law practice for eighteen years before embarking on a business career in the high tech arena.

Almost a year ago, Helen, the love of my life had died of breast cancer. I had been devastated, sinking into a deep funk for a short period. It was a period during which I paid little attention to my business holdings or my family, trying to find solace in bottles of single malt scotch.

With help from my friend and pastor, I managed to find some equilibrium, but did not want to continue in the same roles in the business world.

My friend and counselor, Reverend Father McPhail, known to me as Padre, queried me on the decision.

I said to him "It was something Helen said during one of our last discussions. She was challenging me "Honey. God has endowed you with a good brain and lots of talent and you have found success and financial rewards. Have you thought about giving back to the community and its citizens?"

I told her that I was contributing through my role behind the scenes in politics and our family contributions to a variety of community organizations."

“Michael, I am talking about one on one, face to face, support for the disenfranchised or the dispirited ones who need a boost or a helping hand. You have such a touch with people. I have seen it so often.”

I had been hesitant but she continued “Try it, Michael. It would please me to see you fulfilled as I look down from my seat in the spirit world where I am headed so very soon.”

My Padre asked “so do you have any specific plans?”

“I’ve made my decision. I’m setting out my shingle, going back into law. There are a lot of people who find themselves in the midst of problems and with limited resources to fight their way back. I think I can provide the help and therefore the opportunity for people to land on solid ground.

“That sounds good but it seems hardly enough to challenge the Mike that I know.”

“I’ll continue doing a little politicking, behind the scenes and I do get called upon for ideas by the mayor and some others. I also have some personal friends who have a need to bend my ear as they struggle with personal problems.”

“You are a good, kind man, Mike. Sounds like you’re off to a real start and maybe that’s all you need. I see beyond that a new Mike, who will provide opportunities for people who need another chance. You know there are loads of people with problems who will not show up in your office but can use your strength.”

“I like that idea, Padre. I’ll stay alert. You are good for my soul, my very essence. Thank you.”

Since that time I have been fortunate to be able to help a few persons who needed a boost to find a new start. Many of those opportunities have been a part of my law practice, particularly as I provided pro bono services but there have been other opportunities.

Seated now, waiting for Carl, I was just thinking that I enjoyed one of the prime seats in the city each lunch hour from this booth which has been reserved for me each weekday unless I call to cancel prior to eleven.

Flashing across the scene was a tall striking blonde, Carl’s former wife and the mother of their daughter. She was being greeted by her newest flame, a recently divorced city councilman. Seeing Vera brought my mind back to Carl.

There was nothing flashy about Carl. I picture him in my mind. He was six feet tall, thinning blond hair, wide shoulders and almost always wearing a warm smile. In

my opinion he was lucky to be separated from Vera, who had grand plans for a power seat in local politics and a husband with a healthy bank balance. Carl never came to understand why Vera with her good looks and culture had chosen to seduce him into marriage. He was far from what she really wanted to help achieve her goals.

He had no grand ideas of power but saw himself as one who wanted to serve others as part of his vocational calling. He had found himself in love with Justine, who because of her personal wealth was always besieged by a lot of less than honorable suitors her first marriage was to a real handsome but conniving suitor. It took her but a few months to discover her horrible error and she bought him off with a handsome settlement. After a second disaster, she became a semi recluse before the miracle of her life appeared in the form of Carl Peterson.

Even after three years, it was evident that she adored him and received the same love from him. I had been the recipient of many of his acclamations of his lover and, as he said, great fortune to be loved by Justy, as he called her.

He enjoyed a good income as an advertising executive. His natural charm was accompanied by a trustworthiness that brought him into close relationships with his clients.

My thoughts were interrupted as Carl slid into the booth across the table from me.

“Sorry to be late, Mike.”

“Not a problem, Carl.” We were interrupted by the waiter, who had seen Carl arrive. She slipped my scotch and Carl’s Perrier neatly on the table and was gone with a whisper of air as she drew the curtain closed.

I had arranged with Anne, who was my waiter at lunch each day. I often chose to have the curtain closed when I wanted limited exposure to the luncheon crowd for any particular client.

Carl sipped his drink and said “I stopped by my insurance agent’s office to make a claim for a small accident I had last evening. He is taking care of getting the estimates and kindly dropped me off while he drove the Mini Cooper to a body shop. The car is drivable.”

I listened carefully to his report, not only for the words but for the tenor of his statement. Casually I asked “What happened, Carl?” Having been close friends for more than twenty years, I was aware that he often, when under a bit of a strain, gave brief and less than complete information to his personal attorney.

A bit sheepishly he said “Just as I was pulling into the breezeway last night, I had a horrendous sneeze, banged the front end into the brick planter that holds the six by six posts that support the roof.”

“What time did all this happen? You left our house at ten. Did you go straight home?” Carl and I had an understanding for many years that neither of us would ever lie to each other and I was just a bit suspicious, guessing that he had reported a half-truth.

A slow flush rose from his throat to his cheeks. “No, Mike. Justine was out with some lady friends, so I stopped by the Ste. Claire hotel bar for some conversation with that gang of newly divorced friends and sports nuts.”

I raised my eyebrows questioningly

Carl now realized that I would not leave the subject until I had every last detail. He turned beet red. “I fell off the wagon, Mike. I am so sorry. I stayed after the gang had left and was apparently the last to leave. The bartender wanted a phone number he could call for me but I insisted I was sober enough to drive home. I apparently was able to get home before blacking out just as I reached home.”

I wasn’t surprised but I was disappointed. Carl had been sober for more than six months. On that last occasion, I had been called by a bartender at two in the morning to come and pick up Carl. That was but one in a series of calls over the last few years.

The kind bartender was staying with him until I arrived. That had probably been the tenth time I had come to his rescue during the last two years.

“I am sorry to hear that, Carl. What do you think was the trigger?”

It took him a full minute to respond. “Justine and I had a serious and very vocal argument just before I came to see you early last evening. I put on my best front during our meeting, making sure no one had a clue about the current state of our private affairs. After the meeting adjourned I sat in the car outside your place aware that I dreaded going home and being alone for the night. Justine had packed an overnight bag, planning to stay with her friend, Elaine.”

Carl paused for a long minute, taking a sip of his bubbly water. I waited, knowing that he would continue without further prompting from me.

“Mike, if Justine finds out that I was drunk and smashed the car, she is going to throw me out of the house. Just last week we had another discussion about my need to enroll in Alcoholics Anonymous to which I said that I now had things under control. She even offered to join Algernon and said she would support me in every way but I insisted I was fine. She was disappointed, of course.

I already called the brick layer to fix the damage and I want to have my car repaired before she comes home. I have dug myself into a hell hole. Mike, I need help.”

Anne signaled from beyond the curtain so I invited her in to take our orders. Three minutes later I looked at Carl, waiting for him to continue. He glanced away from me, avoiding eye contact but I just waited.

It may have been two long minutes before he said “I guess you will wait until hell freezes over for me to tell you why things are so strained between Justine and me. The argument yesterday was one in a series. Since I had broken my promise about ceasing drinking those months ago, she has been on edge, expressing her doubts about my ability to stay sober. On the other hand, I have been on edge and determined to prove myself to her.”

Anne slipped into the booth, setting down a second round of drinks, scotch and Perrier. “Food will be another twenty minutes, so I took a chance that another round would be okay.”

“Anne, right on as usual.”

Carl took a deep breath and started in “This is so damned embarrassing, Mile. There is no one else in the world to which I could or would tell this story. Life at the ad agency has been less than fruitful. I lost my largest account to the new national agency that has just moved to town. My clients were subcontractors to one of their clients and the politics was more than I could handle. I had just been handed over to a new supervisor at the agency, a younger guy who needs to prove himself. The loss of that account makes him less than trusting of my efforts.”

He hesitated but then continued.” Andrea, my daughter from my first marriage, keeps hounding me for more money and I am at my limit. The only way I can get more is to ask Justine, who, as you know, is loaded and has been so generous. I can’t take advantage of that.”

I could see that Carl was on the verge of tears and needed to compose himself and, although reluctant, was going to tell me all that was at the heart of his torture.

I said “Rest for a few minutes. You can continue after we have our lunch. Anne will be here soon.”

“No, now that I started, I need to get this off my chest I guess that all those pressures and my worries about pleasing Justine have screwed me up so that I --”. The tears began to ease out of his eyes and his voiced choked. I started to say something but he held up his hand to stop me.

After a long pause he gathered himself and continued “I guess that all those concerns have me so edgy that I have not been able to perform my manly duties in the bedroom. That only makes things worse for me and it has been upsetting Justine. It seems like a vicious circle. As I

have shared with you before, the bedroom has been the place where we shared great joy and intimacy. It was where we found forgiveness for our other faults.”

I asked “How long has this been going on?”

“Nearly six weeks. Mike, I am afraid I am going to lose her. At the root of yesterday’s argument was her accusation that I was having an affair. She refuses to believe that personal problems at the office could have affected my libido. I don’t dare suggest that trying to live up to her expectations is also putting extra pressure on me.

The more I denied the accusation the angrier she got. At one point she said in a very exasperated tone “Carl, all you have to do is admit it and say you won’t betray me again.”

“Mike, there is nothing to admit. I would not even think of betraying Justine. She is the world to me. I guess it would be easy to admit something but the lie would eventually come out and that would be hell.”

I listened, aware of his desperation of being between a rock and a hard place. Perhaps he would find a way through this morass as he let his thoughts become words.

We were interrupted with the arrival of our lunches and addressed the food in our plates in silence for a long time.

“Carl, I hear your desperation but may I presume you will work out some way to resolve this impasse?”

“Mike, I need some help.”

“You know that I am here for you, all the way. Tell me some of your thinking up to this point.”

“Oh hell, Mike, I have been so busy wallowing in self-pity and planning how to avoid Justine finding out about last night, that I have not been thinking straight. Do you have any suggestions for me?”

“Not at the moment but you need to find a way to restore Justine’s trust. You might try to put yourself in her shoes. Whatever you plan, it must be from the heart, Carl. I will be more than pleased to be your sounding board and respond to your ideas, if you want.”

At that moment, Carl’s cell phone buzzed. He excuses himself and listened for a moment, then hung up. “My insurance agent is on his way with the temporary replacement auto. He is a great young up-coming kid. I have to run but how about lunch tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

Tuesday Afternoon.

Justine, Elaine and Cici were lying on mats besides Elaine's pool soaking up the rays, three beautiful women in their mid-forties, beautifully tanned sculpted bodies were resting after long workouts in Elaine's well-equipped private gym and spa.

Cici was speaking "Justine, you can't believe that Carl is sleeping with some other woman. That man adores you. Yours is the greatest second marriage the world has even known."

Elaine nodded. Cici's question brought all three to sit up as Justine contemplated the question. She reached over to pick up her light robe, and then stood to don the robe. She moved to the side table and poured some lemonade into a glass, adding a few ice cubes. The others took the hint and followed suit.

They took their drinks to an umbrella shaded table. Justine, who had taken the time to think about her response, said "Up until a few weeks ago I would have agreed. The past three years have been more than I ever expected from a marriage, especially after the first two mistakes. I still can't believe that Carl fell in love with me and agreed to marry me. I kept worrying that the only mate I would ever find was someone who was interested in my money. That certainly wasn't Carl. Other than agreeing that I would handle all the expenses of running and operating the large house, he has never asked for any money, I take that back. He accepted, although did not request, some funds to help with his daughter's school expenses."

"He has been attentive, loving and kind. You both know that he is fighting some personal demons that, on occasion, cause him to go on a drinking spree. Other than during those spurts, he is magnificent. As I have shared with you more than once, his loving tenderness in the bedroom has unfrozen this original ice queen."

Elaine began to interrupt but Justine waived her off. "Carl seems to have changed starting a bit more than a month ago. He is edgy and I feel like I need to walk on eggs when he comes home after work. He blames his mood on tension with his new supervisor. He is remote although not unpleasant. His kisses and lovemaking seem perfunctory rather than teasing or passionate. He seems to shrivel when I make a pass instead of responding in ways I am used to. I couldn't believe it was my imagination"

I began teasing him, something he used to love, but he appeared to get prickly. I started chiding him but he turned inward. I exploded yesterday and accused him of sleeping with some other woman. I couldn't conceive of any other reason for this change of personality."

"Elaine said "Take a deep breath, and then pause for a bit before you tell us about that. You're totally flushed and obviously upset."

They sipped their drinks sitting in silence for a few minutes. Justine sighed and began. “I lost it totally. I found myself ranting, upbraiding him for his drinking. That was unwise and undeserved. I should have stopped and repented but I kept going on about a dozen little things that are of no consequence. I don’t think I actually threatened but I am sure I implied that he needed to change or else. I laid down the law about no drinking.”

“It was at that point that I went overboard. I accused him of betrayal. I stopped and left the room when he tried to deny my accusations. I was so sure of myself and didn’t want to listen to any lies. When I came down later, he was sitting in his big chair, head almost down into his lap. I told him that I was coming here to stay for a few days. As I left I issued a kind of strange ultimatum. I said “Carl, just admit what you did and promise you will not betray me again. Then we can go forward from here,” I stormed out the door, got into Jag and burnt rubber just for the hell of it. God, what have I done?”

Her voice was so choked that it was not clear to her friends exactly what she had said as she burst into tears and a deep sobbing. Cici rose and rushed over to the side to find some tissues for Justine. The three of them sat silently for a full three or four minutes. Elaine tested the atmosphere with “Shall we take a break, have a swim or cocktail?”

Justine shook her head sideways. “Let me finish with my story and the things that were rushing through my brain. Maybe you can give me some guidance. I certainly can use some.”

Elaine asked “What triggered the big argument? It must have been something traumatic”

Her friends could see the hesitancy on Justine’s part. Cici guessed that it was not a subject that Justine wanted to share even with her two closest friends. They had been friends for almost thirty years, having traded secrets ever since their dorm days at Stanford during their freshman year. She was on the verge of saying “It can wait, Justy” but Justine gulped and decided to continue.

“Three times within the last week, despite our best efforts, we had to quit after unsatisfactorily trying to make love. We all know that love making is not always perfect but these were disasters. After the third time, the evening before I left, I decided that he must have been with his new woman friend earlier that day. There simply was no other explanation.” Again the catch in her voice blurred the closing phrase.

Cici, who was always the most forthright in the trio, asked “Justy, what other signals do you think you caught that indicated his unfaithfulness?”

“What do you mean?”

“Any cell phone calls that he can’t explain? Ever notice any cologne or perfume scent on his clothes or lip stick on a collar?”

“No, but he can be very careful and what else can explain his behavior?”

Elaine moved in “You’ve said in the past that both of you have found those times of intimacy a good time to confess to little sins and receive and offer forgiveness. How about these previous attempts?”

“No. We both turned our backs to each other. I pretended to fall asleep although I was living the big lie, not sleeping a wink before Carl’s rising early and leaving for work.”

Cici said “Justy, if I am interpreting correctly, even before his blow up, the two of you have not really been talking with each other for weeks. Am I right?”

Justine nodded in agreement.

Elaine asked “What do you want to happen, Justy?”

Justine gave a cynical laugh “Move the clock back six or more weeks and return the Carl that I live back to me.”

Wednesday Morning

The three women had risen early, taken a two mile walk in the hills above Los Gatos, returned to Elaine’s gym and spa for a stiff workout. While sitting around the table with a light breakfast, Elaine suggested “How about a shopping spree to chase the clouds away for a few hours before we tackle Justy’s problem. That sparked unanimous agreement. Thirty minutes later they were on the freeway to San Jose.

Cici suggested “Let’s lunch at the DeAnza dining room before we head for the mall. I haven’t been there for ages. In fact there is a specialty shop at the DeAnza that may have something that fits my little frame.”

Marcel, the usual Maître’s been off for the day and Anne greeted the trio. She could not place any of them, although they seemed at home. They asked for a booth. Anne obliged them.

A few minutes later Anne saw me and waived as I headed for the booth, reserved for me as usual. Two minutes later Carl joined me and within a few minutes, Anne brought our drinks and was holding three glasses of white wine on a tray for some other patrons. I heard her move to the very next booth where three women were deep in conversation. I could hear their voices but without concentrating I could hear none of their words. There was the sound of laughter, the kind of laughter that often followed someone telling a joke or a brief story.

I turned to Carl who looked somewhat brighter than he had during our lunch on the previous day. I rose an eyebrow signaling and said “You look chipper and somewhat pleased with yourself. What’s changed?”

He grinned. “I landed a new account this morning, making me and the boss a couple of happy characters. The brick work at home is completed .That man is an artist. There is absolutely no evidence of the damage that he repaired. My car is in perfect shape.”

“Good for you, buddy. “ We were interrupted as Anne returned to take our luncheon orders. He was actually glowing as he filled in the details of the signing on the new account, a successful high tech start up that had gone public the week before.

He seemed to be his old self but I was holding back any such judgment, knowing that while important, these were minor issues compared to his concerns about his marriage to Justine.

He made no mention of that subject as he told me all about the approach he had designed for the advertising and the public relations program he had devised for the new client.

Anne brought our meals and the next ten minutes were devoted to digging into the food on our plates. I could hear the murmur of conversations from the tables nearby but was unaware of any sounds from the booth next to ours.

Carl broke the silence with a big grin on his face. In an excited and rather loud voice, he said “And I have a plan for repairing my broken relationship with Justine.”

I, too, broke into a grin and teasingly said “I am about to hear how I lost my fees for handling the divorce.”

Carl burst into laughter. “You bet. After we finish here, I am going home, not to the office. I have ordered in a catered dinner with Justine’s favorite foods to be served at seven. I will have her favorite champagne on ice along with my Perrier. Instead of ordering flowers, I am picking a bouquet from our flower garden to grace the dining table and a lone red rose in a small vase on the coffee table where she will be having the champagne.”

He paused and I waited. That sounded like a good beginning but the heart of the matter would be in the conversation during that period.

He continued with that big grin pasted on his face. “I will ask Justine to let me say all that is on my heart and mind before she responds.”

I waited as he paused, knowing that he was about to lay out his plan and hoping for a positive response from me

His excitement was evidenced in the tone of his voice as he began. “I plan to start with an apology for falling off the wagon, even though she still does not know that. I will admit that I had planned to hide the fact about the accident but decided to come clean.”

He paused to sip some coffee and gather his thoughts. I silently waited.

“I hope she will respond when I take her hands in mind and gaze directly into her eyes so that I can continue; I want her to believe me when I tell her what you and I know to be the truth. “ I have never betrayed her by sleeping with another woman. I will explain about the loss of the major advertising account and the tension with my new supervisor. I will even tell her of the pressure I felt about my daughter pressing me for funds that I do not have.”

Anne slipped into the booth with a fresh pot of coffee and two small dishes of chocolate ice cream.

When she had departed, Carl went on “The last thing I will say it that I promise her just as I now promise you that I will seek a sponsor who will take me to a group meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

His strong voice had become one of tenderness and hope. I looked closely, noticing a teardrop on his right cheek. I stood, walked around the table to offer a strong embrace of support and friendship.

Just as we parted I heard the rustle of the curtain being pulled aside. I turned to see Justine, tears streaming down her cheeks as she rushed toward Carl. Her arms enveloped him as she buried her face into his chest and a muffled voice crying “Darling, darling.”

I turned to face the sound of the curtain opening as Elaine and Cici entered. It was obvious that they, too, had been shedding some tears as they dabbed their cheeks with tissues.

