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Speed Bumps Ahead

Prologue

Catherine, Mike's mom, said to Frank, her brother, "What am I going to do with him? He's too smart for the size of his britches."

Uncle Frank laughed. "What's he done now?"

She couldn't hide the smile that came naturally when she thought of her Mikey.

"My ten year old is trying to negotiate a deal with me. He wants me to write a full and final list of Saturday chores, with no verbal additions in the morning, so he can plan his day. Have your kids ever tried to negotiate with you?"

Frank roared. "Not that cleverly but then I don't have precocious children like Mike. His dad must have been brilliant. You, too, were doing well in school. Our father was too short sighted on the subject of women and education."

Joe was a good thinker and I wish he were still living to help me raise Mikey. I get so exasperated and, at times, I feel so inadequate. Frank, there are moments when Mikey seems smarter than I am."

"I don't know what to say except that he is a loving boy, well behaved. I suggest you keep a loose rein and let him experiment as long as you don't think he is in danger."

"I will keep in touch with him and continue to help the two of you."

Chapter 1.

Helen was asleep beside him but Mike was wide awake, his mind whirling with thoughts of the past.

He was remembering, vividly, a particular afternoon in May 1959 as he was walking home from school. Uncle Frank tooted his horn and invited Mike to hop in.

When they stopped in front of Mike's home, Uncle Frank said "I have some good news for you, Mikey. Friday evening at the Italian club, there will be qualifying exams for state Senatorial scholarships. Your name is on the list, so I will pick you up at 6:30 to drive you there."

Mike was astonished. He had recently applied for and was informed that he had a new job working for the Frick Coke Company in Coaltown as a bookkeeping clerk. He was starting at a salary with which he would be making more money than his stepdad.

"That's wonderful; Uncle Frank, but I can't do that. I just got that job, as you know, and it is the chance for us to keep up payments on our home mortgage and for my folks to enjoy life a little."

"Mikey that is foolish. Your mom will not stand for it. She has spent her life getting you ready for college. You go up and talk to her and find out that I'm right.

Getting a higher education has been part of your thinking. Think of all the hours you've spent at the reference library. I'll see you on Friday."

As it turned out, Frank was right. No amount of arguing with mom could change her mind.

“You can work through the summer and make enough to help you get ready for school. Dad and I will find a way just as we have until now. Things are picking up at the mine, so dad has a chance to work steady and some occasional over time.”

Mike recalled that his hands were sweaty that Friday evening. His body was as tight as a drum.

He had spent the intervening evenings trying to bone up on his Advanced Algebra knowledge as well as his memory of World History. Each evening, he fell asleep at the dining room table with his books.

Now that he was competing, he put his whole mind and heart into getting one of those scholarships.

There were twenty six kids taking the exam for four senatorial scholarships. He fidgeted in his seat while he listened to the instructions.

The bell sounded for the start of the exam. He looked at the first history questions and suddenly was aware that his tension was draining away.

“I can do this.”

He found himself finished less than two thirds the time allotted. Worried that he missed something, he went over every question before the allotted time was up.

Two days later he learned that he finished at the top of the class, making it possible to go to Penn State that fall.

Uncle Frank and Aunt Kate held a small going away party the day before he left.

After all the relatives had gone, Frank said to him “Knowing you’re hoping to be an aviator, I tried to get you lined up for an appointment to Annapolis but the Senator had to accommodate one of his big financial backers. I’m sorry.”

“This great, Uncle Frank, You have done so much for me since my father died.

As he continued reminiscing, Mike was recalling the words of farewell he had from Sister Mary on the day she told him that he was leaving St Edward’s and going to the public high school.

“Remember, Michael, the things ingrained in you here, must be carried forward wherever you may be. Respect all your neighbors. Stay sensitive so you may be of assistance to those who need you.

You have been gifted with a good brain. Use it for good.”

The priest asked him to come to the parish house on his last day at the parochial school.

“Michael, you have been an outstanding altar boy and an excellent student. You could even do better if you took more time to study.

You have been blessed with gifts from God. I am sure that Sister Mary has given you a special lecture. I hope you will pay close attention to what she had to say.”

“I have watched you on the playground. You are a natural leader of the boys and girls. I would urge you to use that talent well. When it’s time to take charge, do that. When you speak, always speak with integrity. When compassion is called for, be the first to offer your help.”

“Michael, do you remember the day that you knocked down two boys who were abusing Johnny Hatocheck? I saw that from the window and wanted to tell you how proud I was but it would have given the impression that I approved of fighting. That was one time I approved.

He was a lonesome boy who was not treated well at home, especially by his father.”

“You saw that, Father?”

“Yes I did and I loved you for it. I saw you befriend him during the weeks that followed.”

Johnny had been lonely for several reasons. He was belligerent when kids teased him, particularly about his body odor. They had no way of knowing that he had poor hygiene habits mostly because his dad forbade bathing because water usage was expensive.

As Johnny was befriended by Mike, he confided some of his problems to him.

One day, Mike brought a towel from home and took Johnny down to the river just before dark.

Johnny had a great time bathing with a small piece of soap that Mike had brought. Johnny had brought several pieces of his own underwear at Mike’s insistence, so he could rinse them out.

On one occasion, Mike talked his mom into letting Johnny come to their place for a bath.

The priest had heard that story from Mike’s mom and then about the river bath when he asked Mike.

“Michael, you have done something special for Johnny, maybe saved his life in a way. May God go with you, Michael?”

The priest shook his hand as though he were an adult. That impressed him so much that the afternoon would often return to his mind over the years to come.

Chapter 2.

Two days after the test results were announced, Uncle Frank stopped in for lunch. He and Mike’s mom expressed interest in what Mike planned to study at the university.

Mike said, “I have no specific goal in mind and I need some advice.”

Frank asked, “Why not talk with your cousin, William.”

“I hardly know him. He’s so much older than I am. How might he help me?”

“He’s a graduate from Penn and has a veterinary degree. I am sure he would be happy to share his decision making as a beginning student. He happens to be visiting his folks this week.”

That evening Mike and William were huddled with Mike’s copy of the Penn State catalogue.

The upshot was Mike’s decision to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree with electives in accounting and finance.

William smiled as he said, "Frank told me about your passion to be an aviator. You will have a few options. You can go into business, make enough money to buy a plane or get a commission in the Navy Air arm."

At the university, although he worked part time, Mike also was a leader in campus politics and was Business Manager of the Daily News.

Mike graduated magna cum laude but with no specific vocational goal firmly set in his mind.

"I'm not ready for the business world. I don't think I would make a good teacher. I'm not for studying law and I never was interested in the medical field."

He chose not to pursue graduate studies.

He wondered if a naval career might be a good option, as cousin William had suggested.

"I may as well go for it."

A month later he was commissioned an Ensign and promised an opportunity to go through flight training after ninety days of basic naval education. His commitment was for five years.

Mike surprised himself with his excitement on the morning he reported to the instructor at Ground School

His first step was a breeze. He had to memorize aircraft systems, local course rules and emergency procedures.

His body was tense with trepidation and excited as he sat for the first time in the Beechcraft T-6 training plane.

He watched and listened carefully as the instructor rolled to a take-off and flew off to a specified training area.

What did shake him was the moment the instructor got to seven thousand feet and put the plane into a tight tailspin. Mike got woozy and, in that minute, feared he was on his way to dying in a crash.

He bit his lip in order to avoid crying out as he saw the ground whirling from left to right.

"Hands off the stick and watch the plane make a natural recovery."

It seemed to Mike that the moment the plane recovered and swooped upwards, was the moment he lost any fear related to flying.

Learning flight controls, common instrument scans and generic instrument flight procedures came easily to Mike, as did navigation, day and night.

He loved doing loops, barrel rolls, Immelmans and wing splits

Advanced training was a longer haul. Mike spent more than 18 months in Meridian, Mississippi, and then moved back to Corpus Christi to train for his role as the pilot of the newest all-weather medium bomber named the Intruder.

The flight to Corus from Meridian was late due to weather. Mike was the last to arrive at the office of Commander Skipworth.

He was expecting a cool reception but was surprised to see some sandwiches and cookies on one table and drinks on another.

“Welcome, Mr. Wallech. Help yourself while I begin the orientation. I will introduce you later.”

“The four of you will be serving as a unit with a new A-6, Grumman intruder, hot off the line and already inspected fore and aft by Chief Stuart Jason.

Incidentally, ownership of this new baby is a partnership between the chief and the pilot.”