I was flabbergasted and looked questioningly at Elaine, a client and friend for years. She smiled, saying “Let the happy couple come back to life and I will explain.”

It was another two minutes during which Justine planted kisses onto Carl’s eyes, forehead and finally locked her lips firmly onto his. Carl finally took a seat, pulling Justine to his lap. We each took a seat.

Elaine explained “We had planned a shopping spree to release the tension produced by Justy’s problems and decided on lunch before starting. Justine insisted on one of these raised booths that have such a great view of the entire dining room. We couldn’t believe our ears when we recognized Carl’s voice. Normal voices usually do not penetrate the barriers between but his excitement in a raised voice was coming through loud and clear and we unabashedly listened to every word. I had the darndest time holding her back until I thought he was finished.”

Justine rose from Carl's lap and moved toward me. I rose as she reached and put her arms around my neck, whispering. "Thank you, Mike. I don't know how but I am sure you were there for Carl every step of his painful journey. Now we have another chance to renew our great love and marriage."

She kissed me on the cheek, turned and moved to Carl, taking his hand and with a smile said "Take me home, sweetie."

Book V

A Father's Love

After cocktails, the group moved to the dinner table where the conversation centered on events in their current lives, mostly dealing with happenings during the weeks since they had been together. The subjects ranged from golf to bridge to Laura's brief stay in the hospital to city politics.

Samantha, the City Manager, brought them up to date on the happenings at city hall and Laura assured them she was doing well.

The group consisted of four couples, who resided on the same block and met monthly for dinner. They were an intimate group, vacationing together or watching out for each other's children when necessary. Matt commented one evening that this was like family.

The main event of the evening was a story volunteered by one of the gang who was willing to talk about a major mistake earlier in life.

When the table had been cleared and coffee poured, Jack said, "You're up, Steve." Steve, the primary litigator in the District Attorney's office, nodded and cleared his throat.

"Having been Peck's bad boy during my adolescent years, I have memories of a number of mistakes but I guess the most serious of those was being caught cheating during my freshman year at the prep school of my father's choice.

The best way I could describe my dad would be to say stiff necked, and proper. I don't remember seeing him without a tie and a jacket even around the house on weekends.

He was a success in all that he did, heading a medium sized public corporation, very active in community affairs and loyal to his schools. As a result, I had limited access to my father and easily manipulated my mother.

Father was serving on the board of trustees of the private school, which was one reason that I was accepted. His being a major donor probably was another reason.

My scholastic record certainly would not have earned me a spot in this illustrious class."

"My problem was not my lack of talent or ability. I had other things on my mind, like baseball or football, reading westerns and starting in the spring of my sixth grade year, girls.

I began to notice breasts and hips, not straight lines. Homework and books suddenly were of little interest. Worse than all that was the aggravation I kept getting from my dad who was set on seeing me living up to my "potential."

"I was accepted and enrolled, to my surprise, not giving much thought to how. I am sorry to say my performance did not improve. I don't know whether father was ever apprised of this before midterms."

My first midterm exam was in my math class a combination of algebra and geometry for which I had not studied. I could not rely on my general knowledge to help me out and felt I had no choice except "Look at my neighbor's answers." I had never tried cheating in the past. What I hadn't counted on was an instructor who was lying in wait for me, since he was aware of my shortcomings."

Five minutes later I was sitting in the outer office of the headmaster where I cooled my heels for almost an hour, spending every minute thinking about how I screwed up. That, of course, was the intent of the cooling off period.”

For a few minutes the stupid and arrogant self took command. “The hell with it. Public school will be just fine. I won’t have to play rugby or cricket.”

That was quickly replaced with “How will I face my father? Will mom finally see through me?”

I finally got some perspective. This was about more than me. Screwing up meant not only that I was in trouble. I reeked that I was about to embarrass my dad, an important figure in this institution. If this became public I would be embarrassing the school which had a reputation for integrity and the worthiness of the graduates.

It would have been tantamount to the story that broke about West Point cribbing, a few years ago.

“I was blushing to the roots of my scalp when I was ushered into the headmaster’s inner office. I am sure he could see right through my head into the recesses of my mind and he could not have missed the flush of my cheeks.”

“I see that you have been giving thought to your actions, young Mr. Foster.” I was so tongue tied that I could not even say a word but nodded affirmatively. He waited and I knew he wanted to hear my voice. I finally was able to say “Yes, sir.”

“Well?”

“Sir, I am truly sorry for having violated the trust this school had placed in me. I now recognize the impropriety and therefore the embarrassment to the institution. I am also sorry to have misused the trust my father had placed in me.”

“Well spoken, young man. I see your perspective has changed and in a short time have grasped the import of your poor choices.”

“Thank you, sir.” I felt a little leap of hope but was immediately proven wrong.

“You will not want to thank me when I tell you that I have only two choices regarding your punishment. I must either expel you or suspend your attendance. Those are the rules.”

I nodded, again unable to say a word when the import of his words hit home. I began to shake and not for the life of me could I stop. I tried to steel my body without effect as I stood there in silence.

“You are dismissed to return to your quarters until you hear from me. You are to say nothing to any other person until you hear from me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

I detoured via the storage building in order to retrieve my bags, knowing that I would be on my way home very shortly. I went to lunch and remained incommunicado as required. In fact, my classmates avoided me during the luncheon period. There were no secrets.

I was summoned at three o’clock and found my dad waiting with the headmaster, who said, “Young Mr. Foster, it is my decision that you are suspended for a minimum of one full term. Two weeks prior to the beginning of the next term, you shall have the privilege of taking a special entrance exam, qualifying you for entry as a beginning student. If results are satisfactory, you have the privilege of reapplying to start with the new incoming class in February.”

I thanked him, knowing that he had chosen the lighter of the two punishments in deference to my father.

Dad said not a word to me but thanked the headmaster and ushered me out of the office. We drove to my quarters to pick up my bags; I was in a hurry to be gone before classes were

dismissed and the dormitory being filled with my classmates who would try to shun me, Mr. Poison Ivy.

Riding alongside my father, who had still not said a word, was pure hell. Fifteen minutes into ride I screwed up my courage and said in a choked voice. "I am really sorry, Father. I have caused both you and the school an inexcusable embarrassment. I have misused the trust you placed in me and violated the basic principles of the school."

Not a word from my dad except a slight nod in my direction. He was his usual stoic self, the picture that always came to mind when I thought of dad.

We rode in silence for two hours until he pulled into a rest stop area and parked. He turned to face e.

"Steven, I too, am sorry. Your mother and I have failed you, perhaps because you are our only off spring. Your mother shielded you at times when I felt you should have been punished and I was too weak to insist. Neither of us did you a favor. I hope you can see that and forgive the two of us."

I broke into tears, sobbing for minutes on end, trying to stifle myself but with no success. When I finally felt some control, I turned to look him directly in the eyes "Father, it is I, myself, who is to blame. I had always been able to come up at the last moment with enough answers to get by in spite of not being prepared. I never had to resort to cheating. This time I felt so desperate that I did the unthinkable."

I saw the first tears start to bubble, something I had never seen before. He put his arms around me, the first time in years, as far as I could remember. We held onto each other for several minutes. "Father, do you think that I can have another chance?"

"If you are brave enough and willing to work hard enough, my answer is yes. My question is do you have the courage to face your instructor and your classmates? That will take, pardon the expression, guts."

"I will because I need to atone for my behavior. Whatever the odds, I will win my way back to those kids who will try to shun me. Of course, I will be in a separate class having to endure what all frosh do from their immediate upper classmen and a little more in my case."

"Son, I believe you and I will try to make that chance available. You will have to study hard, may even need a tutor to catch up for what you have missed with your behavior last year."

"Father, with your permission, I can work part time at the department store to earn enough to pay for a tutor. I would prefer to earn my way to that extent with your permission."

"Then it shall be."

Laura, the hostess, and the other three women were using tissues to dab at the tears

One could hear the tension in Jack's voice as he said "I am sure you were readmitted and probably finished at the head of your class. "

With a slight blush Steve admitted to finishing as valedictorian of his class. "I couldn't let my father down after his helping me to another chance.

Book VI

Strangers

We seem like passing strangers now

Funny how things can change (Words running through my mind from a song by Sarah Vaughn)

It wasn't, of course, but it seemed like the worst of times. While he was being educated and trained at West Point, the world seemed to tumble into chaos.

The cold war had turned hot. Robert Kenney had been assonated. Demonstrations at the Democratic convention in Chicago had become violent. SDA, Students for a Democratic Society were indeed stirring students toward a revolution. Many of the anti-war protests had turned violent.

Some groups even harassed returning veterans as though they were the enemy. Three days ago, a young hippie like couple actual spit on his uniform. It had taken all his will power from attacking those kids.

It felt like he was the stranger in a strange land

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack went the sound of the rail car wheels on the railroad bed that had been laid anew after the War Between the States.

Bert roused himself from the dark reverie into which the rhythm had set him. He glanced out the window at the passing wintry scene.

He was surprised to see the amount of snow that accumulated during the storm that had begun about midnight. The snowfall had ceased but the freeze that followed had produced some beautiful scenery. He smiled at the drooping icicles that fell almost to the ground from the ice burdened weeping willow tree. He loved the picture of the sagging fence, now showing off four inches of white snow atop the horizontal rails.

He turned to take stock of his fellow passengers, an assortment of strangers who were part of the passing parade, none of whom were likely to see each other once they had departed at their selected destination.

The passenger in the seat next to his had buried his face into the Washington Post, indicating his preference for privacy.

Bert let his mind drift, then settling on the state of the world beyond the boundaries of these rail tracks.

There was no sign of a resolution to this conflict called the Vietnam War. The outcome was looking anything but bright for the South Vietnamese, the U.S. and other allies. They were facing a daunting task. The PAVN (North Vietnam Army) had launched their Easter offensive and had won their first major battle.

He let his eyes move to the passing scene again. Snow had covered the hillsides in North Carolina and Virginia. He realized that his mind had unconsciously become aware of the heavy freight traffic state during the train ride from Greensboro. He had seen groups of young men huddled against the cold, surrounded by family members at the depots of three smaller communities. They were milling around in groups, causing him to consider that they were probably leaving for military bases where their induction would occur.

He had just received his flight wings as a helicopter pilot and thought he would be headed to Vietnam, directly. He had talked with enough returning veterans to know that it was likely that none of them could foresee the changes that would affect their lives after participating in whatever arena or battle zone they would be serving.

He should try to nap; having risen early to make the first north bound that morning. He had not seen one face that looked vaguely familiar. Outside the window now, the scene had changed. The landscape was dreary, black bare tree trunks stripped of the leaves, drifts of snow along the tracks, an occasional lone farmer herding a few cows and heavy curls of smoke emanating from the chimneys of the farmhouses.

Last week, Bert had a chance to chat with two disabled veterans, marines who had been seriously wounded. He had spent an entire evening with Irene Pollack, a former high school classmate. Her husband, Bill, had been part of Bert's debate team and now lay buried in his family's plot.

As he reflected on those conversations, he thought, "The world is changing fast. I wonder where I will be assigned. I am sure I will have a rich appreciation of life as a result of my coming venture that is if I survive. My generation is facing an appalling as well as a dangerous future. Each of us who survives will never is the same. I can see that much just from three conversations. I wonder how many will return suffering from shellshock as Mr. Patterson, our math teacher, did from World War I."

He decided that some breakfast in the dining car would be welcome, having arisen too late to breakfast at home. The dining car was crowded but the waiter helped him find a vacancy at a table with another patron. The gentleman's face was hidden behind the pages of the Washington Post.

After the waiter had taken Bert's order, the gentleman across the table, put down his paper and asked "Is that you, Bert Carson? I'm Pete Brown's father."

Bert grinned "Of course, I remember you. I still remember your teaching Pete and me how to throw baseballs, how to catch fly balls but also the scolding after bringing Maryann home so late after a school dance."

They both laughed, Mr. Brown saying "It must have worked. She made every curfew after that evening. By the way, she is Navy Nurse serving on a hospital ship which I presume is in Asian waters."

"Wow, I thought she was planning to be a teacher. Of course, I haven't seen her since my graduation. Please tell he hello when you write. Have you heard from Pete? I haven't had a letter for about six weeks. I deducted from his last letter that he had been headed for Vietnam after getting his commission in the marines."

"He phoned us three weeks ago and verified that he was awaiting transportation." He glanced at Bert's breast and smiled. "I see you have wings. Are you headed for Vietnam?"

"I thought so but I have been called to Washington with no word of explanation."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter with Bert's meal and more coffee for Mr. Brown who commented "I've just been reading about the widening of the protests across the nation. It is so confusing. How do you feel about it, knowing you may head for one of the battle zones?"

"I'm afraid I have cynical view. I am willing to admit that there is an argument for why we should not be engaged there, but we are. I am just cynical enough to believe that too many are taking advantage and avoiding their responsibility to serve their country. "

Mr. Brown said "I agree. I am so proud of Pete, who took his deferment until graduation and then joined the Marines. What does bother me is a spreading of attitude of non-appreciation of those what are serving or those disabled who have returned. I think it's disgraceful."

"I know. I had a chat with two of my high school classmates who have returned they are very distressed and certainly do not feel welcome. It does not bode well for their readjustment and integration back into civilian life"

They both fell into silence until Bert responded to Mr. Brown's inquiry about his family

Back in his seat Bert kept thinking about how different life would be for families when the men return home and what kind of reception would there be for the thousands of military men after the war was over.

“Mores are already shifting. Couples who are being split apart are feeling desperate. I am sure that many combat soldiers who return from firsthand experience in combat will seem a stranger to the ones he left behind.”

His thoughts were interrupted when the train rolled to a stop to take on additional passengers boarded at Roanoke. His seatmate had departed and now a young woman, his age or perhaps a year older than Bert, took the vacant seat next to him. The dark blue suit and the veil from her hat that covered the top half of her face suggested a woman in mourning.

He tried to hide his interest, not wanting to intrude on her grief. After a five minute interlude, he saw movement to his right, glanced toward her, noticing that she was wiping away tears with her hands, unable to find a tissue.

Bert offered his clean white handkerchief. “Thanks. I promised myself not to cry. She folded his handkerchief and placed it in his hand. He asked, “Would it help to talk?”

After a long hesitation she said, “I’m on my way to receive medal on behalf of my husband. He is being honored for outstanding bravery.

She stifled a deep sob and reached for the tissue that now was handy, in order to dab at the tears. Seeing the tissue that was too damp to help, Bert removed the tissue and handed her his hankie again. She was now taking deep breaths. Bert thought she might be on the verge of hyperventilating. Eventually she seemed to relax. Her shoulders lifted a little. The grip on her purse eased.

She continued after a more dabs at the tears. “We were married two weeks before he left for active duty, eight weeks ago. He was killed two days after his arrival. ” She stopped for a deep sigh.

Holding her hand for a bit, he subtly changed the direction of the conversation toward her parents with whom she was living. She said “Both are very supportive although I know my father had hoped we would wait to marry after Stuart’s service was ended.”

Bert asked “Do you have something to occupy your mind after your return home from this trip?”

“Oh, yes, I do.” She brightened just a bit and said. “I am an operating room nurse at the Community Hospital where my friends have been so helpful since I received the news.

Bert gave her a wide smile. “Good for you. Good luck.”

With hours more to go, she retreated into herself and then fell into a sleep, her head falling to rest on Bert’s shoulder. His mind flipped back to his thoughts prior to her arrival. “I am sorry for her pain and feel more assured that I made the right decision not to marry.” He let his mind return to the yearlong relationship with Tilda and finally nodded off to sleep.

He was aware that she had moved her head from his shoulder and turned to see her give him a slight smile, as she said “I apologized for using your shoulder as a pillow. I guess I was totally exhausted.”

“That was not a problem. You must be tired as well as grieving. Why don’t we take a walk to the dining car for some lunch? I am guessing you haven’t been eating well since you received the news.”

Shyly she agreed. When they were seated she said “By the way, my name is Anne Smythe.” She began to giggle and then took in her breath. Bert waited until she recouped. “I’m sorry. That was my maiden name. I have been married for such a short time that occasionally I forget that I am Mrs. Johnston.”

Bert gave her a flickering smile just as waiter arrived. “I’m Bert Carson.”

He walked behind her on the way to the dining car. As a typical male, he made the usual observations – five three, about a hundred and ten pounds, ash blonde, shoulder length hair and a lovely body. He said to himself “Down boy.”

During their time at the table, he learned more about her family, a bit about her childhood and her years at the University of Virginia Nursing School. She was actually smiling by the time she was telling him of her whirlwind romance and the rush to marriage before his induction date.

Back in their coach seats, Anne smiled broadly, asked “Are you going to tell me a bit about Bert Carson or just remain the stranger I met on a train?”

Teasingly, still aware that he wanted the conversation to stay light, he laughed “My ego was wondering if you would ask.”

He knew by the sound of her laugh that she had temporarily put aside her own pain. “The Carson clan members are three generations, or more, residents of Greensboro,

where the family head had reigned over the production of the Greensboro Herald through all those years

After graduation from West Point, I became a helicopter pilot, but for some strange reason, I've been assigned to a desk job in Washington instead of heading for the Pacific. I am unattached and serving as Sir Galahad to a lovely lady."

Anne's grin broke into a frown. Bert, realizing that his attempt to be jocular had short circuited. Anne was on the verge of tears "I'm sorry, Anne."

She shook her head "Please don't be. I'm still new at this but aware that I have to get past this and will, in time, I'm sure. I am surprised that some woman has not come under your spell, Bert and taken you to the altar."

He grinned "I guess that part of my life is on hold until the end of this damned war. I am looking forward to my duties, hoping to make my contribution

The train was coming to the outskirts of Washington. Anne turned to Bert, saying "I want to thank you for being so present to me. You have made this a light journey and gave me a few hours of escape from self-pity. Thank you."

"It has been a pleasure meeting you. Although we still know so little of each other, I no longer feel like a stranger."

"Ditto, here. If you wouldn't mind, I would like to write to you occasionally. I understand that all our service men appreciate getting some news from the home front, once in a while."

"That would be nice, Anne. I would like that." He took out a pen and jotted down his APO address, that is Army Post Office. Meanwhile she handed him a card with the address of the hospital where she worked in Roanoke

When the train jerked to a stop, Bert took her bag and his, escorted her to the platform. The noise in Union Station was ear shattering as they made their way across the large waiting room. He stood with her in line until a cab was available.

While they were waiting, a dark Cadillac limo pulled along the loading cab. A tall black chauffeur jumped out of the driver's seat and rushed toward Anne. "I'm sorry. The traffic kept me from meeting you at the gate, Mrs. Johnston. Let me take your bags."

Anne was flustered but Bert turned to the chauffeur. "I presume you have some identification."

A big grin spread across the chauffeur's face as he whipped out a photographed I.D." As you see, I work for the President and we had better not be late. Sir, please jump in. I will take you to your destination after I get Mrs. Johnston to the White House."

Under the portico of the White House, two official looking gentlemen helped Anne out of the limo. She turned to wave to Bert who gave a wave and a smile.

It had been a surprising interlude and he smiled ruefully as the limo driver took him to the Mayflower Hotel. His mind now excluded Anne and focused on the question "Why am I here?"

Chapter 1.

While he wondered about what was facing him, Anne knew exactly why she was headed for the White House. What she didn't know was that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, himself, would be presenting her with the Navy Cross.

She was surprised to see that he sat behind his desk in the Oval Office during the entire ceremony. There were two naval lieutenants receiving honors in addition to her. Mrs. Roosevelt and two admirals were present. Although she had been introduced, she wasn't sure of their names.

She thought she was doing well as she listened to the presentations to the two young officers, having noticed that both were showing a slight limp as they stepped forward while one of the admirals pinned the ribbon on the breast of each. Anne broke into a sob as Mr. Roosevelt began reading the citation for Stuart Johnston. Mrs. Roosevelt immediately came to Anne's side, slipped her right arm around Anne's shoulders, handing her a tissue.

She never understood the words that followed but remembered watching Mr. Roosevelt struggle to his feet and offer his hand across the desk to Anne and then to the other recipients. She only retained a hazy memory of the balance of that gathering but finally composed herself in the small study where Mrs. Roosevelt served her hot tea.

She thought she heard Mrs. Roosevelt saying. "Just take your time and sip this tea. We have time for brief chat before dinner is served. I've asked Franklin to excuse us from the formal dinner. You and I will have dinner in my study before you retire to the hotel for the evening."

Anne remembered stuttering an agreement and sipping the very hot tea. "Thank you, Ma'am. "

"You are welcome, dear. Tell me, are you alone or with some family member?"

"Alone." She offered no explanation

"Pardon my saying this, but in addition to your sorrow, you also seem a little out of sorts and slightly pale. Are you unwell?"

"I believe I am running a low grade temp."

Eleanor Roosevelt, a woman of deep compassion for any underdog, went into high gear. She encouraged Anne to tell her of about her childhood and then about Stuart as Anne later reported to her parents "She kept me so busy talking that I forgot I wasn't hungry. I ate the entire meal."

It was seven in the evening before Anne was delivered to her suite at the Mayflower, having been greeted by the Assistant Manager and the on duty house nurse. Phyllis, the nurse, took a pulse reading and places a thermometer under Anne's tongue. She nodded and then helped her unpack, making sure she was fine before departing. She left her card on the table in the entry hall of the suite. Anne looked at the card and asked "Are you the resident nurse? I don't understand. Why would the resident nurse be on the hotel welcoming committee?"

Phyllis couldn't help laughing. "Of course, you are right. It so happens that the boss had a call from Mrs. Roosevelt, who was concerned for you. She thought you had a low grade temperature and obviously aware of your stress after today's event. You do have a temp of ninety nine plus. Your pulse is a bit high. Please call if you have any discomfort."

"Wow. She is special. My family will find it hard to believe. "

Anne had made plans to do some visiting, taking advantage of the two day stay provided for her. She knew her spirits were lifted a bit and she seemed to have digested her meal very well with no hint of nausea.

Anne awakened about four the next morning. As she told her folks later "I became aware that I was bleeding rather heavily and my body felt as though it was on fire."

"I reached for the bedside phone and dialed the operator asking for a doctor.

It seemed like ages passed before the door opened and help arrived, followed closely by the house doctor. Phyllis fetched some towels as Doctor Bacon started the exam. Phyllis used cool moist cloths and towels to wash away tears and the perspiration.

She placed a thermometer under Anne's tongue and took a pulse reading while the doctor continued. When he began to put the blood pressure cuff on my arm, he asked "How are you feeling, Mrs. Johnston?"

"Drained and tired."

"Your fever has broken within the last few minutes and I don't think you are in any danger, but we will take you to the hospital for some tests and a blood transfusion. I expect that you will be ready to go home tomorrow evening."

Phyllis gently used the towels to wipe down Anne's body and stayed with Anne until the medics arrived to take me to the hospital. She listens to Anne's recital of her day at the White House, the medal and dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt.

The next morning at eleven, Mrs. Roosevelt walked into her room while Anne was still eating breakfast. The head nurse on the floor ushered her into the room and shoed away the other nurses who had gathered around to ogle the First Lady.

She reached to take Anne's hands in hers. "My dear, I am so sorry to hear of your illness. "Anne could see tears escaping the First Lady's eyes before her own began to water,

"The hotel manager called me the first thing this morning to tell me the news. I have only a minute before dashing off to my first appointment but I wanted to offer my sympathy. I understand the danger has past. Our prayers will be with you."

Anne hardly had an opportunity to thank her before she was off for a full day's work.

Anne lay in bed for just a short time and got permission to walk around the floor. She was not to be discharged until the doctor signed off and he wasn't due until four that afternoon.

After the walk, she lay on the bed, giving some serious thought to her future. There were things in her history that needed to be put to bed. Two walks and two hours later, she had firmed up a plan, a very bold plan.

She had no doubt about making it come true. All of her life she had always accomplished whatever goal she had set.

Chapter 2.

Bert Carson was just a bit over six feet, a beautifully built body topped with a blond crew cut. His handsome face held a pair of piercing blue eyes that missed very little, yet his expression always seemed warm and inviting conversation.

There was an attitude, a posture, and a way of carrying himself that would force a seconded deeper look from a casual observer. One could sense that it would be a mistake to underestimate this young man.

He walked to a row of phone booths, opened his wallet to extract a piece of paper and dialed the number on the note. He identified himself and was told to stand by. A minute later he was instructed to wait near the lineup for taxicabs. "A typical army sedan, number 413, will be there in approximately twenty minutes."

At 1630 hours he was seated in a conference room in the Pentagon. The Administrative Assistant to the Deputy Chief of Staff was chairing the meeting of Bert, a representative from G-2, the intelligence unit of the Army, and two unidentified civilians. Bert guessed that they might be CIA representatives.

Coffee was poured for everyone and introductions made except for the two civilians. For about ten minutes the two civilians posed a number of questions about his knowledge of the current status of affairs in Vietnam.

The General interrupted the proceeding with a straight forward statement. "Lieutenant Carson, because of your outstanding record at the Point and your accomplishments at flight school as well as the six week course at Benning, you have been selected for a special assignment. You are being assigned to a Military Intelligence Group in Vietnam, scheduled to depart thirty days hence. In the next thirty days you will attend classes in which you will study the work and the procedures of the Group and your role as the Aide to the General."

"Everyone in the room has read your file and may have questions for you. Do you have any questions for me?"

Instead of a question he said "I presume my indoctrination will be with G-2."

"Correct. Colonel Stark will provide you with the all information you will need. If you have no questions for me, I will leave you in his hands."

One of the civilians asked Bert if he had familiarized himself with the current status in the various battle zones. Bert answered affirmatively.

"I understand you speak several dialects of Vietnamese and Laotian. Am I right?"

“Yes, sir. I studied both at the Point and took some private lessons. As you noted in my file, I spent two summers in Saigon when I was a youngster.”

After a brief nod, “You will be working with a language tutor during the next thirty days and possibly on the ground when you are in Saigon. Good luck.” He and his companions departed without further conversation.

Colonel Stark took Bert to his office and introduced Bert to his personal assistant, Lieutenant Alice Cottle. She gave Bert a war smile just as the Colonel left them alone. She said, “Your life is my hands, five days a week for four weeks, Lieutenant. That is from 0800 hours until 1800 hours. I will meet you at the reception desk each morning and escort you to your assigned location. I am required to meet you at the end of each assignment and escort you to your next location according to the following schedule.” She handed Bert a printed sheet.

While all of this was said in a formal tone of voice, Bert was aware of a slight upturn of her lips and a twinkle in her eyes. She asked “How many cups of coffee would you like each day?”

Bert looked surprised. He laughed “As many as possible.”

She giggled “We’ll see what can be done. I have booked you into the Mayflower. It’s only a thirty minute ride each way. You will be picked up each morning at 0730 along with two other officers. Your evening ride will depart here at 1820.”

Her eyes seemed to ask if there were any questions. She picked up a packet from her desk and handed it to Bert. He pinned on the identification lapel pin and took the rest to his desk. Five minutes later she was handing him a steaming cup of coffee. “This is not in my job description but I like doing this for temporaries who are on their way to that danger spot in Southeast Asia. Even the Colonel gets his own coffee, by his own rules.”

The two of them were off to a good start. He asked “Since you seem to be directing my life, would you mind suggesting a starting point?”

“Top right hand drawer contains a lot of reading material.”

The top bit of reading was a description of the command to which he was assigned.

The 525th Military Intelligence Group

Assigned to Vietnam in 1965 and Scheduled to Depart March 1973

The 525th Military Intelligence Group Command Support will provide command but not operational control for all units of the group. It will provide some limited logistic support of organic and attached units. It will serve as an addition the joint command staff

and the office of the assistant chief of staff. It will provide security, plans and operations the intelligence directorates of the area support groups In essence. The group rendered overall control and personnel support for all U.S. Army intelligence-related activities in Vietnam The group will headquarter at Tan Son Nhut.

The 1st MI Battalion (Air Reconnaissance Support) (MIBARS), with a company in each corps, will provide aerial reconnaissance and surveillance for Army forces in Vietnam.

Tactical aerial reconnaissance missions will be closely coordinated with the USAF and because of the 1st's close relationship with ground units, the personnel of the battalion, will develop a joint effort in photo intelligence.

The importance of ground reconnaissance cannot be over emphasized. Ground reconnaissance not only can provide timely and accurate information on all aspects of the enemy and his area of operations but also can report on where the enemy and his influences do not exist.

He learned that Long Range Recon Patrols were used at almost every echelon of command in Vietnam. These teams were expected to be good sources of intelligence for tactical commanders. Most patrol actions were planned, coordinated and executed at sector or divisional level.

He also learned that the Marines had their Force Recon unit in I Corps and the U.S. Army employed patrols from the 5th Special Forces Group,

As he continued his study, he wondered if he would be able to absorb it all.

He paused as a light shadow fell across the desk in front of him. Looking up he saw Alice slipping into her winter coat. She smiled. "It's 1800, Lieutenant. Our ride to the Mayflower awaits us."

On the walk to the front entry to the building, Bert asked "You did say our ride, not your ride. Are you billeted at the Mayflower?"

Alice burst into a loud guffaw. "No way. When there is space I hitch a ride. I then transfer my body to a bus that takes me to my tiny apartment. That's a better fit for my budget."

"Speaking of budget, I don't recall the details of my daily allowance during this training period. Do you recall the amount by any chance?"

"No, but it would be safe to say that you can enjoy a steak at the Mayflower dining room."

Bert chortled. “Knowing the prices at hotel restaurants, that sounds like I can buy two steak dinners at a local bistro. I’d be very pleased if you are free to join me and help me find that bistro.”

Alice giggled. “You, soldier boy, are smooth but my escorting stops the moment we enter that vehicle about three minutes from now.”

“Alice, I am not trying to be smooth or pushy. I understand if you are not free for any reason, but I would enjoy your company. Besides, I am a first time visitor and can use some help to find my way around town during the weekends.”

Alice looked at his serious face and could read the sincerity that came through his voice. There was a sense of innocence, unexpected. She felt herself being drawn to him but said “That’s a sweet invitation but I need to break a previous engagement with a girl friend.”

In the lobby Alice suggested he register while she made a phone call. They went up to his room where they both freshened up and were soon on their way to a bistro about three blocks away.

Alice had spent part of the afternoon reading his entire bio and was intrigued with this rather gentle person whose feats at the Academy and at flight school belied his demeanor.”

“Bert, you seem so shy or at least reticent for the top cadet at the Point. I was just a year ahead of you and knew of your reputation. I figured that you would be an arrogant egotist like the top guys in my class.”

“I’m not sure what you’re saying.”

“There is nothing about you that shouts “Hot Shot” or any other sign of self-importance.”

“I guess I am rather reluctant to point out or show off my accomplishment, especially around women.”

“I like that, although your social life must be slightly impaired. Girls usually like to be pursued.”

“I know but up to now I’ve been focused on career development.”

Alice raised the eyebrows. He laughed “I’m not gay, just shy. I figure there is time to start a family after Vietnam. I like kids and hope my future wife will too.”

“Smart. Like you, I am shying away from guys who may be headed for Nam or Korea. At 25, I figure I have plenty of time.”

Bert was getting a bit uncomfortable so he switched the subject. “How come you took time to read my bio and furthermore, what gave you the right.”

She laughed out loud. “My position gives me access to certain files and I nudge the rules when I want to. Three minutes after meeting you I decided that reading about you would be a great way to spend part of my day. I’m glad I did.”

Bert felt the blush start to rise to his cheeks and Alice giggled. “Bert, you have no idea how precious a rarity you are in a military world, where egos are often blown out of proportion.”

Bert didn’t know what to say. His blush just got deeper. Alice let him off the hook by waving to the waiter. The place was getting crowded and the noise level rising. It was time.

On the way back to the hotel, Alice put her gloved hand on Bert’s elbow and her body tight. “Damn, it’s cold. In the lobby, Bert, not wanting the evening to end so soon suggested a cup of coffee before she caught the next bus.

Alice made the correct assumption. Bert was hoping she would be willing to join him upstairs. She struggled with the idea. It was not what she did with the sojourns on their way to Nam, but he was different.

She decided to use the honest way. “Bert, are you taking the long way around to invite me into your bed?”

His face flushed and he stammered a “Yes.”

Alice took him by the hand and headed for the elevators.

Chapter 3.

February 1972.

Lieutenant Anne Johnson was lying on her cot; she was exhausted, dirty, sweaty knowing she should shower and head for the chow line. "I am just too damned tired" but the demands of hunger won the day.

She lingered over a second cup of coffee, chatting with Maggie that is Captain Margaret Ryan, head nurse at the Seventy Ninth Evac unit, near Tet.

Anne was a fairly recent arrival while Maggie was on her fourth tour in Vietnam. She had fascinating stories about the history of the nurses in Nam. She was say "In the early years of the war, when resources were in short supply, we had to improvise in order to provide care to the sick and wounded under extremely poor conditions.

We had to be flexible, creative, gutsy and practical. We found ourselves facing severe shortages and, often, too few essential supplies or a lack of equipment.

That tent became our surgery. It was primitive. It was dirty, a non-sterile environment. We didn't have enough instruments and definitely not enough nurses. Needless to say we shared things during surgical procedures that were absolutely needed to save lives, but they weren't sterile.

Penicillin and blood for transfusions were often in short supply. There was so much we just didn't have.

We did have so many casualties right out of the field. They just brought them all in there. The brass just kept hoping that we could fix them and sends them back into the war. It was much worse than the public saw in the TV series, MASH."

Anne responded with "And I think this is tough. We still are short-handed and working long hours. I am so fatigued that I hardly felt up to coming to chow."

"What did bring you here? You are a bit older than most of the nurses arriving."

Anyone could hear the hesitation in her voice. "It's a long story, Maggie."

"I have the feeling that this will be a quiet evening and if you are willing to talk, I would love to hear you story. It also helps me as the mother hen to know my nurses."

Anne finally said "It's a familiar story in some ways. A handsome Navy officer sweeps a young woman off her feet it is a match made in heaven. My folks loved him. My friends thought we were a perfect match.

For some mysterious reasons, blinded by love, we thought that we should be married before he shipped out for duty in Vietnam.

We exchanged letters, almost daily, telling what details we could of our daily lives and planning life for three when he had completed his tour. Yes, I had conceived on the very night before he left.”

Anne stopped her story but Maggie waited patiently. She was sure Anne would want to go on.

“I miscarried a few weeks after receiving the news of Stuart’s death and I seemed to have lost my spirit. I managed to perform well on the job, probably because I knew lives were at stake. However, the evening and weekends were empty. I did not feel like reading. Television offered no relief. I began losing weight.

My parents were distraught but could not offer anything to help me. I turned down offers from my hospital friends and for all practical purposes became a hermit except for forty hours a week.

I did keep up with the news, particularly focusing on the war which had taken Stuart from me. That probably was not a good idea but I was angry with all the young people who were in constant protest and even seemed to think of our servicemen as some sort of enemy.

I asked for a few days off, went to Washington and came home to tell my folks that I was being offered an opportunity to become an army nurse. My mother broke down; sure I would also not survive the war.

After the commissioning and serving a brief tour at Walter Reed, I was deposited here.”

Maggie asked “Anne, did you manage to find some social life at Walter Reed?”

“I tried but usually found disappointment. The guys were interested only in dating and looking for a quick lay. After Stuart, I was looking for something deeper, not marriage but a significant relationship.”

“I think I know what you are saying. I never found the right one; it seems that the good ones are gone early. I could even get excited if some guy showed enough interest to find out who I am.”

“Believe it or not, Maggie, I have had the same experience but I once met a stranger on a train on my way to receive Stuart’s medal. He was kind and gentle and listened with compassion as I let my grief show. He even stayed with me until my transportation arrived at Union Station.”

“To my regret I failed to follow through on a promise I made. I asked him if it would be all right to write as a friend and promptly failed to do so. In all the chaos of the events that followed, I lost his APO address.”

“I know the feeling. I have unfulfilled relationships in my history because of my failure to follow through.”

Maggie saw Anne try to cover her yawn. She laughed “Time to hit the sack, Anne.”

Back on her cot, as tired as she was, Anne’s swirling mind held off the sandman for a long period. Flicking across the screen of her mind was the image of the little girl in white receiving her first communion at Saint Leonard’s parish church. That faded into picture of her first kiss from Joey Rich in the back seat of Tommy’s convertible.

The screen went blank before she found herself shyly allowing Stuart to undress her on that evening when she yielded her virginity.

She found herself remembering that the only times she had intercourse were those few precious times with Stuart. ”Here I am at twenty seven and feeling like a virgin.”

Her alarm sounded much too soon. Her body wanted to stay on her cot. Her eyes wanted to close again She felt like she was fighting her spirit as she dragged herself erect and headed for the showers.

At the breakfast table she joined a group of nurses and aides who were talking about the rigors and struggles with their chosen vocation, not that anyone of them would have reneged on their duties.

Patty who was just back from f furlough was saying "It hurts so much sometimes to see the paper full of .demonstrators, especially people burning the flag. I wanted to shout” Don’t you have any respect for the kids who place their lives on the line for you each day? Display the flag, Mom and Dad, please, every day. Ask your friends to do the same. It means so much to us to know that people at home support us."

A round of Amens followed her passionate statement.

Cissy who was one of our newest arrivals but not a novice said “I’m glad to be here. My last station was six months of hell. The noise outside was tremendous and I could hardly hear myself think. Mortars were dropping much too close. Fortunately I was so busy I was almost able to forget about it. It was when I tried to rest that the meaning of the noise hit home."

Maggie said "Some of my most satisfying and yet saddest moments were when I worked with the children who were innocent casualties. I couldn’t believe that tiny slanted children’s eyes could open so wide while in such pain could be so quiet. I wish someone would tell me that my next assignment was focused entirely on those kids.”

Somewhere outside a siren sounded. Maggie said “Incoming Hueys means wounded. Off we go.”

Chapter 4.

Bert Carson was now Captain Carson, USA very much a part of G2, Army Military Intelligence. He now commanded a small unit of his own, responsible for coordinating the Intel from the northern section, near the DMZ. During the last two months, since his change of assignment; he had developed a wide network of information sources in the northern sector that bordered the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone).

He was thrilled with his duty and especially with the recent promotion but there was a big hole in his plan for life. As he said to himself “The damned war looks like it is going on forever. Like everyone else, I figured our military superiority would have helped South Vietnam to victory by now.

Time is fleeting and I want to have a family and no way am I going to meet the future mother of my children in this hell hole.”

Many a night, he lay in his bunk thinking about the two women he had met that even came close to his idea of a wife. One was Alice his guide during his brief stay in Washington. The other was the woman who haunted his dreams ever since they separated after the train ride between Roanoke and D.C.