He smiled. “The chief already claims ownership and will dare you to put a scratch on his new baby.”

There were smiles all around the room.

“In less than four weeks, the four of you and the Intruder will be aboard the USS Independence, headed for the coast of Vietnam where you will be assigned to another carrier.”

“Now, Ensign Wallech, meet Ensign Jack Abbott, your navigator, Stuart Jason, your chief and John Agno, his assistant.”

“Mr. Abbott, I will ask you to assist your new skipper to find quarters and your officers’ mess. Chief, please help the skipper to find the location for the morning briefing at 0700.”

Within forty eight hours, Mike had welded his co-workers into a family. No titles were used when they addressed each other.

He bought them beers during a meeting in the rear of the ship’s store where they shared as much as each cared to about their personal histories, their families and their girlfriends.

Stu shared the fact that he and his fiancé had put off their wedding until his tour of duty in Vietnam was over.

Johnny didn’t have a girlfriend but hoped the Vietnamese chicks were as hot as the pictures he had seen.

Jack was a married man for six weeks and wrote a letter to his Jane every evening.

Mike admitted that he had no special girlfriend, having been too busy while trying to find out his missing in life.

Mike was required to make eighteen take-offs and landings before heading to San Diego to board the carrier.

Jack had to practice his navigation in eighteen different areas during the same period. The last three were with Mike as the pilot.

There were three foursomes aboard the plane taking them west, but they were the only ones flying the Intruder. The others were Sky Hawk teams.

All the pilots practiced landings each day of the trip.

At breakfast on the morning of July 4, 1965, the air commander approached Mike in the ward room.

“Lieutenant Wallech, congratulations on your promotion. You will be leaving us at 1000. You are ordered to take your Intruder to the USS Nimitz which will be approximately twenty air miles northeast of our position at that time.”

Your chief will follow within two hours. Good luck.”

By 1400 hours, they were squared away in their new quarters. At 1500, Mike and Jack, along with two others, were being given an orientation tour of the carrier. This was prior to their introduction to the battle zone and what to expect as members of Strike Force 2.

“We have a lot of stinky weather in this part of the world. Each of you will be assigned to a squadron, one only three equipped with Intruders.”

As you know, there are two unique improvements that are part of the Intruders. We now have a 2nd crew member with separate responsibilities from those of the pilot.

The aircraft had unique cathode ray tube display that provides a synthetic display of terrain ahead.

The additions enable low-level attack in all weather conditions.”

“Tomorrow’s weather prediction is for heavy rain and thunder storms over the selected target area.

Strike Force 2 will be the only aircraft flying tomorrow. This is a sort of test run.

You will be flying almost to the Laos border, a long way with the heaviest payloads we have ever delivered.

As expected, when approaching the target, you will be flying at low levels low to deliver your payload. That makes you especially vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire.”

“At this time, the plan is to use your squadrons for bombing missions. If the Air Boss is satisfied, one or two squadrons will be tested in supplying support for our ground forces.”

“You have a special seating area for dinner this evening where you will be joined by the other pilots and navigators from three squadrons. The table will be hosted by Air Ops, the third highest ranking officer in the air group.”

Commander Little, the Air Ops, surprised the group with his easy going manner, encouraging the men to tell stories or jokes after he set the pattern for the meeting.

As the time came to an end, he turned serious.

“Men, you are guinea pigs of a sort. Much is expected of you with a second man in the cockpit, a clear look at the ground ahead of you and increased speed.

I am aware, however, that the profile of the flight pattern puts you at greater risk. Scenav and Grumman will be anxiously awaiting our first reports.”

“Be careful out there. Now, I’ll leave you so you can relax and have some fun.”

The following is an excerpt from Mike’s journal written the evening after his first sortie.

“I had had heard the term “scared shitless: Well, I now believe that literally.

The morning briefing made it clear that we were flying into a thunder storm toward a well secured and defended target.

The first image that hit my mind was a picture of the bullet ridden plane on deck after our first sortie. That mental image surprised and shook me.

I dashed for the head to have a bowel movement. Three more times before the official take-off I went through the entire process so that I was completely void by take- off time.

Then, when we got the fifteen minute notice before “start your engines”, I had that urgent feeling but had nothing to dump. All during the briefing I had this urgent call.

It didn't go away all through the preflight check. It wasn't until I was strapped in the seat belt and the shoulder harness, did I feel sure that I was not going to be one-embarrassed pilot.

I found it interesting that in spite of all the practice and performance I did not have a calm molecule in my body.”

“It was only after forming up at five thousand feet that I began to relax.

Once we neared our target and descended to the carpet, I was totally cold and focused. Every plane hit the target and returned safely.

It continued to storm for two days. Our two squadrons flew two bombing runs with success during the heavy rains and thunder storms.”

Mike's journal read, “Two successful sorties. There is this weird feeling one gets when flying through a thunder storm.

Lightning is flashing on all sides for long stretches of time .The plane shudders from time to time while we sit calmly going about our business.

The tension comes for a moment each time I push the wheel forward to begin the descent to target.

That does not go away until the payload is gone and the upward swoop has us at 20000 feet and climbing.”

Mike did not fly for the next two days.’

He spent part of the first morning going over the plane, now dubbed, Juliet, in honor of Stuart's fiancé.

Stu said, “Thanks, Mike. Three sorties and not a nick. Juliet is grateful. I just finished a complete inspection with Johnny. Are you up for a game of Acey Deucey?”

“Sure. I need to recoup that buck and a half you took from me a couple of days ago.”

He did.

At the briefing, he heard. “Mike, you will follow the skipper during the strafing run in support of the marines. Be sure your radio is set to his frequency. Your target will be enemy tanks.”

“Your ammo is anti-tank. You will have 250 pound bombs in case you have a bombing target show up. ”

Sid, you and Fox will be headed for trucks carrying either troops or ammo. Be careful.

Approaching the target, the squadron broke formation in order to initiate the bombing run. Just as the skipper commenced his dive on the lead tank, an explosion under his port wing damaged the port engine. The plane caught fire, causing the hydraulics to fail.

Within seconds, the pilot and navigator ejected.

Mike stored the image of the burning plane in the back of his mind and brought his attention back to his task. He switched targets and aimed at the skipper’s intended target, the lead tank. “Scratch the leader and three more.”

The other two planes followed suit.

Mike saw flashes of gunfire from the ground Burt heard nothing and, inexplicably, escaped without a scratch.

During the return flight, he could not keep his mind from saying, “It could have been our plane.”

Jack, experiencing the same thoughts, tried some conversation to change the mood but without success.

“Do you think they are safe? Mike?”

“I hope so. At least, they had favorable wind, blowing away from the enemy position in the battle. They should be fine as long as they didn’t get blown into a wooded area and hung up in a tree.”

As they stepped out of the plane on deck, Stu came to them. “Word is that the two were picked up by a marine helicopter and will be here tomorrow.”

Mike sighed with relief.

He noted in his journal. “Thank you, Lord.”

The Air OpsS commander called Mike to his office. “Mike, your skipper is getting thirty days leave. I’ve cleared it with the Air Boss and your other pilots. You are now squadron leader until the skipper returns.”

Mike was surprised but kept his face masked and emotionless.

“Aye, sir.”

He was aware that a big load was now on his back. He was responsible for on the spot decisions that might expose his buddies to extreme danger.

He would be point man on each strike, charged with making the decision to go ahead, abort or change target during each sortie. ’

The Air Boss called a meeting of all the Intruder pilots and navigators for the following day at 1000.

“Gentlemen. As you learned from experience in Korea, effective day and night around-the-clock interdiction proved beyond the capabilities of the carrier aircraft of the period.

You also know that the A-6A is the first completely all-weather, tactical attack aircraft ever employed in combat.

Your equipped consists of a complex system of sensors, displays and computer-controlled equipment.

This aircraft also enables you to proceed to a target area at very high altitudes, find and attack the target, and egress, without ever having visual contact with the ground.

We now have the ability to deliver heavy bomb loads at long range.

The range will compensate for the fact that we have only a small number of Intruder is in the Fleet

Since its promised usefulness is in combat operations, particularly in the frequent periods of extended bad weather, we are about to give it the test.

We are in the middle of the rainy season with about six weeks to go. That means I intend to fly bombing missions in North Vietnam each and every day and every night of inclement weather

You are going to be dam tired airmen at the end of the six weeks, praying for a nice day so you can rest and let others carry out the missions.