He had letters from Alice. Her last letter indicated that she would soon be on her way to Saigon. “It will be nice to have a friend nearby, that is, if you stationed anywhere within shouting range.”

He hadn't heard a word from the woman on the train. “I wonder why she never wrote as promised. It would be nice to know if she ever recovered from her grief upon losing her husband so soon after their wedding.

He could close his eyes and clearly see Anne Johnston, one hundred ten pounds, a lovely but face with sad eyes, topped off by ash blond hair down to her shoulders.

“If she made a good recovery, some lucky bastard has his ring on her finger by now. What I need is a reassignment, particularly stateside.”

He let his mind drift back to Alice and the few weeks in Washington, where he had found an intimacy never imagined.

He had just arrived in his personal helicopter from Rock Pile, not too far south of the DMZ. His heavy beard was anything but neat, his uniform smudged and stained with perspiration. Having made a request for audience with the commander of his unit, he cooled his heels for almost an hour.

He was pacing in his office, sipping a third cup of coffee and smoking his fifth cigarette. His request had to be routed through channels, meaning two a light colonel and

a bird colonel before it got to the General. "Hell, even so, it should not take this long. I wonder whose aide is dragging his ss."

This last thought was interrupted with the jangling of his phone. He picked up the receiver and within five seconds was on his way.

The General's aide was waiting at the open door. As he walked in, the General said "Sorry to keep you waiting. Carson. Are confident that your informants have the straight skinny? Do you trust the data?"

"I do, sir. They have been right on during the last six months. For reasons that I know, they value the relationship so delay that they wouldn't dare cross us. Besides I always validate the reports through alternate sources,"

The General sat silently for a full two minutes before saying to his aide "Mike, hand Carson the two special code books." He turned to Bert "I want you to take three of your most trusted non-coms and two heavily armed marines for a close look. You will be in your Huey with one of your non-coms and both marines. The others will be in the backup Huey with two other guards flying shotgun. I want you to talk with your network team and then I want you to fly near and, if necessary, into the DMZ to confirm the presence of the PANV"

As the aide handed over the books, the General continued. The observations from both helicopters will be exchanged and your alternates can relay the content of your information directly to my radio room

Mike or the deputy of his choice will be on station there so that I am informed. Is that clear?"

"Aye, sir."

Take time to clean up, have some chow and maybe catch forty winks before you shove off at 2400 hours."

With a firm salute, Bert turned on his heels and left. He headed for his quarters. After a shower, he poured himself a tall scotch and opened his mail. He quickly zipped open the letter from Alice. He broke into a wide grin as he read "I expect to land in Saigon within the next ten days."

Lift off was at 0013. Upon arrival at their southern border of the DMZ, both copters flew at fifty feet above the surface in order to avoid possible early detection by the enemy, if the North Viet soldiers were already in the DMZ. It was agreed that, Bert would fly into the D MZ for two miles while the alternate Huey would stay on the South Viet side of the line.

Bert flew parallel to the demarcation line from east to west and could see nothing. Steve, the senior non-com flew east when Bert started his westward flight.

Radio conversation, although in code, was terse. The two copters returned to the initial point and started another leg westward. Bert moved across the line flying zigzag northwest and then south but no more than mile deep into the zone.

Twenty minutes into the flight, one of the marines called out “Two glints off rifle barrels, thirty degrees to starboard that is to our right.”

Bert turned south to exit the zone as he reported the information. About fifty yards short of the line, the Huey took a direct hit into the rotor blades. Bert fought to make a landing but lost control. The copter tilted to starboard. Bert heard the scream of the gunner as he began falling to earth. He wondered why the gunner had not been strapped in.

“No time to wonder. Concentrate.” He tried to pull the copter level but realized that they were going into a spin to starboard. He was mindful of yelling but never could remember the words. It had to have been only seconds, but his mind was apologizing to his crew and to Alice because he would not be there to welcome her. He would never know the love of a woman or the hug of a daughter.

The last thing he remembered was a scream of pain from someone in the crew or maybe it was his own scream as he crashed to earth.

The next thing he remembered was opening his eyes, lying on white sheets in a pleasantly cool room. There was total silence for about two minutes while he tried to recreate the event or maybe an accident that brought him here. He heard a faint then a little louder whir of copter blades as a Huey seemed to be approaching. In a flash, the last seconds of his copter crashing emerged on the screen of his mind and the sound of human pain was registering on his brain.

He closed his eyes, and then slowly reopened them. He thought he heard the swish of a skirt or the rubbing of khakis and realized that someone was nearing the bed. He turned his head.

“Welcome, soldier. We’ve been waiting for you.”

He tried to smile but it hurt like hell. She continued. “No words are necessary. We have you doped up heavily to minimize the pain. It may take a day or two before you can use your lips without serious pain so we will try to ask you questions that can be answered with one blink for yes or two blinks for no. Understand?”

He blinked once and then closed his eyes.

Her quiet soft voice continued. “We’ll take good care of you. It may take a while but we offer the best of TLC. Meanwhile you are being fed intravenously and have a catheter inserted to take care of your personal needs. You have full use of your right hand and it rests next to the call button. One buzz and some gorgeous nurse of aide will come dashing. Got it?”

Bert tried unsuccessfully to grin, opened his eyes and gave her a blink.

Over the next five days Bert learns that all of his crew, except the gunner, had survived, .but all were seriously wounded and had to be air lifted to Saigon for major operations. He was expected to be ambulatory and was to recuperate here until he returned to duty in about three weeks.

He was being seen by the resident neurologist, who actually served three different Evacs but was stationed here. Bert was suffering with short term lapses of memory but Doc expected a full recovery within the three weeks.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, he decided to take a stroll to the canteen for a cup of coffee, which he could sip through a straw. He poured the coffee into a cup but could not find any straws. He began pulling out various drawers and was starting on the third when a gentle voice asked “May I help?”

He turned toward the sound of the voice and saw a nurse in green scrubs, a skull cap covering her head and mask hanging around her neck. “Yes, please” he said tightly, still a bit stiff jawed.

She moved to another set of drawers, found a straw, turned toward Bert. He said “Thanks. May I get you a cup?”

She nodded and turned to find the sugar container. He asked “May I join you?”

She gave him a broad smile. “I’d be delighted to have your company and I need someone to help me take my mind off the sight of that operating area.”

He laughed “I’m your man. I know a lot of clean stories and even some off color.”

“I’ll take both, anything to give me a laugh.”

Bert actually had her laughing aloud within two minutes. After four stories she said “Enough for a minute. My jaw and cheeks are hurting.”

While he was returning with two refills, she removed her cap and longish blond tresses dropped to her shoulders. The vision before him rang a bell. As he handed her the cup he noticed that she was looking at him in a strange manner

“Have we” they both started to ask at the same time and then broke into laughter. She said “You go first.

“There is something faintly familiar about you and I wondered if we had ever met. That’s what I was about to ask.”

Bert could hardly believe the miracle that had just unfolded before him. This was his Anne, but would she even remember the incident. This was the woman who promised but never did write him.

“Perhaps we met in Saigon?” Bert suggested.

“No. I would have remembered if it were that recently. If we did, it must have been during my university or nursing school years.”

“Unlikely. I was at the Academy and then flight school. I don’t remember meeting any nurses or nursing students. I usually talk backgrounds with people with whom I need to get acquainted. I am sure I would have wanted to get to know you.”

Anne could feel herself blushing but said off handedly Thank you, gallant sir. Speaking of getting to know each other, we haven’t even exchanged names”

She giggled and said “I’m Anne.”

“” I’m Bert.” He watched carefully to see if the name triggered a memory. Nothing seemed to have registered. Then slowly her eyes began widening as some memory came alive.

She gasped and her throat restricted. “That’s it.” With a tremor in her voice she said “Yes. You were reporting to duty and I was on my way to the White House.”

Bert finished the sentence “to receive a medal from the President on behalf of your late husband. I remember being worried about the state of your spirit.”

“You were so kind and I promised to write you and completely failed to carry out my promise. You gave me an address but I seem to have lost it. I am so sorry.”

Inwardly, Bert sighed with relief. “She hadn’t intentionally ignored me and failed to keep her promise.”

Aloud he said to her “Please don’t berate you. It would have been nice but I have been totally concentrated on my task here I’ve thought about you a few times and wondered about your emotional journey that lay ahead of you.”

She reached to take his hand in hers. “I am so sorry, Bert. A broken promise can hurt so terribly. I am deeply sorry.” Bert could hear the pain in her choked voice.

He waited until she seemed in control.” It took a while especially since I decided to bring my skills to Vietnam.” She glanced at her watch. “I have another surgery in a few minutes. Perhaps we can find some time to chat again. I would like to hear about your two years. Did you come here or spend some time in “D.C.?”

She dropped his hand and stood but Bert took her hand. “I’ll walk with you while we set up a date. Maybe we can have dinner together at the mess or tonight’s movie.”

She was almost running. “I’m late. See you at chow six, Okay?”

“You betcha.”

Chapter 5.

Bert was delighted to receive some letters during mail call. His Co made sure that his mail would be forward to the hospital during his stay. One Bert was able to speak without the jaw restrictions, he had placed a call to the skipper in order to answer any questions raised after his written report had been dictated and mailed.

One letter was from his dad. He put that aside to read the letter from Alice. She had written “This is just a quick note to tell you that my plans have changed. We are going to Germany instead of Vietnam. I am sorry, having expected to have a warm welcome in Saigon. Bless you. Keep writing.” Alice.

They were sitting in some form of lawn chairs. The sliver of moon was dancing in and out of the clouds the boom of artillery broke the silence. It was after midnight but neither of them wanted the evening to end it was Anne’s hope to find out about the kind of risks that Bert faced but she realized that it was she who had done most of the talking.

It was Bert’s way just as it had been during that journey from Roanoke to D.C. He was so easy to talk too and one didn’t mind sharing her deepest thoughts. She said “Bert, you are special and make me feel whole. I don’t want this to end but I have an early shift, really a half shift and I better hit the sack.”

She realized that he had been holding her hand. It felt so comforting, a feeling that had escaped her for a very long time. He didn’t let go as she rose but rose with her. “It sounds like you will be free early.”

“Yes, if all goes well, I’ll be done about eleven.”

“Do you think we can borrow some transport? I would like to take you into the village for lunch while we continue getting to know each other.”

Anne giggled “Only if you let me know more than the surface of Bert Carson.”

“I promise if you can find the ride for us.”

At the door to her room, she stood on her toes and planted a sweet kiss on his jaw. “Thanks, Bert. You have brought sunshine into my life today. I am eager to keep our date tomorrow. Why don’t I meet you in the canteen between eleven and noon?”

“I’ll be there with bells on.”

They had finished the light lunch of rice and vegetables and were waiting for more tea.” Bert, I understand if you have to hold back about you present life but your past life can’t be a secret.”

He smiled “It isn’t and I’m willing to tell you all my secrets if you promise to reciprocate.”

“You want to make a free trade? That kind of scares me but I’m willing to try.”

“Okay, here goes. I had a good early childhood. Both parents were teachers in the public school system and determined that my sis and I would have solid educations. Both of us were encouraged to read and study from our kindergarten years through high school. Sis got a full scholarship to Princeton and I qualified for an appointment to West Point.

I finished first in every aspect of our training except academics. I finished a bit behind the valedictorian. As a result I was given my first choice for further study and ended up in flight school for copters.”

He paused for a long minute. Anne reached for his hand. “You can quit there. I haven’t learned any secrets.”

Bert chortled. “I was just gathering my thoughts. In high school at the dances, I was quite the wallflower. Being basically shy and lacking good social skills, I had to depend on the girls to take charge. I never did end up gong steady as did some of my male friends.

At West Point I continued focusing on the development of my career. While I attended the dances in which coeds were imported by the bus load, I participated at a minimal level. I did the same on our social trips to the girls’ schools.”

Anne saw his hesitation. “I know there is more you can tell me and I am hopeful you can share.”

Bert was still hesitant but decided to tell Anne. “One cannot talk about social life during teens and early twenties without talking about sex. It’s almost embarrassing to admit that at twenty seven, I have had very little sexual experience.”

Anne squeezed his hand and felt tears welling behind her eyelashes. “I think I understand, Bert. Except for my times with Stuart, which as you can guess, were quite limited, I had no other experience. In my case, it wasn’t a matter of being shy. It was that I had some sense that having sex had to be more than meeting a physical need, something I felt and still feel quite often. Bert, are you?” She began to giggle “Yes, you are blushing.”

He decided to shift the secret business over to Anne. “Now you know my secrets, Anne. It’s your turn.”

She squeezed his hand “Yes. It is my turn, but I want to say thank you. That was deeply moving. When we decided on this, I wasn’t sure I could be honest enough to tell

my deepest secret but you have opened your soul and heart. Now I have to do the same.”

She took a deep breath. “This is going to be very difficult and I don’t have a hankie handy.”

She took another deep breath. “I’ve been carrying a load of guilt and regret, trying my best to bury it and hide it from my folks and my closest friends.

I have always been a person who went full speed ahead when I decided on a goal. Marrying Stuart and having a baby with him became a passion with me. I could see that he was infatuated with me and I decide that it was easy to have him fall in love with me. I loved him and did my best to make him fall in love with me.

On our second date I seduced him. He had already made a few subtle moves to test me. His big concern was that I might get pregnant. He was aware that going on active duty was in the near future. I told him I was on the pill, a boldfaced lie. We made love almost daily right through my fertile period.

I was ecstatic when I missed my period, went to the drug store and bought a pregnancy test package.

Stuart was bewildered, berating himself for not using protection. Naturally, both of us being Catholic, there was no talk of an abortion and a quick wedding was the solution to save face and avoid embarrassment. We figured that our parents might make guesses about the time of conception when the baby was born but that day was a long way off.’

Anne’s voice had been getting weaker and husky. Suddenly she stopped and began crying, actually sobbing. Bert moved around the table so that he could wrap an arm around her and dab her eyes with his handkerchief. Two other patrons who were lingering started to whisper, wondering what was happening. The woman came over and with a gesture was asking if she could help.

Anne shook her head sidewise. The woman returned to her table.

Bert held her tight until she indicated she was ready to continue. “I had loved Stuart deeply and planned on admitting to him the duplicity on my part but, of course, the end of his life came before I could say anything to him.” The sobbing began again.

Eventually she was able to say. “When I miscarried, I had a sense that this was my punishment but the guilty feelings continued until I was able, at least partially, to work through them with the aid of a psychologist.”

Bert started to say something but she held up her hand while she gulped deep breath and then continued. “Up to this moment I have had this need to share this with someone but never found that someone until today.”

“Anne that is a heavy load that you have been carrying. I hope you are right about find relief in the sharing with me. I feel so privileged that you trusted me enough to do so.”

Anne gave him a weak smile and said “Let’s take a long walk. It is a beautiful day and you are a lovely human being. I had that sense of your trustworthiness that day on the train ride.”

They walked through the village, in and out of a few shops, then down a lane in the shade of some very old trees.

They came to small glade where a spring had been piped for villagers to come and fill their pails with clear spring water. They took a seat on a stone wall that bordered one side of the glade.

Bert sensed that the moment was right. He let go of her and, placed his hand under her chin and gently brought it around while he moved his lips to hers. Her response was a spontaneous and welcoming, even unwilling to separate as his passion deepened.

“Wow, soldier boy. That came close to grabbing my heart.”

Bert laughed. “I hardly think so but I would like to have chance to see if I can crawl into your heart. Would you consider being my girl?”

She became very serious. “Are you sure you are not offering sympathy to a guild ridden maiden? I just told you how duplicitous I was.”

“I have the sense that you paid for whatever sin you believe you committed. I believe that in your church they call than penance. Besides, I don’t consider myself any kind of bargain. You may be right but if I read you right, then we owe it to ourselves to find out.”

“Okay, let me think about that while we drive back to the hospital.

The parking lot was vacant when they arrived. They sat and chatted about her schedule during the next few days in light of the fact that he would be returning to duty within weeks. With a broad grin on her face, Anne slip closer to Bert, wrapped her arms around his neck and moved her lips to his ear. “I’d be delighted to be your girl, starting right now. What I need at the moment is one of your earthshaking kisses.”

A full two minutes later, she managed to unlock their lips and inhale a deep breath. “I think we need to take this action to another arena. Your room or mine?”

The next several weeks were heavenly, as Anne told Maggie She could hardly wait for the long day to end during her day shifts. During the period of her night shift, she and Bert took long walks, found a secret place by the river where they could be alone, doing what lovers do.

The tender goodbye came the night before the Huey arrived to take Bert back to duty. Anne could not help wondering if absence does make the heart grow fonder or, perhaps, more objective.

As she lay close to Bert while the full moon brightened his room, she tried to keep it light. “What am I going to do without you, lover boy? You have brightened my days and taken me to the stars at night. Your presence has made it easy to endure the long and tiring days.”

Bert saw the glistening at here yes in spite of the lightness in her tone. “Sweet woman, you have grabbed my heart and I get the sense that I have crawled into yours. Just remember that you are my girl and always will be. This damned war can’t last forever. Even so, your hitch will expire and I am certain that the army will see fit to have me serve in some other way. In the meantime you can shower me with short but frequent notes about how you miss me.”

She smiled. “You betcha, big boy and I will be expecting the same. I am due for some rest and recreation in a month.”

Before she could finish, he said “What a coincidence. I plan to get some R&R during the same week.” That brought about a couple of giggles.

Bert never could remember if he had any sleep before the alarm announced a temporary change of life style.

Anne’s letter to her mom, six weeks later announced. “That handsome officer, Bert, has put a beautiful diamond on my left hand.

I really had believed that I would never have another chance at love, but the cynic in me is cured.

I will keep you informed about a possible wedding date within the next year.”

Anne.

Book VII

Samantha

Prologue

What had seemed to be a glade of shade trees has turned into a jungle with a wide passage as though someone had cut a swath through the darkness to draw the curious. Her handsome escort appears to be at ease. She feels compelled to take the path, unable to turn back even as her unconscious hints that the way forward is fraught with risk.

With each step forward her mind is embroiled in a war. “Come forward.” “Turn back.” She walks ever so slowly, drawn by the desire to see the beauty that he promised she would behold at the end of the journey.

The scent shifts and she finds herself climbing the stairs leading to the entrance of the beautiful castle. She enters the wide entrance, the doors of which opened automatically to welcome her. As she crosses the threshold, she senses a faint shiver in her spine.

She ignores the warning and continues in her desire to see the grandeur of the castle.

She slowly ascends the stairs that are directly opposite the doorway. At the top, to the right is a gold door which is opening slowly. She steps ever so gingerly through the doorway to behold a spacious and beautifully furnished bedroom with a circular bed that is in the center and is the focus of her eye.

Sometime in her past, she has dreamt of such a room. She dashes for the bed and bounces on it as she might have as a young girl.

Her joy is interrupted as she senses an evil presence nearby.

She is suddenly aware that she is lying naked among rumpled sheets. Her hands are damp and as she raises them to discover the reason, she sees blood, shrieks and cries “help, help”.

Bursting through the door is a large gorilla, dressed in tuxedo tails. He begins bounding toward the bed, tails flapping and grinning ear to ear. She shrinks into a tight ball and screams louder as the creature leaps into bed atop her body.

She suddenly awakens from the nightmare that had gripped her. Her body is bathed in sweat but she sighs with relief that the sense of that horrible reality was only a dream. The relief is short lived.