The carrot at the end of the stick is a three week leave and reporting back on board at Coronado, California after your leave.”

Grins and smiles were visible all around the room.

The Boss continued. “That’s it for today. God speed and good luck. Lieutenant Wallech, walk with me to my office.”

At the office, the Boss said, “Get us couple of cokes from the refrigerator and grab a seat at the table.”

After a couple of sips, the Boss said, “Lieutenant. I understand you finished first in you class at Meridian. Am I Right?”

“Yes, sir.”

I also understand that there was a first in every category during your last training level.”

Mike nodded.

“Air Ops tells me tells me you stepped up to the plate when we lost our first Intruder. As a result I am promoting you to the temporary rank of Lt. Commander, and making you the flight leader of Strike Force 2 and its twelve crews.”

“May I ask the extent of my responsibilities, sir?”

“Your squad will lead each sortie. You will be the point man on each strike. If there arises any condition where you believe the mission cannot be implemented as planned, you will radio for instructions unless there is no time.

At the point, you will be making the decision to go ahead, to abort or change to the alternate target for the mission.” ’

“Is there any reason you cannot do that?”

“No, sir.”

The Boss went on. “Let me paint the changes in the big picture under the President’s Operation Rolling Thunder.”

“The project was launched in March as a sustained bombing campaign of North Vietnam. The operation was designed to interdict North Vietnamese transportation routes in the southern part of the North Vietnam and to slow infiltration of personnel and supplies into South Vietnam.

There are restrictions against striking targets in or near Hanoi and Haiphong, so our missions are in the southern part of the country.”

“Now, you need to consult with Air Ops. You and he are to find your assistant, who will be your replacement on days you do not fly. He must be trained and as fully briefed before flight as you would have been. I leave that in your hands.”

“Now, allow me to change your insignia. These are my personal insignia and are to be returned when you vacate your temporary rank.”

Mike had a lot of explaining to do with his buddies and the other Intruder crews.

The squadrons were renamed Alice, Betty and Carol

The first targets under Mike’s command were two supply dumps. Carol was designated to bomb the nearer location while Alice and Betty were headed for the other, forty miles west and south of the first.

Two hundred miles from the first target, Carol disappeared from the enemy radar screen as the four planes descend to treetop level.

The other eight continued as if headed for the nearer target before altering their heading west and south.

According to the debriefing of Carol’s crews, the defenders were caught totally off guard. The mission was a success and only one plane suffered minor damage.

Five minutes after separation from Carol, the other two squadrons were headed down to a thousand feet.

Twenty miles from the second target, just before they descended to tree top, Jack spied a long freight train moving southwards and told Mike.

Mike pointed his nose fifteen degrees to port to alert Betty of an alternate target.

Ten seconds later, Mike gave a half second burst on the radio. The leader of Betty acknowledged with a flash of lights and was off to intercept and destroy the train.

Some of the cargo must have been ammo, based on the words of the debriefed crews.

Squadron Alice “bombed the hell out of a supply dump but took heavy ground fire, mostly from rifles and fifty caliber machine guns, apparently.

All the planes arrived in tact but each had at least a half dozen holes to be patched

Mike called a meeting of the Strike force crews an hour after the last debriefing. Everyone was present except for Jason, the number four pilot in the Carol, Max Dirksen.

Joshing and jokes accompanied the beer and cokes. After thirty minutes had passed, Mike decided to visit Max at his quarters to see why he had not made an appearance.

He found Max curled up in his bunk, wrapped in his blanket, although his forehead was covered with beads of sweat.

Mike assumed that Max had a bad case of the flu, but reconsidered when he saw Max shaking and crying.

Mike knelt beside the bunk and wiped off the sweat with his handkerchief.

To himself, "Something happened on that flight that had scared the hell out of Max."

"Max can you talk to me?"

Max shudders and turned his body away from Mike, pulling the blanket tight to hid body. Mike knew that further conversation was unlikely. Max needed some professional help.

He put his hand on Max's shoulder and comforted him with words of encouragement. He stepped out of the room and called the psychologist on duty who promised to be there in five minutes.

He called the debriefing room and spoke to the officer who had questioned Max.

"Commander, I just tried to reach you. Lieutenant Dirksen is in bad condition. He had three holes in his flight jacket. Those near misses have put him in a state of shock. I suggest you visit him and call the psych department."

"Thanks. I just visited and have called for help which is on the way."

Mike returned to the meeting and informed the group that Max was ill and unable to attend.

"Let's meet tomorrow morning at 1000."

As the members moved out, Mike asked Phil Donner, Max's navigator to stay for a minute

"Phil, did you notice that Max was ill at any h time after the engagement?"

"I noticed he was pale and asked if he felt well but he shook his head and walked to the head. I haven't seen him since."

Mike went to see Air Ops and informed him of Max's condition.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mike. Leave it to me."

Air ops attended the morning briefing the next day

He told the group, "Lieutenant Dirksen will not be with us. He is being sent to San Diego for rest due to mental stress. Carol will fly with three crews this morning."

It was three days later, twenty fifth morning of Mike's command. Word had come to Intelligence that a train load of supplies and personnel was moving sooth down the west corner of North Vietnam

Mike was roused from sleep and given the coordinates and estimated sped as of 0428.

He realized that Betty and Carol were due from sorties to the west and north.

His own squadron had returned from their mission just five hours ago. He was tired as were the others who were about to be challenged with another flight.

"Damn."

He told the Officer of the Day, "Rouse the crews of Alice.

At the briefing, he ordered addition caffeine pills. The briefing officer said, "This is the longest train that we have seen for months. You should expect that come daylight there will be some Migs coming to fly aerial protection. Our Intel says that was the case during the late daylight hours yesterday"

He continued. "The weather is clear although you will have heavy head winds."

Twenty five minutes later, four Intruders were spraying water off the deck of the carrier as the catapult sped them on the way

Fifteen minutes prior to target, Jack said, "Two blips on the screen, at Angels 15."

Mike pressed the radio microphone to his neck. "Alice three and four continue to target. One and two have business at Angles 15"

Mike, with Fred on his wing, descended to 110000 feet. The Migs allowed them to move past their position, hoping to approach the he Intrudes from the rear and above them.

That suited Mike, who wanted to be east of the Migs as the sun rose.

"Mike said into his microphone, "On a count of three."

Four five seconds after the sun rose above the horizon at their backs the two Intruders pointed nose upward and headed directly toward the two Migs. Their approach made it just a bit more difficult for the Migs to see the Intruders clearly.

The Migs were separated, hoping to squeeze the Intruders. Mike feints to port while Fred split to starboard, causing one Mig to turn in pursuit.

Mike jerked to starboard and was on the tail of the Migs, streaming ammo into the Mig. Seven seconds later, the Migs burst into flames and Mike was spinning toward Mother Earth to escape the fire of the second enemy.

Meanwhile Fred was coming around to be behind the other enemy. The Mig managed one burst before Fred sent it spinning toward earth with fire streaming from under the cowling.

A few bullets from the Mig behind Mike came through his canopy doing little damage to the Intruder but a bullet tore through Mike's left knee and the two small toes of his right foot."

He was biting his lip to keep from screaming and turned to Jack.

Gritting his teeth, Mike said, "We need to return to base in a hurry. I'm hit and bleeding. You're going to have to land the plane from the right hand seat."

He held up his hands. "It's all yours."

Ten seconds later, he passed out from the pain.

Jack called the base. “Den Mother, this is Alice one. The Skipper is damaged. Need medics.”

Jack was apprehensive. He had barely qualified during his last landing qualifications.

“Lord, I never asked for this.”

His hands were sweaty and his pulse was racing as he made the final turn.

He heard a voice saying, “You’re doing fine Lieutenant. Lift your nose a bit. We’ll bring you home safely.”

Suddenly, he felt calm. He had found a friend on the air, a friendly voice of someone who cared for him.

His hook managed to catch the last wire on the first approach. He watches medics and the ship surgeon approach the port side of the Intruder.

He was interrupted when his door was jerked opened. He was escorted to the debriefing room.

His interpretation of the events would be important since Mike was unavailable.

Mike was confused when his eyes flicked open three hours after he had passed out. He was slow figuring out that he was in sick bay. He finally came to the right conclusion when he saw several flexible tubes connected to his body.

A soft feminine voice from very close to his ear said, “Welcome back, Commander. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Mike gave her a weak smile. “Thank you. Did you hang all that equipment for me?”

“I did and am about ready to change the red bag of blood so I can make a full red blooded hero of you.”