Chapter 1.

Mike Malek was poring over their notes in preparation for the afternoon hearing in Superior Court Seated across the desk was Johnny Hagar, his law partner, who had recently rejoined the firm. He considered Johnny to be a better litigator than who would be sitting in the first chair this afternoon. Twenty minutes into the conference, Susan knocked gently on the door, opened the door and said “Samantha Stevens has been waiting for about ten minutes. I know you do not like to keep your clients waiting, boss.”

Mike smiled. “Thirty seconds, Susan.” To Johnny he said “You have everything covered as usual. See you in court.”

A minute later, he and Samantha were seated in arm chairs at a side table. Susan poured coffee for them and silently slipped out of Mike’s spacious office.

Samantha, a tall beautiful woman, about twenty five years of age sat stiffly, back straight with her lips drawn firmly in a straight line across her mouth. Her knees were pulled closely together, firmly planted in front of her. Her arms were folded cross her breast, telling the world to stay away.

Mike took his time, carefully but not obviously, taking inventory of a very frightened young woman. She was dressed in a navy blue suit, a white blouse, very plain with no ruffles. Her ashen blond hair was cut short but seemed to form a halo around her finely formed features.

Mike knew she must have overcome a lot of fears to keep this appointment. Although she had not indicated the reason for her visit, he guessed that someone had violated her sense of rightness and that it might have been someone she knew, but that was speculation. It was time to lead her gently to get past her fears and put some trust in her decision.

“Please have some coffee, Ms. Stevens. I can assure you that the temperature is just right and won’t burn your tongue.” That caused her to show a hint of a smile. “Would you like some cream or sugar?” She nodded her head side to side and reached for the cup.

He gave her a warm smile. “Please take your time. We have plenty of time and, regardless of what you may have heard about lawyers, I am not charging you by the minute.”

She took a long sip, put down the cup, used her tongue to moisten her lips and began hesitantly. “I want to sue someone, a person from a well-known family here in Silicon Valley.” She started to continue but her voice choked and tears began dropping onto her cheeks. Mike quickly produced a clean white handkerchief and handed it to her.

It was a full two minutes before she could continue. Mike had taken her left hand in his as a sign of friendship and support for her feelings.

“Eight months ago I was brutally raped by this supposedly nice young man.” She hesitated, not sure how to proceed.

Mike, still holding her hand, said “I am so sorry. I have been privileged to represent two other young women who suffered the same violation of their personhood and I offer you my sympathy. I am ready to help in any way that I can. Tell me, first. Have you gone to the police?”

She shook her head negatively “I just couldn’t bring myself to face the public humiliation at the time. My mother and my brother urged me to do nothing. As Bud said “We will be shamed with all the publicity and there is no way to win against a family with that much power in the community and in our church.” That was so many months ago, and after all the personal anguish I decided that Phillip Dexter needs to face up to his extremely bad behavior.”

“I hope he hasn’t done this to some other woman but if he has, he needs to be stopped. If I have to go to the police, I think I can do that now. Do you think it is too late?”

“Not under the law but the time lapse may cause the police to think about how to proceed, if at all.”

She paused to take a deep breath. Mike did not interrupt. He sensed that she had overtaken her first fears and would continue without prodding. He was correct.

“The expenses have been horrendous. My medical insurance did not cover all the costs and I didn’t have coverage for all the psychiatric assistance that I required in the past and the months that are ahead of me, according to my psychologist and psychiatrist.”

Mike asked “Do you realize that once I initiate any legal action on your behalf this will become public knowledge?”

“Yes, I am aware but I am willing to risk that. His family name will also be in the limelight. My brother, who finally reconsidered, believes that they may be willing to settle out of court. He says that is the hallmark of your practice, if I may say so.”

Mike grinned. “I do seem to have established that reputation.”

They were interrupted when Susan tapped on the door and entered with a fresh pot of coffee. “I also went out to get a few sweet rolls. Boss, since you seldom eat breakfast, you need some nourishment.” She gave Samantha a warm smile. “I don’t think the calories will do too much harm to your waist.” She got a nice smile in response.

While they enjoyed the repast Mike asked “You know I presume, that I will have dozens of questions about your history and the history after the event but while we are a bit relaxed, tell me about your current situation, your family, where you live and about any friends you have at present.”

“I live alone in a studio apartment, having moved in just two weeks ago. I’ve just started working six weeks ago as a computer engineer with a young startup firm. Until then, I had been traumatized and almost a recluse in the little cottage behind my mother’s house.”

“I quit going to church, the Second Baptist Church, a few weeks after I shared the story of the incident with the pastor. While he didn’t say so, I got the impression that he was not very sympathetic. Oh, he was smoothly somber and looked sympathetic but his responses had a hollow tone.”

“Are you dating or seeing any male friend?”

“No. I’m afraid to start that again. I’ve had lots of invitations from guys at the office and some of our vendors but I’m not ready or sure that I ever will be. I’ve heard people talk about girls like me being ‘damaged property’. I am not sure what effect that may have on my future but right now I am not willing to test new relationships.”

“How about your brother?”

“He is sympathetic but his wife is very judgmental and probably believes I got what I asked for. Thus I see little of my brother although we were extremely close as kids growing up.”

“By the way, everyone close to me calls me Sam. I think it might be easier than addressing me by the full name.”

Mike smiled. “Okay, Sam. You do understand that a lot of our conversation will get deeply personal and sometimes touch on subjects that you may not want to discuss?”

“I understand. I gave this a lot of thought. Except for this last eight months, I have been a self-assured person, willing to face most difficulties head-on. I know I have a long way to travel to be my old self but I am willing to endure what it takes to reestablish myself.”

“That is very encouraging. We can proceed in several different ways. My usual style is to suggest a subject or an area of conversation and let the client relate as much as possible. If that is uncomfortable, I can develop a host of questions to which you can respond directly.”

Sam gave it just a moment’s thought. “Let’s start with the first method. If I am not forthcoming enough, please feel free to dig. I already feel like I have a new friend, although I only know you through the eyes of my brother, who happens to be a big fan.”

“All right. This may take a couple of sessions, if you are fully responsive. One of the first things I want to know is any and every thing that may give fodder to the enemy’s case. In other words, what weakness or sin of the past could rear its head during negotiations or litigation, if necessary go back in your history as far as your early teen years.”

“All right. Here goes. First, a bit of family history. I have never known my father. He left my mom when my brother was two and I was a few weeks old. It seems I was the hope of my mother but the unwanted brat by my father. Mom, therefore, was a working mother. She worked long hours at two jobs, leaving Tim and me to be raised and nurtured by a constantly changing set of nannies, baby sitters or kindly neighbors.

Tim seemed to take it in stride while I constantly kicked at the traces, sometimes flying into rages. I kept pushing at the boundaries, trying to do things that older kids did. By the time I was eleven, I was able to sneak out of the house after dark. My mother was so tired from a long day’s work, that she was dead to the world. I am sick about the way I acted but I guess you need to know it all.

I attached myself to a group of young teenagers who found every which way to get into trouble. On a number of occasions I was brought home by a policeman while the older kids went to juvenile hall.

Although I was grounded, my mother was unable to keep me indoors unless she tied me up with a rope and she would never do that.

Tim tried to help me, guide me but I was set on my ways and he would never betray me. Poor mom.”

Sam stopped to pour another cup of coffee for the two of them.

My mother thought of me as a hellion and prayed for me each night and for three hours each Sunday at church, I’m sure.

When I started middle school, I refused to attend Sunday school. As I told my mom “The teacher either tells these ridiculous stories from the Old Testament or Revelations. If she wasn’t doing that, then she was lecturing about the evils of drinking, swearing or hinting about the evils of sex.”

“This is probably only a slight overstatement, but I was hot after boys shortly after I had my first menstrual period. Curiosity about boys and sex drove me to the library where I consumed every book or article I could find on the subject. At age fourteen I seduced my friend Tommy on an old mattress in our garage while my mom and Tim were gone for the evening.”

“A little later there were a couple of other boys. In high school it was Mickey, who had me exploring the use of weed and meth on the evening of my fifteenth birthday. He was a year older than I and promised me a good time. It was in the back seat of his car six months later that I got pregnant. We were sure it couldn’t happen because we had been having unsafe sex for all those past months. I was sure that I knew all about the rhythm system from my reading at the library.

We were making out in Lovers’ Lane when I gave him the news that I had missed my period. I decided I had best see our family doctor who would not share his knowledge without my say so.

Both of us shared the strain and tension of realizing the impact this would have on our lives. I was the stronger of the two of us and wanted to help him “Mickey, no matter what happens from this point on, you must not think we have to get married, but I think we need to tell my family.”

Down hearted, Mickey said “My father is going to be so disappointed then kick my ass. He has dreamed of my playing quarterback at Cal Berkeley.”

“You will, Mickey. We will work something out.”

“God, I hope so. Your aunt and uncle are coming to dinner tomorrow night and then playing cards as they usually do.”

“Are you strong enough to go with me while I tell both families? My aunt is a rational, calm woman who has been warning me that this could happen to me. She had been a part time nanny to me when I was young.”

“Anyhow, Mickey and I faced both families that next evening just after dinner. It took ten minutes of chaotic recriminations or maybe a little longer before my aunt took charge. In the course of the discussion that followed, everyone agreed that Planned Parenthood should be our first step. All four of them agreed on the hardships of my trying to raise a child at this young age and the burden that it would put on two young kids.”

The following morning I felt like death warmed over with morning sickness and then heartburn the rest of the day. I have no idea how I got through school that day. Since I had not talked with my mom earlier, I was not aware that morning sickness was a

rather common side effect of pregnancy and so I wondered if I was having a miscarriage and what did that mean.”

“I kept telling myself that this was the way that God was punishing me for my profligate behavior for these last years, ignoring my Sunday school teacher’s comments about reaping rewards, good and bad.”

“I was to find redemption with a great counselor at Planned Parenthood. Mickey was with me every step of the sessions and each decision was unanimous. The counselor took us through a whole range of options, explaining all the pros and cons. In the end it seemed that terminating the pregnancy was the best choice. Of course, it was heart- wrenching for me but we gave up the fetus.

I had many nights when those events came to mind, deferring sleep for hours. Mickey told me that he too had similar nights.”

“Mickey and I stayed together as teen age sweethearts but stayed celibate, using no drugs. The discipline was good for us and we found other ways to show our love for each other. We came to know, even before we parted, that each of us would find our life’s love elsewhere. Yet we clung to each other at the airport when he left for college, not Cal, where he was a great quarterback and is now playing in the NFL.”

Mike could feel himself being drawn closely to Sam. She was a year older than his son and two years younger than his second daughter. His mind was flying over a scene like this that might have included either one of them. He commented to Sam. “That may never have a bearing on your claim, but it’s good to have all the info on the table.”

Sam jumped right in. “It might. When my aunt took me to tell my mom about the pregnancy, she began to weep and rant at me in her frustration and probably was experiencing guilt feelings. She insisted that I go to the pastor for counseling.

He had a woman deacon sit in, since the subject was so delicate. In the current instance we are talking about the son of the prime pillar and monetary benefactor of that same church with the aging but same pastor.

He was never sympathetic but judgmental and probably thinks of me as some kind of Jezebel. I am as sure as day follows night that he will eagerly take the side of his benefactor if push comes to shove.”

Mike looked carefully at Sam. He was certain that her willingness to be open with him had cost her a lot of energy. He turned off the tape recorder and said gently. “Thank you, Sam for that full story. I can see by your drawn expression that it cost you a great deal to retell that story. Is there anything else in your history that might provide fodder to the opposing attorney?”

“I can’t think of anything.”

“Why don’t we take a break and set an appointment for tomorrow morning?”

“I won’t be able to do that. I took a sick day today. If we can meet after three any day, I can go in early and leave at two forty five.”

Mike called Susan to review his schedule for the week. She said “you’re clear tomorrow and Friday at three thirty.”

Mike turned to Sam. “Three thirty tomorrow, then?”

She gave Mike a weak smile saying “Fine. I’ll be here.”

The next afternoon Susan reminded Mike that Sam was already fifteen minutes late. “Do you think she has had second thoughts, Boss?”

“I doubt that, Susan. Something has delayed her. I expect she should be rushing in at any moment. If I read her correctly, she is determined to see this through.

The muted ring of the phone sounded at that moment. Mike could hear Susan saying “I understand, Samantha. I am sure that Mr. Malek will still be available at four fifteen. I’ll explain,”

She smiled at Mike. “Right as usual, boss. She could not leave a special staff meeting. You know about startups. The founders and many of their first employees work day and night to get their product off to a good start.”

Mike nodded and went back to his desk to call Cynthia, his wife, to explain the possibility of a late dinner.

Samantha was breathless as she burst through the door at four twenty. Susan gave a warm smile. “Relax, Samantha. He has rearranged his schedule. He has plenty of time for a full appointment. Just knock gently and walk in. I’ll be right behind you with some Cokes.”

As Sam sipped her Coke and chewed a few peanuts, Mike was studying her face and came to a tentative conclusion. “She knows this is going to be difficult and despite her trepidation, she has set her jaw to tell me things that are too intimate to share with anyone... She has guts.” He waited until her jaw relaxed a little and then raised an eyebrow.

Sam took in a deep breath. “Knowing that I was to talk about the event, I didn’t sleep much last night, spent a lot of time trying to think of the good things in my life instead of rehearsing the story that you need to hear. I thought about calling and asking for a later appointment but the moment I got out of bed, I was determined to see this through, so here goes.”

She took another sip of her drink, seemingly gathering her willpower. “About a month before the incident, my mother asked me to drive and accompany her to a church fund raising dinner at the Baptist Church. I tried to resist since I had left that church with less than friendly thoughts. Bud usually accompanied mom but he was out of town.

I ate little of the rubber chicken dinner and let my mind wander during the presentation, which held no interest for me. When the meeting was ended and mom was milling around with some of her friends, this very handsome dark haired, gray-eyed young man, about my age, came by introducing himself. “I’m Phillip Dexter.” His tone implied that I should recognize the name.

At the outset, I was very aware of his good looks and his very polished charm. I guessed that he was the product of a private prep school and probably a graduate of some Ivy League University. I had a sense of just the tiniest hint of self-importance but not arrogance.

After the usual chit chat by new acquaintances, he said “I haven’t seen you at church, have I?”

I smiled and said “I am not a member. My mother is very active in women’s work and a regular worshiper. Are you a member?”

“Oh, yes. We have been stalwarts here for more than two generations. Dad is a deacon. I believe this is his fifth term on the governing board.”

I wanted to change the subject. “Do you live nearby?”

“Oh, no. I have an apartment in Los Gatos and my folks live in Saratoga but this is our church home as it has been for ever so long.”

I noticed my mother wending her way toward me, so I said “Nice to meet you, Mr. Dexter. My mother is sending a signal that it is time to leave. “

“Nice to meet you, Miss Stevens. Would you be interested, perhaps, in joining me for dinner sometime soon?”

That invitation came out of the blue and so unexpected that I was stunned and said “I’ll think about it.” On the way home I wanted to kick myself. I wasn’t sure he would be good company and I thought he was just a bit too stuffy.

He managed to get my phone number from mom and a week later we were dining at the Fairmont. We agreed on a movie date the following Friday. I demurred on the next two invitations but he was persistent.

He was very pleasant, although not exciting and I agreed to dinner on the following two Sundays. He was a true gentleman and kissed me sweetly on that next Sunday evening as we parked in front of my apartment. He hinted at the possibility of joining me in the apartment but I neatly avoided that.

After going to a tennis match at the Pavilion and dinner in Saratoga afterwards, Phillip invited me to visit his parent’s home nearby in Saratoga. He had described these extraordinarily designed home and gorgeous gardens. I started to say no but he gave me a pitch on the beauty so I relented.

When we arrived, he took my hand and gave the grand tour of the lighted gardens. I must say I was in awe. I had never seen such a lovely set of grounds.

We entered the house through the back entrance, walking through the mud room, the kitchen and into the family room. I was getting tense about meeting his parents. We certainly hadn’t seen each other often enough that this was his way to be “meeting his family” Was I ever mistaken?

I suddenly experienced goose bumps, you know, the secret signal one experiences when something is not right. He must have sensed a change in my manner. In an almost dulcet tone, he said “Oh, Samantha, I forgot to tell you my folks left for a short vacation earlier today.”

I turned to ask him and realized from the sneer on his face that I was in trouble.

I was tight as a drum and asked “Phillip, what is this?” Before I finished the question he was unbuttoning my blouse, saying “I am going to make love to you.”

“Stop that. You are not going to make love to me.” He just sneered and lifted me into his arms. I began kicking and trying to break out of his hold but he was strong. He strode, or more like running, to a small spare room that might have been furnished for a live-in maid.

There was a soft light on a side table casting a shadow on the ceiling. I can’t remember any other details of the room

He thrust me down on the single bed, his knees straddling my body. I continued screaming and began scratching at his face. I missed his face but tore at his throat. He leaned away but began tearing off my blouse. He ripped off my bra. It must have hurt like hell but I hardly noticed at the time. I was concentrating on escaping what now seemed like an east.

He eased off the straddle and somehow managed to find the zipper on the side of my skirt, pulled down the skirt, jammed his hand under the elastic of my panties and ripped them off.

I began screaming louder, although there was no way for anyone to hear me. My face was bathed in tears. I quit screaming and started pleading. "Phillip, don't do this. You are hurting me." I beat on his chest to no avail and then tried to scratch his face and managed one or two scratches before he took my hands in his and held them flat on the bed above my head.

The look on his face was pure evil, a look that reminded me of Sunday school stories of the devil himself.

He began cursing and telling me to lie still. "You will just make it harder on yourself if you don't quit squirming." He had spread my thighs with his knees. .

I was determined not to give in, but he was powerful. I might have suffered less if I had relented a little. He used his powerful legs to hold me in place as he stabbed and stabbed until he finally penetrated me. The pain was unbearable.

I do not consider myself religious but I was praying for this to end. Perhaps my prayer was answered. I have little other memory of the rest. It all seems like a dream. I may have blacked out for a few minutes.

I remember his rising and heading for the bathroom, at least that was my guess. Despite the pain, I stood and began searching for my clothes which he had strewn all over the room.

I found my torn panties and slipped them on, although they offered little cover. I was pulling on my torn skirt when he entered the room "Get dressed. I'm through with you. I'll drop you off near your apartment."

He must have felt some guilt or remorse. Seeing that my clothing would not cover fully my nakedness, he handed me a large monogrammed Turkish towel to wrap around my upper body and drove me home."

Sam's voice was rising higher as she came near the closing of her story. When she finished, she almost collapsed in her chair and burst into tears. Mike marveled at the way she had managed to hold herself together until she had completed the tale.

Mike rang for Susan who came, took one look and walked Sam to the rest room. It was ten minutes later that Sam returned a cup of hot coffee in hand, and smiled ruefully. "I'm glad that's over for now."

Mike took her other hand in his and said "I will try to make sure you never have to repeat it ever."

Mike continued "Sam, I am sure you are drained emotionally after relating all that information to me. I can tell you that I am. Let's put off a continuation until you have some time again. I am putting your situation at the top of my list and will make room for you as you are free from your work responsibilities."

"That is very kind of you, Mike. If you are free anytime on Saturday. I am available."

"I can do that. In fact you should come to my home office about ten or a little later. We will plan a long session. Bring your bathing suit and enjoy a swim in between

sessions. My wife, Cynthia, will be delighted to whip up a lunch. She is a first class cook in addition to being a professional woman.”

That sounded just fine to Sam.

Chapter 2.

Cynthia answered the ring of the doorbell and was met by a beautiful young lady who had a stunned look on her face. He voice stumbled as she said “You’re the editor of the San Jose Clarion, aren’t you?”

Cynthia grinned and said “Yes. Do come in. We are both expecting you. Just drop your tote bag beside the door and follow me into the kitchen. Welcome, Samantha. Mike will join us in a few minutes. He is still on a long distance phone call.”

Sam could not help stating her pleasure as she entered the kitchen. “Wow. Pardon me. This is a professional kitchen, not like my dinky kitchen at the apartment.”

Cynthia grinned. “I see you like it. Yes, it is. This house was Mike’s before we were married and in memory of his darling, Helen, I agreed to make no changes except in this kitchen. I love to create dishes and cook and Mike loves to eat. You will be my newest guinea pig at lunch as I try out a new recipe.”

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Mike who went to the side table, poured three cups of coffee and uncovered an aromatic warm coffee cake that must have just been taken from the oven.

Twenty minutes later, Cynthia, with a grin on her face, said “Take the thermos of hot coffee and skedaddle into the office. I have a luncheon to prepare and you have serious work ahead. The sound of laughter went with the two of them as they head for the office.

Mike started the conversation with some news. “Sam, I had my investigator do some checking at the police department. While no formal charges have been made, the police are investigating two potential assault charges against Phillip. The information is privileged since no charges have been filed as of this date. I believe it does offer us a real edge in possible negotiations with Phillip and his dad. It is his dad who has the deep pockets and with whom we shall have to deal.”

Sam broke into a huge grin. “That is great news. I also have some news that may help you. I remembered that I had stuffed all the torn clothing and the monogrammed towel into a laundry bag and stored it in my mom’s garage. I brought it with me in case you thought it might help.”

Mike’s face broke out into a grin “That is more than helpful. It probably makes our case and may offer the police a reason to listen to your story, no matter how belated.”

Sam laughed out loud. “Believe it or not, I remembered the clothing as I happened onto a cop show in which the subject was DNA captured from blood stains.”

She continued “I guess I should pick up the story after the event. Fortunately, my purse had been left on the seat of Phillip’s car. I stumbled out of the car, trying to keep my nakedness covered. Somehow I managed to open the front door and moved down the hall to my unit. I heard someone turning a door knob next door just as I slipped into my unit. I shed all my clothes on the way to the shower, turned it to hot and let the spray hit me for a very long time, scrubbing with a washcloth and soap to rid myself of Phillip. I let the water splash over me actually until I began to get a chill. After drying myself

I climbed under the covers, dressed in flannel pajamas and shivered for a very long time. I got no sleep with those ugly images occupying my mind. I forced

myself to lie still because every movement brought pain to my upper thighs and my womanhood. That lasted until the first light of dawn.”

At one point during the night, I rushed to the bathroom and vomited into the toilet. I must have heaved a dozen times before I could wash myself and climb back into bed.”

Sam paused and filled her cheeks with air and blew out slowly. Mike poured some more coffee, signaling a moment of rest.

Sam took the coffee but not stopping to sip, continued her story, almost as though she wanted to get past the event of that morning.

“I went through the morning routine as if in a daze. I couldn’t seem to get organized. Suddenly I realized I was going to be late for work. I was alert enough to call my employer and ask for a sick day.

I started to make the coffee but realized I did not want to eat or drink anything. I slipped off my robe and went back to bed. I fell into a deep sleep, not rising until three o’clock that afternoon.”

“When I awakened, I felt like I was in a fog. I couldn’t figure out what time of day or what day of the week it was. Suddenly an image of the blood and Phillip’s sperm over my body caused me to rush into the shower where I stayed until the hot water turned cold. Again, I scrubbed and scrubbed.

Somewhat refreshed I came to realize that I would not be able to face my co-workers the next day. I couldn’t organize my thoughts knowing I should go back to bed. In the midst of all this confusion, I called my brother Tim and asked him to stop by on his way home from work

One look at me, the torn clothes that lay in a heap in the corner and he said in an inquiring tone “Who?”

“Phillip Dexter.”

Tim made me dress while he called Doc Marten, our family physician, who said he would meet us at the hospital. Up to that point, I paid little attention to my pain, although it was excruciating at times. Going to the hospital brought the pain to the top of my mind. I remember again how Phillip acted and knew I had some serious wounds between my legs. It was a mixture of sharp pain and a deep muscle ache.

When I was taken from surgery and placed in a private room, I was met by a Dr. Jane Murray, a psychologist friend of Doc Marten. He was my doctor and my friend since childhood. He was not about to let me wallow in my own thoughts or try to “put this behind me”. I can tell you that Jane has been the most important person in my life for the last eight months.

After an hour of consultation, Jane explained that I was suffering post-traumatic stress. She explained that she and I study intently the after effects of rape so that I could begin my healing. It has taken months during which I have moved from listlessness and disorganized thoughts to a point of sanity and alertness close to my earlier life. She believes that we are near the end of our time together.

Coming to see you and struggling through the reliving has made me stronger. I had a long conversation last evening with Jane. She agrees. It was she who gave me the final push to undertake this claim.”

She actually giggled and reached for the thermos of coffee.

Mike held out his cup and asked “Would you care to brief me on some of the specifics on which Dr. Murray dwelt?”

Sam reached into her pocket to retrieve a business card. Jane said she would be willing to give you all the information you need. Just give her a call.”

Cynthia knocked gently and opened the door. “Lunch will be ready in fifteen, if that is okay with you.”

Mike nodded affirmatively.

Sam had become aware of the aroma filtering into the room. She identified it as something baking in the oven. Her hunger pangs took over completely

As she walked into the dining nook, just off the kitchen she saw Cynthia’s grin reacting to the pleased look on her own face.

“Do you do this every day, Mrs. Malek?”

Cynthia laughed. “Hardly, but I do cook every evening if both of us are home for dinner and that means at least three evening per week. Since we prefer our own company most weekends, Mike often keeps me company in the kitchen while I dream up new concoctions and cook up a storm.”

“I can’t wait to put one of those beautiful smelling croissants in my mouth.”

Mike laughed as he stepped in front of Sam, reached for the plate and placed it at her designated spot at the table.

Sam was still spouting compliments after her fill of cheese soufflé and a dish of homemade strawberry ice cream.

“Mike, I may need a nap before we continue our session.”

“I’ll give you a half hour and then we can take a walk in the park while you tell me a bit of the post event trauma, in your own words. I still plan to call your psychologist next Monday.”

“Sounds great, but I need to repay Cynthia by doing the dishes.”

Cynthia demurred “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll do the dishes but I would like to be with you on the walk, if you allow me the privilege. I would appreciate hearing your story of your months after the event. Your case has stimulated some thoughts of a series of editorials on the subject of rape and other forms of abuse.”

Sam’s face suggested some doubt and Cynthia quickly responded. “I wouldn’t consider using your story but that story will help me know where to do my research for the editorials.”

Mike was looking carefully at Sam and noticed the relief as she said “That sounds terrific but I’ll still help with the dishes.”

Forty-five minutes later they were starting out on the walking trail. During the ride to the park, Sam offered Cynthia free access to all the information she had given Mike during their previous sessions. “I know that you will keep the details and my name strictly private and if it helps you put together a good message, please use it. Like so many other women, I read and felt heartbroken over the stories of rape and abuse that women continue to suffer. When I am ready, I hope to work with some organization that is focused on this issue.”

As they moved slowly down the path, Sam started. “During the first weeks, I could not eat and lost more than ten pounds in two weeks.

I was listless and unorganized. I could not even get myself together to keep house. Tim dusted and arranged items that I had used for one reason or another. I drank lots of water and coffee but never rinsed or washed any of the dishes. Tim did it all. Of course, he had limited time so I found myself alone most of the time.”

Each time Tim left, I seemed to develop a case of high anxiety. I wondered if his wife would let him come back. I worried about how I could sustain myself. I was certain that no one would ever want to hire me.

My mom was avoiding me, probably ashamed of me or so I thought.

I never left the house. Tim kept bring me groceries and almost force fed me, although in a very loving way.

Highly sensitive to the possibility that Phillip might try to come to the apartment to rape me again, made me stay constantly on the alert. I checked and rechecked the locks on the apartment door during the day. Footsteps of neighbors in the hallway caused me to want to run into the bathroom and lock that door.

Much of that moderated as I gave in and began my therapy sessions. I don't know why I was resisting. Perhaps I was worried about being judged as I unfolded my story and feelings. Anyhow, after my first few visits, I could feel an easing of my anxiety.

At Jane's insistence, that is Dr. Murray, I began to eat on a regular basis, although the early amounts were very small. She got me to do my own shopping, driving to and from the super market.

As I became involved with the presence of people I was aware of being continuously startled. I would jump if someone bumped my arm in the grocery aisle, particularly if I was concentrating on some food item.

While waiting in the doctor's office, I might be reading a magazine. The first time that the receptionist called my name I almost jumped out of my seat at the sound of her call.

Jane was pleased to note that while I occasional had very vivid sexual dreams, I ceased having a nightmare. She told me that was an excellent sign and a welcome one.”

Mike noticed a table and a bench. He suggested they rest and have some lemonade that Cynthia had prepared. They watched a set of six year old twins frolic through a pile of mown grass left by the gardener. Sam commented “I remember doing something like that with Tim during our childhood days.”

“Do you sense that Tim and you are still close?”

That caused Sam to reflect for a minute before responding. Since my progress has been markedly improved, he comes less often. I think it is pressure from his wife who is always worried that their image may become tarnished by my actions.”

“I used to fuss about that and worried that might be the case but I pay little attention to that now. A lot has changed in the eight or so months. For instance, I seldom have a sleepless night. At first the insomnia was ever present except for short periods of vivid dreams and, too often a nightmare of being attacked by a gorilla.

I still have flashbacks too often but the frequency has decreased and Jane is very hopeful in that respect.

I hope this is helpful, Mike, as you begin your work.”

“It definitely is, Sam. The very fact that you have been so open has given me a lot of ammunition. By the way, have you had thoughts about or actually reverted to drugs or alcohol to help you ease your days?”

“No, I haven’t. My psychologist says that is a good sign and quite rare. Most victims give in as they seek to avoid flashbacks or nightmares. She says that often is the case when the victim feels some guilt about their own part. I never had a sense of contributing to the act, leading Phillip on or even hinting. I know I tried my best to resist even though I was isolated and overpowered.”

Mike suddenly switched subjects. “Sam, how do you hope to see all this unfolds for your life?”

Sam took her time before saying. “I am not sure I have a clear picture. You remember that it was Jane who suggested that I come to you. What I didn’t say was then she believes that I have two major obstacles to overcome. The first is to face Phillip and accuse him directly of the abuse and have him pay for his treatment of me.

She believes that once I have that behind me, I will be ready to find happiness in a relationship that will find me able to respond sexually to a man of my choosing.”

“Are you saying that you agree with Jane?”

Her laugh had a hint of cynicism. “I had better feel that way or else I will lose all hope.”

Mike took her hands in his. “Thank you, Sam. You must be mentally fatigued. How about a slow ten minute jog and then a dip in the pool.”

Cynthia said “I’ve prepared some snacks, you can have anything to drink that you wish. Mike and I usually have a glass of wine after the swim. I would like to have you stay for dinner. If you feel like it, you can stay overnight. We are having the family over for a poolside brunch. They are fun, your age group and all professionals.”

“Wow. I’m not sure I am ready for a party. Just thinking about that, makes me a little up tight.”

Mike said “We’re not pushing you but we want you to know you are welcome and in my unprofessional opinion you can handle a social get together... If you want to give it a try, I will be there to help bail you out if you become uncomfortable.”

“I need to think about it. Let’s jog. I’ll decide by the time we get to the pool.”

Chapter 3.

Sam was startled as she opened her eyes after a very restful night. She was disoriented, for just a few seconds unsure of her surroundings. She smiled to herself as she realized that she had decided to stay the night and against her better judgment had agreed to stay for the family swim and brunch.

She looked at her wrist watch; asked herself “I wonder if it is too early to do some laps in the pool?” She answered her own question by slipping into her bikini and the flip flops that Cynthia had provided.

As she opened her door leading to the patio, she saw that her hosts were emerging from their bedroom heading for the pool. “Good morning, Sam. Did you sleep well?”

Sam grinned “I would say it was the best night of rest that I have had during the last eight months.”

Cynthia dashed for the pool. “Last one in, makes the coffee this morning.” That duty fell to Sam, who was beginning to feel like she had just joined a new family.

Within minutes of their arrival, Mike’s daughters, Julie and Marie were making Sam feel that she had known them forever. When Mike, Jr., better known as Junior, walked in with his Cynthia, known in the family as Cyn, Sam did a double take. She was almost a twin of Cynthia, although a generation younger. After twenty minutes with Cyn, Sam knew within her heart, she was sure that she had found a lifetime friend.

After an hour of swimming and lounging poolside, Cyn invited Sam to help her set the table for the brunch. “How may I help, Cyn?”

“Why don’t you set up the large family table while I finish making the fruit salad? Set it up for soup, salads bread and butter and small dessert bowls for ice cream. Set ten places.”

“Why ten places. There are only nine of us.”

“Oh. My husband’s study partner is joining us. His name is Frank Gogol, the brightest kid in our class at SCU law school. Those two are bosom buddies. Frank has loads of meals with us, at my invitation, because I need his brains as we study for classes. He is practically a member of the family. Dad had invited him to clerk at the office.”

Frank Gogol actually blew through the front door just as they were about to head to the buffet table. He was grinning and then greeting everyone with a hug. Every face was beaming at him waiting for their hug. She was the last and although a stranger found herself wrapped in his huge arms.

She was doing a quick appraisal as she waited. She noted a six foot, two hundred pound, curly headed light brunette, with shoulders that reminded her of a linebacker of the Forty-niners. He looked big and tough but his hug was warm and gentle.

There was no special seating arrangement but Sam ended up seated next to Frank. She could feel her insides tightening as he held her chair when she approached the table with her sparsely loaded food plate. No one else had acted as formally as he did.

He said “I’m Frank Gogol, close friend of Junior, law student.

“I’m Samantha Stevens, new friend of the family and an overnight guest. I am pleased to meet you. Please call me Sam.”

The family just sat around gabbing. A round of joke telling got underway about half way through the brunch. Laughter was loud and abundant. Julie surprised Sam when she turned out to be a fun raconteur.

Frank, whose behavior had been polite, reserved but warm as he introduced himself to Sam, was a close second to Julie as the story teller of the party.

During her conversation with Frank she found him honestly interested in her work but did not ask any personal questions. He responded to her questions fully. She asked him about his clerkships and discovered that he had clerked for the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court. "After that, I am surprised that you are clerking with Mike. Cyn shared that info with me."

Frank laughed. "I invited myself. Mr. Malek was surprised but he has the kind of practice that appeals to me. I want to serve people, not corporations or governments. I've started working two afternoons a week until the end of the school term."

They were interrupted by the sound of Mike's voice. "Anyone interested in a walk to help settle down all the food we've ingested?"

Sam said "I'm in." She turned to Frank. "How about it?"

"I was about to head home but I'll join you."

Six walkers set out, Cynthia, Mike and Julie in the lead followed by Sam, Frank and Cyn. Sam was soon feeling left out as Cyn asked Frank some question related to their law studies and Frank was dutifully responding. Five minutes later, Cyn went to the group ahead, leaving the two of them to resume their getting to know each other.

The warmth that emitted from Frank, gave Sam a feeling of being the center of attention by this stranger who was fast becoming an ex-stranger. As they were just coming to the end of the walk, Frank said "I really have to say my farewells and dash, but I would like to continue this conversation. Since you indicated that you love hiking, perhaps we can try again next Sunday. Would you be interested?"

Sam had already guessed that such an invitation might be in the offing. She had been debating inwardly about her answer during the last few minutes. She sensed the tightening of her insides, facing the same question that had confronted her several times recently "Am I ready to start dating?"

In the end, she equivocated. Saying. "I'm not sure I'm ready, but you may call me." She recited her phone number.

Frank wasn't sure what she meant. He grinned, to Mike and Cynthia. "I have to run. Thank you for a lovely brunch and the stories. Hope to have another invite. The food was scrumptious as it always is."

A few minutes later Sam was saying her goodbyes. Mike said "I'll call you when I have analyzed all that you told me and suggest some approaches."

"It's in your hands, Mike."

Chapter 4.

Mr. Phillip Dexter
343 Hilltop Dr.
Los Gatos, Ca. 95999

Dear Sir,

I will be brief and to the point.

May I introduce myself? My name is Michael Malek, Esq., Attorney-At-Law I represent Ms. Samantha Stevens of San Jose, California.

You will recall that on the evening of September 30, 2012, you assaulted Ms. Stevens, causing severe physical and emotional pain.

In addition, there is a minor matter of an entire set of clothing which you damaged beyond repair during the assault.

I am inviting you to set a date within the next seven days during which we may discuss the manner of your apology and plan to suitably reimburse Ms. Stevens for her material loss, her medical bills and her long term pain for which she continues to see her various physicians.

Michael Malek.

Susan handed the letter to the postman at 9:53 on Monday morning. It was now two o'clock on the following Friday afternoon. Susan walked into Mike's private office. "Boss, since there was no answer to the first letter, here is the copy of the letter with the additional note attached. If you sign the note, I will send Maria to the post office to send everything registered, receipt requested."

Monday morning Susan walked into Mike's office. "Boss, the second letter was returned, not accepted by Phillip although he had answered the knock by the postman."

Mike grinned. "Not unexpected, Susan. The poor bastard will now have to face his father. Repackage that in a large envelope and mail it, with no additional note, to his father at the Saratoga address.

Wednesday morning at 9:30, Maria, the receptionist, called Mike. "Boss, there is a Mr. Jennings, an attorney, desiring to speak to you, personally."

Mike recognized the name, the governing partner of a large firm in Palo Alto which represented many Silicon Valley high tech firms.

"Good morning, Mr. Jennings."

"Good morning, Mr. Malek. We have never met but I do recognize your name and your reputation of long standing in the valley."

"Thank you. I, too, am aware of your name and the work your firm does for our locally domiciled high tech firms."

Jennings came right to the point. "I had a call from Paul Dexter; He received your package which contained no message from you. Would it be possible for the two of us to meet?"

“Of course, although it might save some time if either or both Dexter’s were present. Have you read the contents of the package?”

“No, but I expect to have it delivered within the hour. Indulge me. We may or may not be wasting time, but this is Mr. Dexter’s wish. He happens to be in a major negotiation, requiring his presence for at least forty eight hours.”

Mike decided that the meeting would be on his terms. Jennings asked “When might you be able to meet me here at our offices?”

Mike responded. “I can meet you here in my office any time today or, if you prefer, we can have lunch or a drink at the DeAnza.”

“Touché, Mr. Malek. Lunch at one o’clock?”

“Sounds right. The maître d’ will show you to my booth.”

“Right. See you then.”

Mike hung up and asked Maria to make arrangements for lunch.

Mike and Matt Jennings were on a first name basis half way through their drinks, single malt scotch. The conversation mostly centered on chatting about the types of clientele that each firm represented, as well as the current political situation the county.

When they had placed their orders, Matt asked “Why should my client even respond to you, Mike? He has no involvement in this supposed abuse case.”