“How can one be a hero when he gets knocked out?”

“You did it by hanging on to life in order to do something significant. The incident is no more than a speed bump on the road to a good life.”

“Now hush. Don’t tire yourself. I’ll take good care of you.”

He watched her jot down his vials on the chart, and then calls someone.

“No, doctor, there’s no rush. He awakened a few minutes ago and his vitals are good.”

An hour later, the surgeon came in for some conversation. The essence of his findings was, “The damage to your knee is greater than we first thought. We need to perform several operations. I believe we can restore about seventy percent effectiveness of the leg.

“You will lose at least two toes on your right foot”

“The complexity of the damage to your knee suggests that we send you to San Diego for the surgery. Fortunately, there is another carrier departing early tomorrow. We plan to transfer you later this evening.”

Mike listened with mixed feelings. The news from the doctor was hopeful but also meant that his naval career was at an end.

“What the hell will I do? The only real skill I have is as an aviator. No airline will hire a crippled pilot.”

He closed his eyes so that the doctor could not see the tears that were forming.

The doctor, realizing that Mike was too absorbed to respond, laid his hand on Mike’s arm.

“I need t to start making arrangements. I’ll see you this evening.”

He sensed the doctor leaving and kept is eyes closed. Someone else took a seat in the chair next to his bed. He felt his hand being lifted lightly by soft feminine fingers.

The silence continued. He felt tears easing out from behind his closed lids and soon felt a tissue wiping away the dampness on his cheeks.

It was another minute until he opened his eyes and saw the nurse who witnessed his awakening.

She had a warm smile on beautiful face with blue-green eyes, surrounded by a halo of short blond hair.

He blurted out. "You're a beautiful angel."

"Thank you but I assure you that I'm not an angel. I sensed you needed someone to hold your hand after the doctor gave you the news.

"Thank you for wiping the tears. I was trying to hold them behind my eyelids."

"I recognized the signs. You're not the first pilot to cry at the news."

Mike decided to switch subjects.

"I didn't think nurses had time to sit and chat with patients."

She smiled. "Right. I happen to go off duty ten minutes ago after being present during the surgeon's visit."

"Thank you."

"I'm Helen. Do you prefer Michel or Mike?"

"My friend calls me Mike and I would like you to be my friend."

She flashed another smile. "I'd like that because you and I will be seeing each other often. I am being sent to San Diego and will be your nurse on the carrier."

Mie grinned. "Maybe we can also see each other after your duty hours."

"We'll see, but I doubt it. You may be sick of me by the end of the trip."

Mike laughed. "If it takes getting sick in order to know you, I plan on being very sick."

Helen laughed with him. She felt her hands being lifted to a sweet caress by Mike's lips.

She gently removed her hand but she felt his lips on her hand during the long return to her quarters.

Most of the mobile patients were taken to the movies during the evening of the first day at sea. Mike cajoled Helen to wheel him to the deck at the stern of the carrier. It was a balmy night with a full moon.

She had brought a light aluminum beach chair so that they could sit side by side. Less than a minute after they sat, Mike was trying to find her hand to hold. She made it available and liked the way it felt.

She said to herself, "I shouldn't. This may encourage him."

"Helen, I'll tell you my story if you tell me yours."

"Why do you want to hear my story, Mie?"

"Because I want to know more about the woman I plan to marry."

"That's foolish talk, Mike. We met yesterday. That isn't enough time to make an impression let alone talk about weddings."

"I know this sounds crazy but that was the feeling I had a minute after I opened my eyes and saw you waiting for me. I haven't been able to shake that feeling for thirty one hours."

She gently removed her hand from his.

"All right. Put that thought aside. Tell me your story."

"There isn't much drama in my story. "It's the one about a poor boy who catches a break."

"When your father is coal miner, you discover how difficult it is to rid yourself of the chains that bind you to the mine. When things are booming, most of your income is withheld to pay off your debt to the company store that fed you and clothed you through the thin times.

The growing boy is shackled because the mine expects him to join the crew and implies that dad's job is at risk if the boy refuses to work in the mine.

I was lucky in two ways. My mom demanded that I study and finish at the top of my class. As she said, "That is the only way you can get a scholarship that will free you."

My Uncle Frank was a foreman who saw opportunities and made sure I was in a position to take advantage.

He found a path for me that took me to Penn State and out of the mines.”

“God has blessed me with a good mind and couple of angels, a nun and a priest who found ways to challenge me.”

Helen said, “You must be something special to hold the rank of Lieutenant Commander at your age.”

“That was a temporary appointment for the task I was assigned.”

“Never the less, it is impressive. Now, I haven’t heard anything about women in your life. You’re too handsome to have escaped all of them.”

“I never had a steady girlfriend in high school, although I did go to dances and was friends with some of the girls. I loved reading, especially nonfiction and the occasional mystery. I guess I was an egghead although I played sports with the guys.

“I dated a few women at State when I had time. Keeping up my grades for my scholarships and working to find some financial help for my family, limited my college social life.”

“The location of flight training schools provides few women and lots of males. It was better to concentrate on m studies.”

Helen chuckled. “This is hard to believe. I see a handsome fly boy in blue that is part of fun loving, hell raising tailgaters, who is telling me he doesn’t or ever had a real girlfriend.”

“It’s the unvarnished truth. Cross my heart.”

“Mike, tell me more about living in a company town. It sounds dreadful.”

He replied. “My mom told me it was even worse a few years earlier. There was a time when no boys escaped unless it was the will of the mine owner or mine manager.”

“During recession years, the owners put a cap on the credit for the miners, putting most on starvation wages, dependent on government handouts. Even then, those in charge took the best for themselves with leftovers for the rest of the community.”

“Stop, Mike. I’m sorry I asked. I need to go back to my quarters.”

“Okay, but I still want to hear your story.”

“We’ll see.”

Helen saw to it that Mike wanted for nothing. She even brought him some light weight hand bars so he could exercise his arms and maintain his upper body strength.

Mike wrote her some love notes in Haiku and taught her the technique. She did not reciprocate with love notes.

She did her best to avert a situation in which he might press her for some kind of commitment. Her attempt to keep the relationship platonic held only for her side. It was obvious that Mike was convinced that they were made for each other.

On one occasion, he bribed a nurse’s aide to buy a box of dark chocolate candy for Helen. He did the same for a single red rose on another occasion.

Out of the blue came a reminder that his friend, Max, was in the San Diego naval hospital.

He asked Helen. “Is it possible to find out some information about a friend who is being cared for in the psychiatric ward at the hospital?”

“I can try when we get there, Mike. Information may be private and unavailable but I’ll give it a whirl. What’s his name?”

Mike’s actions were making dents in Helen’s resistance. Helen knew she was developing feelings for Mike. He was the nicest thing that ever happened to her but it had to stop at that.

The carrier docked at 0300. Sleepy eyed Helen came to Mike an hour later with two seamen who would take Mike safely ashore under her watchful eye.

As she tucked him into his bed, Mike's hands move gently but swiftly behind her head and pulled her lips to meet his.

Surprised, she responded with ardor, but just for a moment. She removed her hands and smiled.

"That was a nice thank you, but unnecessarily. Making sure you are comfortable is part of my duties."

Mike grinned. "I know."

He liked the momentary response of her warm lips and figured he was making progress.

The doctors decided to deal with the foot before start the complex operation on knee reconstruction.

Step two would not begin for weeks. It would take time for Mike's body to be strong enough to handle the long process.

Mike's spirits sagged when the reality struck home.

"What the hell am I going to do with myself?" In fact, where am I headed when I leave here?"

He lost his appetite. He blew his top when the nurse's aide spilled some water on his blanket.

He hardly spoke with his new buddy in the next bed.

This was a complete turnaround for the usual affable Mike who enjoyed swapping jokes and stories with his room mate.

There was no smile for Helen when she came in.

She recognized the signs immediately and decided to find some way to rejuvenate his spirit.

He was surprised at dinner time on the second evening to see her carrying a large tray with food that had not come from the hospital kitchen.

“Hi sailor, “I heard that you were tired of navy chow. How would you like a double cheese burger and/or join me as I enjoy a double cheese pizza?”

Mike’s face widened into a smile.

“I’d love some pizza if you have some of the burger.”

“It’s a deal.”

Silence dominated the cubicle for a bit until Mike said, “I guess you heard about my poor behavior.”

“You bet. You’re the talk of the town. Joyful inmate turns sour and won’t eat.”

“I’m sorry and I will apologize.”

“Would you care to talk about it or have I called a shrink?”

“I’d rather talk with you and then a shrink if you think I need his help.”

“Good. Your roomie will be in physical therapy for a while. This is a good time. I also have a bonus if you finish your meal.”

Mike grinned and dug in.

When they finished eating, she pulled from her tote bag two plastic glasses and a split of Napa California Chardonnay.

“Women, you’re an angel.”

“I told you that I’m no angel but I was sure this would lift you a bit. Now, let’s chat.”

Mike told Helen about his disappointment at hearing about the time he would have to be in the hospital.

“I need something important to do. Joshing with my buddies for a bit and reading the newspaper takes a very small bite out of my day.”

“I’m bored and will be for months.”

He paused, waiting for some response to his complaint.

Helen said, ‘There’s something more. You can figure a way around that minor problem. Am I right?’

Helen got the feeling that he was not going to be forthcoming but she sat silently, making him the first to speak.

The silence lay heavily for long minutes.

Suddenly word gushed from Mike. “What the hell am I going to do with my life? Nobody wants to hire cripples. I won’t be able to fly. I have no other skills. I have a smattering of knowledge but not enough to teach. I’m worthless.”

It seemed to Helen that he hadn’t taken a breath while the words flowed out of his mouth.

“Mike, do you really believe what you have said to me?”

“That’s how it seems to me.”

“If that is so, then maybe you should see a shrink. I think this is pure emotion talking.”

Mike asked, “How can I tell the difference?”

Helen suggested, “Let’s deal with the lesser concern, your stay in the hospital.”

“Okay.”

“Tomorrow, you become mobile, although limited because of the tubes. An aide, however, can help you move by hanging the bags on a rack attached to your wheelchair.”

“Your love for others makes you a natural to help others. There are several who could use your help and one in particular. He is someone you will enjoy as well.”

“Damn it, Helen, you just made obvious something I’ve always known. That is, find yourself by losing yourself in others. I think I would like to try that, even if it is not the whole answer.”

“It’s just the beginning, Mike and may even be a prelude to answering the long range question. In the meantime, I think seeing a counselor would help.” ”

“I’ll get an appointment. When can I meet this interesting mam?”

“I’ll bring him by during my afternoon break tomorrow.”

At noon the next day, Mike’s counselor had just left and Helen appeared at the foot of his bed.

“Thank you, Helen, for the suggestion. I’ feeling more centered now.”

“Good. Your lunch is on the way. I brought you some mints for after lunch. I’ll be back with Vin at three thirty with a couple of Cokes.”

True to her word, she came by pushing a wheelchair in which sat a handsome Vietnamese young man.

Mike, meet Vin, a scout attached to one of our Marine units. He was too near an exploding grenade that shattered one leg, caused more than a dozen holes in various parts of his body including his forehead and eyes.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Vin. Helen thinks we should become friends. I’d like that.”

“I, too”, said Vin.

Helen rolled the chair close to the bed.

Mike said, “Helen told me there was some way I might be of help.”

Vin smiled. “That would be kind of you.”

Vin reached under the blanket that was covering his legs to fetch a soft cover book. He tried to hand it to Mike but was a foot off the mark causing Mike to reach and miss the hand off.

It was in that moment that Mike realized that Vin was totally blind. He picked the book off the bed.

“I see you’re a fan of Dick Francis, who writes about horse racing in England. So am I.”

Vin said, “I would appreciate it if you could read me a few pages. My recent roommate was reading to me when he had to be moved from our room.”

Helen said, “I’ll see you later.”

Mike was enjoying himself as he read closing pages of the Sid Halley character created by Dick Francis.

“You are a good reader, Mike. You were into the character. You must love reading novels.”

“I do, especially Dick Francis. I think I’ve read most of his books. I found them to be a good way to relax after heavy days training at flight school.”

Vin laughed. “I have four more if you would like to read with me.”

“Sue. This is usually a good time of day for me.”

“Mike, may I ask. Were you shot down by a MIG?”

“No. I was lucky. I had been a split second too late escaping a Mig on my tail and took a brief tattoo that shattered a knee and three toes. My navigator had to land the plane.”

“I, too, was lucky. A medic got me to the doctor quickly, before I lost too much blood from the twenty pieces of shrapnel.”

“How long have you been in the hospital, Vin?”

“Three months and still have no idea for how many more.”

Mie said, “We shall have a long time in which we can become friends.”

“I will like that”, said Vin.

Helen was off duty and joined Mike for dinner that evening. She brought some special cookies that she had baked as well as a unique blend of coffee from a specialty shop.

The two of them talked until the five minute bell sounded. Mike had been holding Helen's hand. She had opened a bit more and he learned a lot of details of her early life.

She was deeply moved when he told the story of Johnny Hatching, the kid who wasn't allowed to bathe at home because water usage was too expensive.

He responded fully to anything she asked.

"Helen, you keep holding something back. I am sure you liked me and you know that I plan on asking you to marry me as soon as I can see my way. When do you plan to fill in the missing story?"

"Oh, Mike, please don't press me. You are my closest friend and I don't want to lose you. You already know more about me than my mother does."

"I love you, Helen."

"I'm aware of that, Mike and I have a hard time trying to limit my feelings for you. You are everything a woman wants in a man"

Mike felt sure there was some incident in her past of which she was ashamed and didn't want to discuss with him.

The final bell sounded. Helen rose and leaned over for her good night kiss. Tonight, that kiss was a bit more than the sisterly peck of past times

Mike lay awake for a long time trying to decipher the mixed messages he was receiving.

The next several weeks passed with a deep friendship; developing between Vin and Mike but no changes in Helen's responses to Mike.

Mike felt that Helen was softening her resistance but not enough to encourage him.

"By the way, Mike, Lieutenant Dirksen is in the psyche ward but refuses to talk with anyone, including his fiancé who arrived yesterday."

Mike said, “Thanks, Helen. I should try to talk with him but I can’t get to him for a while. Would you ask his doctor if it were possible to have him come for a visit?”

“I’m sorry, Mike. I presumed that you might, but the doctor nixed the idea.”

Mike sighed and figured he could try later when he was mobile.

Helen stayed past the last bell the night after his first knee operation. The pain killers were not working at a hundred per cent.

She held his hand and made comforting comments and told a few jokes to divert his mind away from the pain.

She finally climbed in on the right side away from the bandaged knee. Within a few minutes, she felt his body calming. She continued lying there even when she knew Mike was asleep.

The next six weeks rolled by. Other than the first twenty four hours after each operation, life was peaceful.

Mike read four books to his new friend, in. Helen watched and cared for him like a mother hen.

Two weeks after the final operation, which was deemed a success by the surgeon, Mike was told he was ready for knee therapy.

Through all the weeks, Helen had stayed late; making sure Mike was asleep before she left for her apartment. On the evenings that Mike’s pain was severe, she sat on the bed and held his hand until he fell asleep.

She walked in after dinner that last evening.

“Where’s your roomie, Mike?”

“He was discharged ties afternoon. I understand they are going to refurbish the room after I leave tomorrow. Did you bring another book of poems or are we into Haiku this evening?”

“I thought a little of both. I do have a new book of poetry”

It was a fun evening. There was laughter when Helen read some naughty poems and sober moments when she read some Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Helen was wiping away a tear. "It's past time again. I should leave."

She knew she had to leave before her feelings were on the surface for Mike to see.

"I want you to stay longer tonight. We're all alone. Is it okay with head nurse on the station?"

She began to say she had to go but knew she really wanted to stay.

"We're personal friends. She won't mind."

"Good. I wrote a bit of Haiku that I want to read and the ask you to write a response How does that sound?"

She broke into a grin. "Okay. Go."

He read.

"I want you, dear Helen

Enough to make love with you.

Let's make love, let's do."

He waited.

"Michael, you are too clever. Give me a few minutes."

She was taken off guard. It wasn't that she didn't want to. During these last weeks, as Mike revealed himself to her, she knew she was falling in love and wanted to express her love in a meaningful way.

It had been a long time. She felt her shoulders tensing. "Is this too soon? Will I be able to give Mike the satisfaction he deserves or will my memories interfere? This is crazy. Helen, you can trust Mike."

Mike didn't know how to read her expression during the long wait.

Helen looked sober as she prepared to read. Mike's heart dropped a notch.

"I'm not sure about love.

Though I have deep feelings for you

Gently I will do."