“Of course, he hasn’t but as you noted from reading the contents of my package, his son has refused to acknowledge my request for a meeting. You and I know that I will use the only means left to me and that is to file on behalf of my client. Beginning with the five o’clock news, the Dexter name will be the subject of every newscast. Those station managers will keep that going and milking it for all it’s worth.”

“That may be so but his reputation as a community leader, his reputation as a strong churchman combined with the dirt we dig up on your client will be sufficient to clear the name. You can guess that Mr. Dexter has given me carte blanche to deal with this matter.”

“In other words, you are telling me with all the finances available and with the tremendous power of your highly paid staff of attorneys and investigators; my client can politely go to hell.”

Jennings laughed “I wouldn’t put it so crassly but I guess that you might come to that conclusion.”

“I suppose I can also conclude that Mr. Dexter, on behalf of his abusive son, would not even consider any amount of reimbursement to Ms. Stevens.”

“Yes, that is his decision but I am sure I can convince him to hand her a check to cover some of her expense from this supposed incident.”

“What kind of figure are you considering?”

“I am sure that Dexter will be unhappy but I will recommend as much as twenty five thousand with the usual restrictions on discussing this matter with any members of the press, the police or the District Attorney’s office, etc.”

“Are you making that an offer or do you want to discuss this with Dexter?”

“I can make a phone call and have the word within the hour but I need to get a feel for your reaction.”

“Of course, I will present the offer to my client, but I will recommend non acceptance. In fact, even without my guidance, I believe she will laugh at the attempt as though it were sop thrown to a pig.”

The waiter arrived with their food. Jennings stood, saying “I guess I’m not hungry. Sorry, Mike. I heard you were tough. I had informed Dexter that this would not fly. He is adamant but if I can change his mind, I will be in touch by tomorrow morning. If I don’t call, you may act as you deem best for Ms. Stevens.”

When Mike returned to the office, Mike’s facial expression told the story to Susan. “I’ll be right in, boss.”

She walked in a few minutes later and put a file folder on his desk. The papers are ready for signatures. When Ms. Stevens comes in, I will be standing by to notarize the signatures. I’ll take them to the court for the filing.”

“Good. By the way, are Sam’s clothing and the towel at the lab being tested for DNA?”

“Yes. The receipt from the lab is in the main file.”

Mike called Sam during the dinner hour. Her response was “Of course, I would reject that offer. I wonder if his dad has spoken to Phillip yet. I would sure like to be a fly on the wall when those two saintly men discuss this.”

“I need you to be prepared. When can you come in to sign the papers?”

“I can be there at eight in the morning. Tomorrow is going to be a long day at work.

“Eight is not convenient. May I send a messenger who can witness and notarize your signature?”

“Sure. He can come at any time. I will be working until nine or later”

Mike decided that this was the kind of job that Frank could do since he would be working the afternoon and early evening

Maria handed the package with instructions to Frank when he arrived at three. He took the package to his desk and looked over the assignments. “This is going to be a heavy day.” He dialed the receptionist. “Maria, please see if it would be possible to arrive at Ms. Steven’s office as late as eight thirty this evening.”

Maria confirmed the time just a few minutes later.

Frank arrived a bit late and out of breath, having dashed up the stairs. It was ten minutes before Sam’s quitting time. He had broken a few traffic rules after leaving his own office a little late.

He had spent quite a bit of time thinking about her. He kept trying to figure out what she meant about “being ready.” His impression of her was a nice woman who seemed shielded by some invisible aura. He had looked forward to a nice hike and lunch during which he might find out more.

After acquainting himself with the file, he had a clearer picture and one that required gentle handling.

He slowed down to a walk as he reached her office. She was facing away from him, slipping into a light sweater before heading outdoors. She turned around at the sound of the door opening. “Frank. What in the world are you doing here? How did you find out where I worked? Did I miss your call on my cell phone?”

She was definitely flustered, her face still in a questioning mode as Frank strode to her side and put his index finger over her lips. “Give me one minute to explain. “No, you did not miss a phone call because I did not call. I am here on Mike’s behalf to have you sign the papers in regard to your law suit. I am the dog’s body as I serve my apprenticeship doing whatever from running errands to researching historical cases to filing.”

She had been unaware of the tension that had taken over her body but now could feel the easing. The relaxation lasted but a minute as she thought about the content of the papers. “Did you read the papers?” She was afraid that he would now be privy to what she still thought of as her secret. Her fear was confirmed

She felt a full flush hit her face as he nodded in the affirmative. “I have orders to put my nose into anything unless specifically forbidden. I am so sorry, Sam, not only for knowing your secret but more so for the pain and anguish that must be a part of your essence as a result of that evening.”

Sam burst into tears, her head falling onto his chest, soaking his shirt as he enveloped her and held on for a long several minutes. Finally, as her sobbing slowed she said. “That is the last thing I wanted you to know at this time, .Frank.”

“Just remember, that this is privileged information which I hold with the same respect as does Mike.”

Sam felt a little easier but nagging her was the thought that Frank now would avoid any possible social connection. She had spent last night thinking about saying yes if he had called. She really needed someone like him as a friend.

She tried to compose herself, accept the situation for what it was. “Well, shall we go to the desk and complete the paper work?”

Fifteen minutes later, Frank was packing away the file in his briefcase. He asked “Do you drive to work, Sam, or take public transportation?”

“I have my car in the parking lot on the west side of the building.”

“I’m parked somewhere in the same area and would be happy to walk you to the car.”

“There’s no need for that. I have done it so many times since we work late quite often.”

“I was going to ask if you would care to join me for a drink or a cup of coffee at the Marriott Lounge which is just a few blocks away.”

She felt her heart jump ever so slightly but decide to decline. “That’s kind of you, Frank, but this has been a long day.”

“Well, let me walk you to the car, anyway.”

She nodded and started for the door when she heard her boss call “Frank, you old scoundrel. What a surprise. I haven’t seen you since graduation day at State.”

Frank said to Sam “Please hold on a minute, Sam.” but she continued slowly. He turned to Bill Wright, his former buddy from tier undergrad days, torn

between these unexpected reunions and wanting to be with Bill. After a two minute reunion he said “Bill, give me your card. I’ll call you to make a date. Right now, I have to catch Sam before she drives off.”

He had wanted to tell Sam to avoid being alone now that Phillip Dexter knew she was planning to make him pay for his abuse. Frank could not see her as he exited the building, figuring that she had already turned the corner and was headed somewhere across the large lot. He knew that he might not find her in this dimly lit large area. Just as he rushed around the corner he heard her scream.

As she crossed the parking lot, Sam’s thoughts were focused on the last half hour and the sense of embarrassment she felt about Frank’s learning of her experience with Phillip Dexter. She was so absorbed that she had not heard the sound of someone running to catch up with her. When she did, she assumed that it was Frank.

Suddenly she felt her shoulder being grasped and pulling her to face someone. She thought “Oh, no. Phillip.” Just then, his tightly closed fist struck her high on the cheekbone and started her reeling. She reached out and grasped Phillip’s arm. She felt his other arm enfold her body but she held on, sensing that as long as she held on, he would not be able to strike her again.

Frank dashed in the direction of the scream and saw a male figure and Sam in a wrestling grip. He appeared to be trying to break his grip. Nope. His one arm was around her neck but she was holding on to his right arm and starting another scream.

As Frank got nearer, he heard the man’s voice saying “Damned bitch. I’ll teach you your place. What I do to you right now will be repeated unless you apologize to my father and to me for that damned accusation. You know you wanted me and you wanted it rough.”

Frank heard that last phrase as he reached them and put a chokehold practically paralyzing Phillip who released Sam.

“Sam, are you hurt?”

“Not too badly. What can I do?”

“Get out your I-phone and shoot some pics of the two of us.” He continued his hold on Phillip until Sam said “I got three shots.”

Frank threw Phillip to the ground, then put his right knee on Phillip’s chest and said “This is only a sample of what I can do, you stupid ass. Now get the hell out of here.” Frank and Sam watched Phillip scamper across the lot.

Frank stood, turned toward Sam. Now that the incident was over, he could see that she was trembling. He guessed that she might be going into shock. He put his arm around her shoulder and took her to his car which was only a few feet away. He took a light blanket from the back seat and wrapped it around her shoulders.

He went to his side of the car, took his seat and started the engine and turned on the heater quickly as it started to warm up. They sat in silence until she said. “Are you going to call the police?”

“Only if you want to press charges.”

“What would Mike want us to do?”

“Hold off. You have me as a witness and photos and, if you will permit me, I’ll take a few shots of the shiner that will be yellow and purple in the morning. The time stamps will be helpful evidence for Mike to use as he sees fit.”

Sam could not bring herself to look at Frank, but looking into her lap she said “Thank you.”

Frank could see that she had stopped short of going into shock. He was about to ask her when she volunteered “I’m doing well except for the ache in my shoulder and the pain in my left cheek bone.”

“I thought you might be going into shock.”

“It seemed like that until you made the chill go away.”

“Do you want me to take you to a doctor or an emergency room?”

“I don’t think so although I can use a pain killer or a sleeping pill.”

“Do you have some at home?”

“No. I need to find a pharmacy that might still be open. “

“Would you mind leaving your car here and allow me to help find either a Walgreen or CVS Pharmacy and then see you home safely?”

He waited for what seemed a full minute. She finally made up her mind. “I shouldn’t impose but I sure can use a friend at the moment. Thank you.”

Forty five minutes later, Frank was leaving her at the apartment door. He asked “What will you be doing tomorrow?”

“I think I will call in for a late start and ask Bill to call a staff meeting where I can tell them about the mugging and a Good Samaritan who happened by. “ She gave him a slightly lopsided grin

“If you can wait until eleven thirty, I would be happy to take you to lunch and drop you off at your office. However, I am worried about your having to go to your car after dark. I do not trust Dexter.”

Oh, I’m sure one of the fellows will be happy to escort me or Bill will send me home before dark. Okay. Why don’t you stop by at eleven thirty? “I’ll have a sandwich and some soup ready. We can have a light lunch before you take me. That is a small down payment for all that I owe you,”

Chapter 5.

It took quite a while for the sleeping pill to take effect. Sam spent the entire waiting period thinking about her good fortune that brought Frank to her rescue. She was reminiscing about the events and the role he played and the gentleness that was a part of his ministrations. She admired the cool way he handled Phillip physically, his alertness to the use of snapshots and the softness of his rubbing her shoulder with alcohol to ease the pain. “I hope we can continue to stay friends, which he is not put off by my history.”

Frank skipped a class so that he could get to the office early and bring Mike up to date on the events of last evening. When they were about finished with the debriefing, Mike said “Frank, Sam could use a friend, I am sure. You might hint at being available if you are not put off with her involvement with Dexter. I assume you read the entire file.”

“Yes, Mike. I read the file and have offered. She has accepted a ride this morning since her car is still in the office parking lot.”

“Good. Put those hours on your timecard.”

Frank nodded. He considered that offer a bonus for doing something that gave some special pleasure.

Sam bolted into a sitting position at six that morning. She was bathed in sweat, her breast heaving and her body shivering. She had awakened in that moment before the monster pounced on her bed.

“Oh, lord. I thought those nightmares were long gone.” She took several deep breaths, bounced out of bed and headed for a hot shower.

As she toweled off ten minutes later, she realized that she had recovered her calm quite rapidly in contrast to the dozens of times that nightmare had gripped her during the last eight months. She remembered her instructions from her psychologist and moved quickly into her morning meditation and yoga.

After a light breakfast she concentrated on making sandwiches and soup for lunch.

Sam turned her thoughts toward Frank as she set the table for their lunch. She had taken the time to put on a clean white tablecloth and set out her new plates and stainless. She surprised herself with the question ‘Why am I being so formal?’ She couldn’t answer the question and was off the hook when the buzzer sounded.

Realizing that time was short, she ladled out the soup and uncovered the sandwiches.

After a brief quizzing about her aches and pains, Frank asked “if it is not a secret, are you willing to talk about your work?”

“Sorry, Frank. We all promised Mr. Wright that we would not discuss our work with anyone other than our colleagues. Perhaps, Bill might be willing to talk with an old friend.”

“No. I would never want to pry but I would be pleased to know a bit more about your life.”

“That is very kind of you but we will have to find something else to talk about besides my work or my recent life.”

She saw his lip moving into a smile. “That comment, I hope, hints that you will be willing to have me around for support, something Mike and I both are offering.

Sam could feel the flush starting to rise from her throat to her cheeks. “That was a slip of the tongue but I guess I am saying yes to the suggestion. Besides I thank you for the kind invitation to go hiking.”

Frank grinned “Do you realize how radiant you look when in full blush? Sam, I’m so pleased that you agreed. I was afraid you might not and I think I would have understood. Right now, you seem to have no friend to lean on and I am offering my services.”

“I think I would like that. Besides, there is hint of some mystery behind Frank Gogol that might be worth knowing.”

He laughed. “No mystery is hiding there, believe me.” He looked at his watch. “What time are you due?”

She glanced at the wall clock. “We have time for bite of dessert and a cup of coffee.”

He said good bye at the front of her work place building. “I’ll pick you up Sunday morning at eleven fifteen. Please be sure that someone accompanies you to your car tonight.”

She smiled and said “I promise.”

Chapter 6.

Mike decided it would be a good idea to have Sam's refusal transmitted in written form, so he opted to send a brief email communication to Jennings. It read as follows:

"I regret to inform you that your informal offer to bring this matter to a close has been refused by Ms. Stevens. I suggest that we arrange a conference with either or both Mr. Dexter's. I recommend that such a gathering occur within ten days. If this cannot be arranged, then I promise to file the suit and take the matter to the police where my client shall file a criminal complaint and ask for the arrest of young Mr. Dexter."

Michael Malek, Esq.

Two hours later, Maria called on the intercom. "Mr. Jennings is calling." Mike picked up the phone. "Good afternoon, Matt."

He listened for a full three minutes then replied. "I am sorry, Matt. No offer by you on behalf of Phillip Dexter will be considered. My client wants to make her demand directly to Phillip who must be prepared to come to terms with her during that meeting. If no resolution is forthcoming, she insists that I file on her behalf and then accompany her to the police department."

Mike thought he heard someone sputtering and cursing in the background before Matt could cover the mouth piece. He listened to Matt again and replied. "Certainly you may have until five this evening to respond to our request for the meeting. I emphasize the five o'clock."

At four fifty six Maria announced that Mr. Jennings was on the line. "Mike, this is Matt. Would this Thursday at four be acceptable?"

"I'm sure that will be fine. Set the date unless I call you back within the next twenty four hours."

Sam agreed to meet Mike at his home office that evening for a briefing and rehearsal for the upcoming meeting with the Dexter's.

She was surprised to see Frank in attendance but she knew that Mike had a plan and she had an important although small cameo appearance for the drama that was to be acted out on Thursday.

By ten o'clock Mike felt that they were ready. Although Sam put up a little resistance, saying that she would be fine, she accepted Frank's accompanying her until she walked into her apartment. He refused her offer of a cup of coffee when they arrived at the apartment, saying he had some studies but suggested she could have some coffee ready before they headed out on Sunday morning.

Thursday's meeting was held in the conference room-library at Mike's office. Mike was flanked on the left by Frank and on the right by Sam while at the other end the Dexter's flanked Matt Jennings.

After the introductions, Matt addressed Sam. "Ms. Stevens. Without admitting to any of the claims presented on your behalf by Mr. Malek, we are prepared to offer you, on behalf of Phillip Dexter, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars. It is true that the very announcement of a Dexter's name related to such an incident would be

unacceptable to his father and in consideration of that fact, we make this offer. It is generous, considerably more than I have recommended.”

While appearing calm and collected on the surface, Sam’s guts were roiling. She knew she had to control her anger, as Mike had advised, but she wanted to cross over to Phillip and scratch out his eyes.

She inhaled deeply and without prompting, Sam looked directly at Phillip. “Are you denying that you raped me in your family home?”

Phillip, his face flushed, obviously trying to control his temper, almost shouted. “I don’t deny that we had sex, but it was what you wanted.”

In a cold voice, Sam, ignoring his comment, asked “Are you denying that you lured me to your family home, knowing your parents were not home and forcibly forced yourself on me?”

This time Phillip was shouting. “I certainly did not.”

Again she asked “Are you denying that you tore off my clothes while I fought back and screamed?”

At that point, Phillip could not raise his voice to answer but shook his head side to side without looking at Samantha.

Mr. Dexter, disregarding a warning from Mr. Jennings, said “This is ridiculous. You have no proof. Phillip, stand up. We are leaving.”

Mike stood. “I recommend you sit down while I give you a blow by blow version of the events of that evening, a version that I can back up with evidence and which I will take to the police in addition to asking the court to award a half million dollars to Ms. Stevens.”

Mr. Dexter’s face turned ashen as he looked at Matt who signaled that staying was important. When he was seated, it was obvious that Phillip was in tears and very fearful of his father’s actions.

Mike reached under the table and produced a suit case. He snapped open the latch but did not open the lid. “Matt, Mr. Dexter, I presume that Phillip never told you of the evidence he left behind after his abuse and rape.”

He could see that both were surprised. He turned to Jennings. “I am sure you believe that neither the police nor the DA’s office would open a case of a woman crying rape, eight months after the fact, but I submit that with the evidence in this case, they would have to reconsider that kind of decision.”

Jennings asked “You believe that the evidence is so strong, that it can bring about a criminal charge?”

“Yes and we are willing to show you that evidence right now if you are willing to start negotiating a reasonable settlement and have Phillip apologize to Ms. Stevens for his behavior for the record.”

Jennings asked “May we have a fifteen minute recess in order to confer?”

Mike looked at Sam who nodded affirmatively.

Although the trio was in the next room, Mr. Dexter’s voice could be heard shouting at Phillip. An occasional word could be heard. One was “stupid” and another “ass”

When they reentered the conference room, Phillip was still crying, Mr. Dexter was gray faced and scowling. Mr. Jennings’ jaw was set. He asked “Mike, may I view the contents of the suitcase?”

“Of course.”

He lifted the lid. Jennings was stoic as he lifted each item of the torn and shredded clothing and literally gasped as he got to the bottom and saw the monogrammed towel.”

Mike knew that Matt was ready to capitulate but still wondered about Mr. Dexter. Matt asked for a few minutes to confer with Mr. Dexter. When they returned, Matt said. “Mr. Dexter would like to ask some questions of Ms. Stevens.”

“Not if it has anything to do with that evening. I promised her at the outset that she would never have to repeat that story unless a judge required it. She has suffered enough and her counselor strongly recommends against it.”

He saw Dexter nod his agreement as he stood “If you have no objection, Mr. Malek, I would like to leave and allow you and Matt to come to a reasonable settlement.”

Mike nodded.

“Come, Phillip.”

Mike asked Sam if she wanted either to observe or listen to the negotiations, to which she replied. “Mike, I put it all in your hands. I know you will do the right thing. Besides, I’m drained emotionally.”

“All right, but I hope you will let Frank see you to your apartment. I don’t believe there is any danger but we haven’t plumbed the depths of Phillip’s sickness. He will be on his own. His dad has heavy responsibilities and will send him home. Whatever dad has to say will come after his work day is done.”

She gave him a wide smile. “Thanks Mike. Frank will be good company. I certainly do not want to be alone .I want a quiet celebration. Thanks to you, I have reached the next major milestone on my journey to a new life.”

In the parking lot she handed her keys to Frank. “Let’s use my car but you drive.”