She stood with the light behind her and slowly removed each article of clothing until her nude body was revealed as a shapely silhouette by the backlight.

Mike caught his breath as he watched her.

She moved to the door and put out the "Do not disturb" sign, clicked off the light and slipped into the right side of the bed.

She knew that her muscles were bunched tightly but within minutes, the tightness began to relax as Mike's gentle caresses moved over her breast and belly.

The next two hours were more about love than they were about sex, although there was that in spite of Mike's limitations. Their passion was intense, almost as if they were making up for lost time.

As they were trying to recapture their breath, Helen's tears were dampening Mike's chest.

He didn't know what to say or do so he held her tight while the tears continued to flow.

It was Helen who broke the silence

“That was beautiful, Michael. You not only fulfilled me but you released moths of pent up emotions.”

She choked and a sob escaped her throat. The tears began again as she buried her face in Mike’s breast.

It was two minutes later that she freed herself from his arms. “I must leave, Michael. The nurses and aides will be making too much of this.”

Mike asked, “Must you? I have a need to talk.”

“I do, too, especially about the tears but I promise we will do that tomorrow in your new room.”

Chapter3.

The first hour of therapy was painful and Mike knew that he faced much more of the same. This was much worse than the therapy for his toes.

He was shown how to gently massage his knee and thigh every hour he was awake. He was hurting when he returned to the four man ward.

That was the bad news, three roommates. He would have little privacy. The good news was that he could move on crutches which gave him freedom of movement.

Mike did not see or hear from Helen during the whole day. The dinner hour came and went with no sign of Helen.

He sighed with relief when she came through the door at seven. It was a low whistle from one of his new mates that made him look up.

His gorgeous angel was carrying two cupcakes with lighted candles. The room burst into song as a smiling Helen walked toward Mike.

They blew out the candles. "I checked your records today and noticed that we shared birth days."

She turned towards the others. "Anyone have a knife so we can share and celebrate?"

The next half hour was a nosy gang getting to know each other and learning that Helen was the new supervising nurse for this convalescing ward.

She handed Mike his crutches as a signal they were headed out.

They found a small nook at the end of the hall that provided the privacy they needed. Mike set aside his crutches and swept Helen into a tight embrace, their lips meeting for a crushing kiss.

The result was another flowing of tears.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I can't help it. I'll try to explain."

It took a while for Helen to collect her composure.

“I did not want and tried not to fall in love with you, Michael. You deserve better. You have a full life ahead of you, a life with a wife and children.”

“I can’t give you that, Michael, as much as I would love to do so.”

Her voice choked and the tears started once more.

Mie reached for his handkerchief and wiped the tears while he caressed her back. He waited patiently.

“I can’t have children, Michael.”

Mike began to protest but she put a finger to his lips.

“There’s more. You must have noticed last night. My body tightens up like a drum when I even think about sex.”

“I was raped more than a year ago. I fought back with no success. In fact, my attacker got vicious and angrier and did some horrible things that require major surgery.”

“I’m healed physically but my shrink says there is still work to do. He will be pleased to learn that I had sex. He has been encouraging me to find a gentle mate.”

Mike said, “I didn’t think we ended very gently.”

“She smiled. “That’s because I was trying so hard to please you, Michael.”

Mike asked, “May I speak now?”

Helen bit her lip and nodded.

“Helen, I love you. No history or physical effects of that history can negate that love. I want you in my life. I need you. I want us to be husband and wife.”

The dam burst, letting the stream of tears of joy gush from behind her eyelids...

“Oh, Michael, hold me tight. I need to know this is not a dream.”

For the next several weeks, the only private times in their favorite alcove were limited to holding hands, learning more about each other and passionate kisses as they separated.

Then on one bright morning, Mike had a long visit with his physician, including a full physical exam.

“Mike, the therapist says you can reduce your visits to twice a week. That’s an indicator that I need to make my final report. You do understand that means separation from the navy by the end of the month?”

“Wow. I need to make some plans.”

Helen stopped by the ward at 1500 hours.

“How about a home cooked meal for a change?”

Mike grinned. “After all these months, I am ready.”

“I’ll pick you up at 1750 hours. Remember to check yourself out for the night, to return at 1600.”

“Wow, twenty two hours alone with Helen.”

In the elevator of her apartment building, Mike was sure that everyone was guessing that this was his first visit to Helen’s apartment. He was glad when they reached the fourth floor.

Helen dropped her coat on a chair and turned to unzip his jacket. She found herself crushed in Mike’s arms, her body tight to his. The kiss went on and their passion deepened.

“Oh, Michael, this very scene has been in my mind throughout the day. I planned a roast which would give us plenty of time.

In the bedroom, she said, “Let’s see if you are as good at undressing me in person as you have been disrobing me with your eyes for all those weeks.”

“Aye, Aye, Lieutenant.

She gave him an A plus as she shivered at each touch.

Much later, as they lay side by side, holding hands, Helen said, “This is a moment of great peace for me. Lying with you in the afterglow of making love is so intimate.”

It's a tune when the world does not come between us. I am so glad, that you also sense that."

"I do. In fact, I have a request. "Honey, do you think you can switch from that Michael thing, it reminds me of an older man. Addressing me with my full name seems too formal."

"Okay. I'll try. But Michael is a beautiful name and I think he was an archangel."

"Thank you. I'll still try to be your archangel, but this angel has a problem. Now that I am being booted out of the hospital. I need a place to place to start my civilian life."

Helen said, "I was hoping you would move in with me. That will give us a chance to really know each other."

Mike said, "I was hoping for an invite. We need to map out along range plan, starting with a visit to the jewelers for rings."

Her face was wreathed with a smile.

"You are inverted. I love the way you get directly to the point. It's been that way since the moment we met, but don't we need more time before buying rings?"

Mie said, "I don't need time. I've known since the day we met that you were my future unless you give a definite and final no."

"That kind of response is not an option but I have become an independent, self-reliant woman as a supervising naval officer. Most men are less than comfortable marrying such a woman."

"I know that. It is one of the traits I would admire in any woman. I would expect us to be partners as well as lovers."

"Are you certain? Most strong men do not hold that view."

"I know but I don't fit that pattern. I am aware that I have some great asserts but, like any human, I have short comings. That means I need help and support just like the support I offer to you."

“Lordy, Mike, you continue to amaze me. The more I learn about you, the more I know I want you in my life.”

“How do you see our life together down the road, five or ten years from now?”

Mike responded. “I’ve given some thought to that but only in broad strokes. I see us growing together and continuing to discover the mysteries we hide deep in our psyche. I hope we can bring your folks close by to that our families are interlaced.”

He went on. “I want a successful business career but not at the expense of our time together.”

“I want us both to have time and funds to give back to the community, the way you say that your folks do. I, personally, have so much to be thankful for.”

“You sound like my dad. I am sure they will be more than pleased that you want them to live near us.”

She continued. “I presume our life together also involves a spiritual side. I know that you have broken away from the Roman Church but you haven’t rejected spirituality. Am I right?”

“Right. In fact, I hope we can do some theological reading together.”

He moved his hand to her thigh and gummed.

She didn’t move his hand but switched subjects.

“One more thing. If you are serious about marrying me, then I have a question. Do you feel the need to be married by a priest?”

“Nope, but I have the sense that you want a church wedding.”

“I do. That’s part of what I mean by s spiritual. Somehow, I feel there is something sacred about a promise to live together forever. A Las Vegas wedding doesn’t do it for me.”

“I agree. Why don’t we plan a small wedding in San Jose, your home? That would please your folks that is, if I am acceptable as the son-in-law.”

She poked him in the ribs. “They’ll love you as I do and thank you for suggesting exactly what I hoped you would say. Now, you may move those fingers a little higher.”

Much later, Helen was lying with her body facing Mike, her hand caressing his cheek. “I look forward to being with you each evening, facing you and feeling so cherished.”

At the jewelers, her smile was a mile wide as she slipped on the three quarter carat diamond solitaire.

“Oh, Mike, that’s too expensive. Navy officers are not known for deep pockets.”

“Please don’t worry. I haven’t had much opportunity to spend money since I started flight training and certainly no in Vietnam.”

“All right but I am buying our wedding bands.”

He started to protest but she said, “I believe we talked partnership.”

That was that.

Mike asked, “Where can we find a cane to replace this crutch?”

A half hour later, Helen was all smiles as she said to Mike, “I am delighted to walk along side my distinguished handsome hero.”

They arrived three days before the wedding day. As Helen promised, Henry and Catherine Scott fell in love with Mike

The two men were still conversing hours after the women retired for the evening.

Mike was so stimulated that he stayed awake for quite a while. He could not rid his mind of one particular comment from Henry.

“Mike, you seem to play down the story of your successes and talents, in this old man’s opinion that is unworthy of you.”

“Humility is a key factor in a good life. I don’t mean belittling yourself. I suggest you live your life and communicate it always aware of all your strengths and weaknesses.”

“In business, most men try to hide their weaknesses, much to their regret at some place down the road when they hit a speed bump.”

The wedding ceremony was performed two days after Christmas at a small Stone Church, where over a hundred members participated to honor one of their favorite daughters of the past.

Her family had fallen under Michael’s spell as she predicted, showered him with gifts for the Christmas celebration.

He was sorry that his own folks were uncomfortable coming to a non-Catholic wedding.

As Mike had promised in a letter to his folks, he brought home his bride to meet the family.

Helen was tense, stiff as a starched shirt, during the drive from the airport

“Mike, how can you be sure your folks will be accepting of this woman with whom you are living in sin?”

He answered, “Because they will fall in love with you within the first hour just as I did. Sis will be looking at you with adoring eyes as will dad. Mom will look at you as a person and will melt when you offer to help her cook dinner.”

So it was. Mike watched it unfold as he predicted

He heard Sis whisper to dad, “Isn’t she beautiful, dad?”

Helen marveled at the love that existed within this family who lived out their lives in the bleakest of communities, a slightly modernized coal town.

Mike’s mom carved out time for a private chat with his mom.

“I’m sorry now, Mike, that we turned down the wedding invitation. I see that she is a woman of faith and that both of you practice your faith in God.”

“We had a cry together when she told me she can’t bear children.”

She also is so proud of your rapid rise in the navy world. I hope you remember your promise to Uncle Frank not to step on other people to get ahead.”

“I’ve kept my promise and will tell him so when we have a drink this evening.”

Chapter 4

In the few weeks since Mike moved in, their love had widened and deepened.

They developed the habit of sharing the events and the emotions of the day each evening when Helen arrived from the hospital.

Mutual interests in music, in reading and in cooking stimulated their marriage. . They spent much time talking about the value of transparency and intimacy and then finding a full measure of both during the brief honeymoon period in Santa Barbara.

During their long walks on the beach, Mike admitted to being uptight about the few skills he had to offer potential employers.

Helen gently placed her hand on his arm.

“I can’t deny your feelings, but everything I’ve learned about you tells me you will meet whatever challenges with strength and self-assurance.”

Mike was silent for a minute while he thought about his life at the moment.

“I am so damned lucky to have found Helen.”

It was on the Monday morning after their return that Helen snuggled close to Mike. “Sailor boy, this is the day you begin a serious step toward your vocational future. You may turn on the shower while I start the coffee. I’ll join you when the water is hot.”

In the shower, she asked, “Where do you start the day?”

“Since you and I decided that big corporations are not my thing, I thought a conversation with the chaps at the Chamber of Commerce might be productive.”

That sounds reasonable.”

Mike turned off the shower and reached for a towel to dry off Helen.

“Lordy, Helen, you are more beautiful than the e iconic Helen. How could I be so lucky to be matched with such beauty, brains and determination?”

“Your hormones have distorted your vision. Now dry my back. I have to get to the hospital. You may have a better inspection tonight.”

He laughed. “You win. I’ll get breakfast while you dress.”

Mike was aware that he was exceptional in the brains department but he never overrated himself, only seeing this as a special gift that required him to do something special with that gift.

If he gave the idea some real thought, he probably would know that he could work in any field of endeavor and find success.

He did know that he was committed to finding a way to make a contribution to his employer, his fellow employees and to the world that his employer would be serving.

He should have been confident.

The only interview he had earlier, ended with an offer at McKenzie Steel, although the salary was minimal.

Mike also had the same experience as other returning Vietnam War vets. His welcome was not always warm when strangers noticed his jacket bore the navy insignia. He couldn't help wondering if his duty in Vietnam would limit his chances for an interview.

Mike sought and received an appointment with the chief staff person at the Chamber. Mel Jones was well informed about the types of industries, their sizes, the principals in the medium sized and small businesses in the greater San Diego area.

After what amounted to an interview of Mike, Mr. Jones said, "There is one company you might look at. It is the Smythe Corporation, which has a small string of auto agencies. I hear that they are expanding, really bursting out of the seams of their primary building. Why not give it a try?"

As he reflected on his years at the university and in the navy, Mike was aware that he had developed into a natural leader but leading was somewhere down the road.

The words of the parish priest, on the day he matriculated from the parochial school, remained deep in his memory. "You're a natural leader. Take charge when needed, but be compassionate."

It would be worthwhile to eyeball the Smythe organization to see if they might be a going concern and might be what he was wanting.

He walked into a Ford dealership that was bursting at the seams. When approached by a salesman, he said he was only looking.

Without a salesman on his tail he was able to observe their operation. He saw every one moving with dispatch and not a single sign of disgruntlement. The ones he observed talking with others seemed to be all business, yet pleasant with each other.

Walking out onto the used car lot, he saw three salesmen with potential buyers. Watching them closely he liked their style, not too much pressure, just enough to try for a close.

He walked back inside. "The facility is clean and neat in spite of the limited space. Everyone seems to act very professionally, talking in soft tones probably because they are aware of the overcrowding. The customers are animated and I don't see any grumpy ones around. This seems like a decent place to be connected."

He was pleased to overhear a conversation in which an elderly salesman was saying "It's always a pleasure to have you come in, Mr. Thompson. This will be your sixth car you bought from us. Your car will be ready in two hours."

The old man shook his hand and was smiling as he left.

Mike was unaware that he had been closely observed by a Mr. Brick from his slightly elevated office with large windows overlooking the floor. He couldn't take his eyes off Mike.

"That is a sharp looking young man. From his behavior I would say he is not a customer, having given a negative nod when approached by Tom. He seems to be casing the agency.

He looks like a military officer with his straight back, his air of confidence. He's a little less than six feet tall, curly hair and handsome as they come. All the girls are craning their necks for a good look.

The caner he uses takes one's eyes off his slight limp."

He smiled as he watched Mike walk to the bookkeeping department at the far end of the showroom space. .

A gorgeous young lady stood up, flashing him a brilliant smile and asked if she might help.

He said, "If it is not too much trouble, I would like to speak to Mr. Brick"

"May I tell him the reason for your visit?"

Mike said "Please tell him a young eager vet is inquiring about an opening in one of these companies."

She smiled and said "Just a minute."

Three minutes later he was ushered into a cramped office to meet a tall bald headed guy, Mr. Paul Brick.

"So you are eager, good looking and in good physical condition. Navy, maybe?"

Arching his eyebrows, Mike said, "You guessed right."

Mr. Brick came right to the point "What are you looking for?"

"I am not sure How about VP of Finance"

You want to start by booting me out?

After a good laugh, "I'm just kidding for the present. I am not particular about tasks that I might be assigned early on. I am hoping for opportunities down the road, a chance to take on responsibility and to serve some company and its clientele"

Paul liked what he heard from the young man, sensing that this could be important to their agency. "How much of a hurry are you in?"

Mike answered honestly. "I am sitting on an offer from Mackenzie Steel. I am looking for a place where I can learn the ropes quickly and make a contribution. Do you think there is something available here?"

Paul said, "I like your answer, but I meant do you have time to wait for a half hour. The man you need to see is the general manager and he is tied up for about twenty five minutes in a meeting. Then I need five minutes' to convince him to talk to you."

Mike laughed, "I sure stepped into that one."

Paul laughed with him "I like the honesty and transparency you put forth. Will you wait?"

"Sure".

Paul said, "As you can see, we are short of space. I can find you a seat in the Sales Manager's office. Come along.

"Bob, this is Mike. He needs to wait to see the boss. Can he sit here?"

"Yep."

Bob went on with a couple of call, then, "I presume you are not looking for a sales job or Paul would have turned you over to me."

"I think you are right. I'm not sure where I can fit." Bob nodded and answered the phone.

A sharply attired man in gray with dark hair walked into Paul's office talking for about five minutes.

His suit was a medium gray, obviously tailor made, not off the rack. His tie was a muted red tie covering a part of his white shirt. The cuff links were expensive and very attractive.

He left and came into Bob's office and said to Mike. "I'm Joseph Josephson, general manager.