He held her door while she got into the car. Then, turning on the ignition, he asked “Where would you like to go? Home? Stop for lunch?”

She brightened a bit and said “Let’s head for the supermarket. I need a few items. Then home while I bake a pie after I make us some lunch. I find that cooking or baking is good therapy. This will be something different. You may sit in the kitchen so we can chat and, if you like, you can peel and slice some apples for the pie or some “Apple Brown Betty.”

There was a hint of a lilt to her voice as the idea unfolded. Frank picked up on that, grinned and said “If you like Brown Betty, I have a special recipe. I’ll open my lap top and print out my mom’s famous recipe.”

Laughing for the first time since they had met she said “What more can a girl ask?”

Chapter 7.

The two of them were creating an old fashioned family tableau. Sam had donned a long white apron and was rolling out the dough for the pie. Seated at the table, five feet away, Frank was peeling apples for the content of the pie. This picture if snapped would have displayed a calm on Sam's face, a calm that had been absent for months. The snapshot would have shown a smiling Frank, pleased with this temporary but sweet role he had in her life.

"Frank, are you willing to tell me about your early life. What led you on the path to law school?"

"There isn't much to tell. I'd rather hear about your youth. You must have wowed the boys and I'll bet you were an outstanding student."

"Not fair. I asked first."

"Okay, but only if you agree to share."

"We'll see, but you go first."

I grew up in Hayward, in a relatively poorer section of town. The kids were pretty rough and most seemed uninterested in school, especially as we arrived at our early teen years.

I developed some skills with my fists and knuckles; I liked school and liked spending time in the city library. That brought a lot of hassling from some of my classmates.

I also was the first kid from among my classmates to have a steady girlfriend, Chloe. The jealousy brought more enmity and the need to defend myself.

As we moved into the high school years, the guys left me alone and went on to hassling others. Eventually a good many of them dropped out of school, finding ways to get into trouble. A few lucky ones managed to find redemption in military service but not the majority. I try to follow up just for the sake of knowing what might have been my fate without the urging and support of my single dad, after mom died when I was ten.

Three of those kids died from HIV Aids infections; four are still in jail and one in prison. The other two are married and living on one form of welfare or another. Only three others are doing well, one as the father of three and working as a carpenter. Two others are laborers but always seem to be on their feet solidly.

Those make me seem like an angel compared to the others, but not entirely. While I was a good student and serious about preparing for the future, I had my wild streak, at least until I had a near miss.

I am less than proud of this time of my life. I had a string of girlfriends after Chloe, namely Barbie, Cathy, Marie and Stella. Together we smoked weed, which we considered less harmful than liquor. I seldom partied with a gang, preferring to have sex, smoke pot and watch TV in the small garage apartment that my dad had fixed for me.

Dad offered good counsel and responded to my inquiries enough to keep me on a good path except for the weed. He cautioned me a few times on practicing safe sex. There came the time when I was regretting not taking his advice.

Stella with tears in her eyes told me one evening that she had missed her period. We were struck dumb, sure that we had carefully worked the Catholic practice of timing our sexual relationships.

We spent two weeks trying to work out what action to undertake. She had a scholarship to Brown University and I to Santa Clara University. I can tell you that we were both sweating and gushed with relief when she called to tell me that her period was late but sure.

Now, Sam, it's your turn."

"Not yet. You didn't tell me how you decided on law as your career. Since we are planning on being friends I need to know more about you."

"Okay. During my freshman year, I was invited to try out for the university debate team. That was one step. Because of the friendship of my social studies teacher in high school I had been encouraged to study history and rhetoric in high school so I did so during my freshman year at SCU. During my junior year, I happened to meet Junior and Cyn. They were both headed for law school. Listening to them spell out their dream and then meeting Mike, seemed like I had a clear path ahead and so it happened."

Despite Frank's urging, Sam delayed while she mixed the fillings for the pie and put it in the oven. When she finished, she saw that Frank had poured her a cup of coffee and was waiting with a raised eyebrow.

She laughed and capitulated.

"Since we are going to be friends, you may need to hear of the sins of my youth, I guess. Let me give you the condensed version."

"Like you, I was a serious student but talk about wild, your story is a tame tale compared to mine. I thank God for helping me find a way back until that damned Phillip moved into my life.

"From the time I reached puberty I was hot after boys. At age fourteen I seduced a friend, Tommy, on a mattress in the garage. I was hot and managed to seduce some others of my classmates.

Then came Mickey. We became a twosome and were deeply in love. Six months later I had to tell him that I was pregnant.

We were making out in Lovers' Lane when I gave him the news that I had missed my period. I decided I had best see our family doctor who would not share his knowledge without my say so.

We agreed that we had no option other than telling our families. Down hearted, Mickey said "My father is going to be so disappointed and then kick my ass. He has dreamed of my playing quarterback at Cal Berkeley."

"You will, Mickey. We will work something out."

"God, I hope so. Your aunt and uncle are coming to dinner tomorrow night and then playing cards as they usually do."

"Are you strong enough to go with me while I tell both families? My aunt is a rational and calm woman who has been warning me that this could happen to me. She had been a part time nanny to me when I was young."

"Anyhow, Mickey and I faced both families that next evening just after dinner. It took ten minutes of chaotic recriminations or maybe a little longer before my aunt took charge. In the course of the discussion that followed, everyone agreed that

Planned Parenthood should be our first step. All four of them agreed on the hardships of my trying to raise a child at this young age and the burden that it would put on Mickey and me.”

The following morning I felt like death warmed over with morning sickness I was not aware that morning sickness was a rather common side effect of pregnancy and so I wondered if I was having a miscarriage and what did that mean.”

“I kept telling myself that this was the way that God was punishing me for my profligate behavior

I was to find redemption with a great counselor at Planned Parenthood. Mickey was with me every step and minute of the sessions and each decision was unanimous. The counselor took us through a whole range of options, explaining all the pros and cons. In the end it seemed that terminating the pregnancy was the best choice. Of course, it was heart- wrenching for me but we gave up the fetus.

We stayed together as teen age sweethearts but stayed celibate and no drugs. The discipline was good for us and we found other ways to show our love for each other. We came to know, even before we parted, that each of us would find our life’s love elsewhere. Yet we clung to each other at the airport when he left for college, not Cal, where he was a great quarterback and is now playing in the NFL.”

By the time she finished, her voice was hoarse and barely audible, but she gave out a forced laugh, asking

“Are you sure you want to be friends with someone who has that kind of wildness in her background?”

He rose, took her hands in his. “The real story within the story is the courage you displayed, facing up to your mistake and finding a solution for the two of you. I think you are someone special, Sam.”

“That’s sweet of you to say that, Frank. I owe a lot to family who surrounded me with support and made sure I had another chance in spite of my youthful folly”.

She stood, squared her shoulders and said “Let’s have dinner.”

Frank went to the refrigerator to retrieve a split of champagne to toast her victorious step to full health. After filling their plates, Sam asked Frank, do you think I am being vengeful if I decide to press criminal charges against Phillip for the attack on me the other night?”

“Maybe, a little. On the other hand, you and I know that he is capable of trying again and that he is probably sick enough to be pursuing other women with the same intent as he did you. You should discuss this with Mike. My guess is that he will tell you to follow your heart, do what is best for your mental health.”

“Okay. Would you please set it up?”

“No problem. Now why don’t you take a nap? I have some books in the brief case. I can use a little study time.”

“Promise to awaken me. We still have to indulge ourselves with Apple Brown Betty and that rich ice cream.”

“I promise.”

Supper was fabulous. She served a shrimp cocktail, a small Filet Mignon, a salad. “Not too much main course, Frank. You need to have room for the large

Portion of dessert.” They laughed and chatted about life as a law student as they partook of the delicious meal.

The chatter and laughter continued as they washed and wiped the dishes. Putting away the last of the silverware, Sam asked “What would you like to do? Play some games? Watch TV? Study?”

Frank chuckled “You’re the hostess. I leave the choice to you, but study is not on my agenda.”

Frank, looking at her expression, saw a hint of a shadow cross her brow. She said “My counselor, Jane, says that if I can find a friend that I trust, then I should see if he or she might be willing to let me ramble on about my thoughts about the rape. I shudder to ask you but you are the only friend I have and we hardly know each other.”

“Sam, I am honored to be considered your friend. I have felt like that since you opened your life to me accidentally as well as intentionally since Phillip’s attack in the parking lot.”

“I know, Frank. I felt the same way and was moved when you were so open with the story of your youth earlier today.”

She began with her first concern. “Tomorrow I need to come clean with my boss and my colleagues. We are a team and pledge to let each other know if a crisis in our life might impair our contribution to the teamwork. While I trust them all, and most will be very understanding, there may be an exception. Jane reminded me that someone may try to make me feel ashamed. She says that he or she is not worth my time or energy but these are all co-workers. She warned me that some immature men will freak out and refer to my rape as “baggage” and may want to avoid me.

For that reason I have held back but it is time to level with them. It scares the willies out of me.”

Frank asked “Why do you think everyone needs to know?”

Up to now, we shared many things in our personal lives but there must be others who have something that cannot be brought into the open. It has been hard for me to hold back.

“May I suggest that you start with your boss and watch for his response? If that goes well, he may be your best bet on what follows.”

Sam was silent for a bit, and then smiled. “Good alternative. I should have thought about that.”

She continued “There is more I want to talk about but since you are assigned here for a few days, the conversation can wait. I’m ready for bed. I will sleep on the sofa and you can have the bed.”

Frank scoffed. “No way. I like to watch TV into the night and the TV is visible from the sofa. You need some sound sleep to recoup after this ordeal.”

She started to object but noted that he decided the issue was settled.

Frank drove her to work and headed for class. Junior and Cyn joined him for coffee after their first class since they had an hour before the next session. It required some deft maneuvers to avoid telling them about his assignment with Sam. Cyn asked “Will you come to dinner on Friday evening?”

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Cyn. Mike has me on a special assignment and I can’t make any promises.”

Junior asked “Anything to do with the Stevens case?”

In fact, it does and you know by the stamp on the file that I can’t talk about it.”

“Right, but find some time this weekend. You’ve been busy recently but Cyn and I have questions about some case history. We need some input.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know but I will find some time.”

Sam was waiting at the front door of the office building at six thirty. She dashed for the parked car. She was beaming a huge smile that he thought he could see from a mile away. She was gushing even before the door closed. “Everyone was so empathetic and ready to help in any way I might ask. After a huge hug from the boss, he stopped all work and called a staff meeting of everyone from the VP down to the janitor. I have never been so hugged in my life. I kept looking for anyone hanging back but found no one. I am so happy and your idea was the key. The boss thanked me for coming to him first.”

Someone tooted from behind, sending Frank into driving mode. He stopped fifty yards down the road to hear her whole story.

Frank stopped at the nearest liquor store to buy a special bottle of champagne to celebrate. He invited Sam to a celebratory dinner at a local restaurant but she wanted to cook a special pasta meal to celebrate.

Grinning, she said ‘You can be the sous chef and therefore my slave instead of the honored guest at the restaurant.

Frank burst into laughter. “I am pleased to serve my mistress and will obey every command or request.”

An hour later after finishing off the bottle of chardonnay and feeling just the tiniest bit high, they retired to the kitchen. Frank began gathering the makings of the salad while Sam started making the pasta, using her new pasta maker.

The next hour was filled with jokes, some office gossip and teasing before they gorged themselves on Sam’s creation “Pasta Tuscana” preceded by her “Zuppa Tuscana” warmed over from a jar full that she had made a week ago.

Since the new day was Saturday, Frank decided to sleep in, certain than Sam would be doing the same. Her boss had decided she should take the weekend, promising her a week of twelve hour days starting on Monday.

He awakened to the aroma of biscuits baking in the oven and sausage on the stove top. “Hey, I thought you were going to sleep in.”

“I did sleepy head. It’s ten thirty. Breakfast will be ready by the time you shower.”

While topping off his coffee cup after a slow and delicious meal. Sam asked “Why don’t we take that hike today, now that our plans have changed. If it is okay with you, I would like to go to church tomorrow.”

“I like the hiking plan but may demur on the church. I would not be comfortable at a conservative Baptist church.”

“Oh, neither would I.”

“How about the protestant service at Santa Clara. The young woman pastor is a liberal Presbyterian minister who is actually one of the campus ministers. I have been moved during the few times that I have attended.”

“Fine. Since we have a plan, why don’t I make up a small picnic lunch? Where shall we hike?”

“How about Stevens Creek Park. They have some great hiking trails with neat rest areas.”

An hour into the hike, Frank suggested a coffee break “Sam, you are in great shape. I thought you might be limited with exercise with all the overtime work.”

She laughed “If I were living a normal life that might be the case. Since I have no social life, I get to the gym before or after work, my gym being open 24/7.

At the end of the second hour, they found a cool glade off the trail and settled in for lunch. As they finished off the cookies, Sam asked “Is this a good time to talk about the subject I hate to talk about?”

Frank nodded and began packing the leftovers.

“One of the worst experiences was a nightmare that kept repeating itself two or three times a week, starting a few days after the event.

“The nightmare seemed to be identical each reoccurrence. I still remember each detail of the dream simply because I have experienced it so often.”

“I don’t want to tell you the whole story of that nightmare, although I can down to each detail. It is the horrifying end just before I awaken that makes me sure it it’s Phillip in the dream.

I find myself naked among rumpled sheets. My hands are damp. I raise them to discover them dripping with blood. I scream for help”.

Bursting through the door is a large gorilla, dressed in a formal tuxedo tails. He begins bounding toward the bed, tails flapping and grinning ear to ear. I shrink into a tight ball and scream louder as the creature leaps into bed and atop my body.

I suddenly awaken from the nightmare that had gripped me. My body is bathed in sweat but I sigh with relief that the sense of that horrible reality is only a dream. The relief is short lived.”

Frank saw a slight shiver hit her body as she finished the story of the nightmare. He dropped to his knees and put his arms around her, pulling her tight to his shoulder. The quivering was gone within a minute but she made no move to free herself. She stayed for about two minutes before suggesting they start walking back to the car.

He took her hand in his as they walked, giving her courage to go on. “Since you’ve read the file. You are aware of my PSTS, disorientations and the myriad of disturbing details. While most of that is history, what continues are these moments when suddenly my mind wanders back to that small bedroom and the viciousness of Phillip’s

actions, like he was punishing me, instead of having sex with me. I need the force of will to tear my mind clear and back to whatever had been my focus before the lapse.”

Frank squeezed her hand, signaling his awareness and empathy for her emotional pain. She went on.
“That is the one thing in which my psychologist has not been helpful.”

Frank took a moment to reflect then asked “Are you thinking that you need a new counselor?”

“No, but I do need to find a way to rid myself of this reliving the experience.”

Frank had no answer but he continued to encourage talking about the event and the subsequent feelings until she changed the subject.

After the worship service the next morning, Frank was pleased to hear Sam gushing about the young woman minister and her sermon on forgiveness.”

Frank insisted that they stop at a little bistro near campus for brunch during which he probed her ideas of forgiveness. She eventually said. “Remember when I asked you about taking my complaint of Phillip’s attack in the parking lot.”

“I remember.”

“Something has been stirring in the back of my mind. I will talk with Mike because I am worried that Phillip’s sickness may cause him to continue physical abuse of other women. I, however, feel sorry for him. Today’s sermon made me realize that I may find some peace if I can forgive him.”

“Are you saying that you do not want to press charges? Don’t you think that may be letting him continue?”

“I recall some statement that the police are already investigating him on two other incidents. Maybe Mike can give them some information that will help their investigation. I can’t see how his latest attack on me can help their investigation of possible rape.”

Frank grasped her idea and said. “Let me talk to Mike tomorrow.”

“Fine. I hope he agrees. Even talking about this seems to have brought some relief.

During the drive from the park, Sam said “Since this is our last day of protection detail, I need your help on devising my travel routes and timing until Mike is certain that Phillip is no danger to me.”

“I agree. Let’s focus on that after dinner. I need to spend a couple of hours with Junior and Cyn. Do you feel easy about being alone in the apartment for a little while?”

“Sure. That’s how it will be starting tomorrow. Speaking of dinner, I have something planned and will be busy while you are gone.”

Dinner was ready when Frank returned, bringing a large slice of chocolate cake that Cyn had baked and sent with Frank. He said, handing her the cake, “Cyn would like to invite the two of us to dinner next Saturday. I told her you would call.”

While washing dishes they worked on a plan to discuss with Mike regarding her safety, Sam agreeing to leave work early on Tuesday for a conference with Mike.

Sam poured them small glasses of dessert wine as they took seats on the sofa. She sat on her legs at one end while Frank lounged his long legs resting on an ottoman and his back to the corner so that he was facing her.

“Frank, I need to make a speech and want you to listen to the end before you respond. Promise?”

He smiled and said “I do.”

“I want to thank you for being all that you could be as my protector and confidante during these few short days.

It was hard to believe when Jane told me that “some man will hold your hand and weep with you when you tell him, because he can’t believe anyone would be capable of hurting you.”

She also said that there are men who are patient and kind. Some men will listen and support you and they will read and research and seek to understand.

It was hard to believe at the time but somehow you found me and lived up to her promises.

Frank started to say something but she put her index finger to her lips.

She also said the first few times I would try sex again it might not go well. She said “You might have a panic attack or a flashback, and you might scream or shake or cry or throw up or all of the above. What you need to remember is that the right partner will stroke your back or make you tea or hold your hair back for you. He’ll leave if he’s asked and he’ll keep his phone on him so you can talk if you need to.”

He could see a blush rising to her cheeks and heard the tremor in her voice as she continued.

“Frank, during these last days, my hope has been lifted, hoping for another chance to be a whole person. A big part of that is because I have come to trust and rely on you to an extent I could not believe was possible. Based on the belief that you are the man that Jane was describing,” (her voice dropped to a whisper) I am asking you to help me start a new chapter in my life.”

She was trying to continue. Frank could see the muscles of her throat tensing but the words came slowly. “Would you consider coming to bed with me and patiently seeing if I can break through this emotional barrier?”

She saw his tears of compassion as he rose, walked to her, lifted her and buried his face into her hair “Samantha Stevens, you honor me.”

Chapter 8.

The alarm rang at six the next morning. Frank had said that he had to leave early in order to get home and change clothes before school. They were lying in bed, in the dark, making small talk “Tomorrow will be a busy day with a lot of catching up at the law library.”

“I understand, Frank.”

He reached for her right hand and brought it to lie on his chest while he gently stroked her arm. He knew that every muscle in her body was stretched with tension. He pulled her arm further to circle to his back, thus bringing their bodies closer together. He knew she was holding on for dear life as he gently stroked her shoulder and put his lips to her throat. She lost control when he reached to lift her night dress. She pushed away and turned so that her back was toward him. “I’m sorry, Frank. I am scared and cannot, at least not at the moment.”

Frank with all gentleness continued his pursuit as she continued to insist that she wanted to consummate the relationship but maintained her resistance until the early hours of the morning.

As Frank turned toward her to suggest she continue to sleep while he had to leave, she moved close and whispered. “Thank you, dear Frank. I am sorry I caused you the pain that you must have experienced during your entire patient attempts to fulfill my wish. There is no way to express all the thoughts that went through my crazy head before your patience finally disproved my fears. Now, I know that I am on the road to full recovery.”

Frank placed a gentle kiss on her lips and scooted out of bed, heading for the shower. Two minutes later he heard the shower door open as Sam, grinning, reached for the bar of soap.