The staff refers to me as Mr. J. Please come with me."

He walked into an office, which had a larger desk but looked just like Bob's. Mike could see that he was being observed for a reaction to his surroundings but he kept his thoughts invisible.

Mike appreciated the fact that Mr. J made no comment about the cane or the reason for the cane.

“What do you have to offer a small growing corporation? I presume you have been observant enough to see that. ?”

Mike decided to be straight forward, brief and confident.

“Yes sir, you are busting out at the seams and I bet you have some blue prints hidden someplace.”

Mr. J nodded.

Poker faced, Mike answered, “I think I have a lot to offer if I am in a place to contribute. I am holding an offer from another corporation.”

“Mackenzie Steel is pursuing me but I’m not sure the position is right for me.”

“I’ve held major responsibilities in the Navy. I am eager and a quick study.”

“If you can make a decent offer so I can live, and put me in a spot to learn quickly I think I can show you within a couple months. I just don’t know anything about your business but I do understand that it’s varied. That’s why I came by.”

During the hour-long interview Mike was evaluating Mr. J. He liked much of what happened in this preliminary conversation.

In a rather direct manner Mike did lay down a few questions almost like a challenge to some of M. J’s authoritarian mannerisms causing Mr. J to bristle.

Mike found himself slightly at odds with Mr. J’s attitudes but not with the sharp mind that he saw that day.

Mike’s directness was strange to Mr. J since he was expecting behavior that waffled a little, a young man being careful to find out the wind direction in order to make the right impression.

Mike was sure he had done the right thing even if Mr. J seemed a little off stride.

As it turned out Mike had been right to opt for directness. Mr. J was intrigued and surprised him “I invite you to join us for a light lunch around the corner. Paul and Bob and maybe our service manager will accompany me. We’ll throw around some ideas as well as hear reports from these three managers.”

“How does that sound? Lunch is on the house.”

“Well, I can’t go wrong with a free lunch, although I know there is no such thing.”

Mr. J threw his head back and roared. Young man, I think you are brash, maybe that’s too harsh a word but you do not happen to sound like a young man who is looking for a job. You are a bit too direct but I like some of what I hear.”

Mike said “Mr. J, this may sound even brasher but I am not looking for a job. I am hoping to join a firm where I can begin a career and where I can make a major contribution.

“I like that in you, but you sound a little too confident for a young man with limited experience.

“Perhaps. As for being direct, I would say, in all honesty, that what you see and hear from me is what you will get, I promise.”

He could not read Mr. J’s reaction but the invitation was not withdrawn.

The three of them and Mike sat at a round table. Paul Brick sported a very shiny baldhead He dressed formally, today in a dark blue suit, white shirt and a muted red tie.

As controller, he held down a key position in the firm. Mike figured he was in his late forties or older.

Bob Applet was a little less than six feet. He wore a medium gray toned suit with a dark blue tie over a light blue shirt.

As the Sales Manager he was responsible for the major revenue stream. Mike liked his affability.

Mr. J, obviously, was the big honcho. The others deferred to him, waiting for him to initiate the conversation and then to initiate the subject matter.

Mr. Smiles, the service manager, did not attend the meeting

Mr. J reintroduced all the parties.

The first part of the business conversation consisted of reports bringing Mr. J up to date with sales figures then cash flow. Bob handed him a sheet that came from the service department.

The conversation moved to discussion of the limited number of new vehicles coming from the Ford plant. They talked about the pending strike of the car carriers.

Paul mentioned the length of time it took to get his reports from bookkeeping. Mike also gleaned that Bob was working without adequate help.

When their dessert arrived, Mr. J turned to Mike. "Any ideas or comments?"

Without hesitancy Mike reviewed concisely the essence of the conversation. "Paul or the bookkeeper needs help. Bob can't manage and do so much paper work himself.

The used car sales need to carry the agency at the moment since new cars are at a premium for some reasons. There is probably more but I would have to ask questions."

Mr. J. said "That is a good recap which one of us can discuss more deeply later. Unfortunately, two of us are due for a meeting with the owner and need to rush back, Can you come back tomorrow?"

Mike could see the ambivalence in Mr. J's eyes so he said with an absolutely neutral voice. "Tomorrow is too late for me, sir I owe McKenzie answer by 3:00 today.

Paul stepped in. "You can probably delay that call until 4:30 without hurting your chances. We'll plan to meet you at 4:00 if that works."

Mr. J seemed upset with that suggestion. He started to object but he conceded the point and agreed.

Mike thought, "I like Paul. He is not afraid to take on his boss and his boss is wise enough to know that Paul may have some solution."

Mike agreed to a 4:00 appointment. He knew he was going to work here, if they didn't low-ball him on wages

Unbeknownst to Mike, Paul and Mr. J had a rather sharp division of opinion about Mike. If Paul had not felt so determined, Mr. J would not have cared whether Mike was available or not. He had specific ideas about behavior of young men seeking employment.

Mike did not fit his image. What Mike did not know was that Mr. J preferred another young applicant, a graduate of Southern Cal, whose application form was on file.

Paul had convinced Mr. J. that Mike had greater potential. Reluctantly Mr. J acceded to Paul's wishes. He said privately "Paul, You must see something I don't. Grill him. If you think he fits, then hire him under your wing. I rather like our other candidate."

Mike and Paul met alone in Paul's office. A handsome older gentleman came through the door behind Paul. Paul introduced Mike to Mr. Smythe, who smiled, shook hands and left.

Paul opened the interview. "Mike tells me more about your leadership in the Navy."

Mike told him of being chosen the cadet commander at the training station and being given responsibility as flight leader with a temporary promotion of Lieutenant Commandeer.

Paul probed him for details of the time Mike took control of the cadets during the air raid exercise, and then abruptly led him into discussion of cost accounting, moving swiftly to questions about leadership at college.

Watching carefully Paul's eyes and seeing Paul leaning forward, he knew Paul was about to make him an offer.

Paul presently asked "Would you consider starting as my assistant for sixty days? You would start by learning our bookkeeping system from Mrs. Foster, who has been here forever. I would assign you other work relating to contracts, etc. I presume you have some accounting in your background.

Mike nodded affirmatively. "

Mike said he would be interested but wanted to know more about the future.

Paul smiled "There are only a few limits. We have eight corporations always in need of leadership mostly because so many of us are past our prime."

"What does Mr. J have to do regarding the other corporations, Paul?"

"Nothing at all but do I hear some concern regarding Mr. J.?"

"Well, I don't think he likes my style which may become a deterrent at some time in the future.

"Mike, that is possible but Mr. J. is an absolute straight shooter. If you deliver what I believe you will, Mr. J. will become your champion. If he doesn't like your style but likes what you accomplish, he will use his influence to see that one of the Smythe corporations makes good use of your talent."

"I'll take your word on that, Paul. Now the question is are you willing to pay me a decent wage to start?"

Paul laughed "I like your spirit. You get right to the core of matters. You attacked future and present and made some kind of bridge. You are going to come to work with me, aren't you?"

Mike smiled "That's why I think you are interested in me. Now make me an offer I can live with."

Paul got sober. "We have a problem during the first sixty days. You will spend most of your time with Mrs. Foster learning our accounting system. I can offer you just under her salary."

He named a figure.

Mike struggled mentally. "The money was a pittance Even Paul must know that but he wants me in a serious way. What shall I do? Time to fish or cut bait."

Helen's pep talk this morning rose to the top of his mind.

Mike stood up. Paul was guessing that he lost a good candidate. Mike took Paul's hand, surprising him, "You won't regret hiring me. Paul. I hope you all can stand an upfront guy who can't stand to work with fools.

I don't see much of that here. I also hope that what I see is, at least, one guy who likes my style of directness."

Paul beamed. "Mike, you just earned me a small bonus. I bet Mr. J that you were a good fit and would sign on. He thought not."

They both laughed and Mike said, "Do I get a signing bonus?"

Paul roared. When do you want to start?"

"Tomorrow, if you have a chair for me."

Paul said the chair would be there and that they would have a long lunch for a good orientation

While Mike was involved in negotiations, Helen was hard at work and needed a break at lunch time. She decided on a walk in the Neighborhood Park and concentrate on Michael

She mused "What a wonderful gift you have been to me, you big hunk! You are my shield and my anchor. I love the way you take me on your lap each evening, teasing me while I move my hands through those blond curls of yours. Then there are those serious follow ups when you ask me about my day and share yours with me."

Her thoughts focused on his interview.

"My man is coming home with a smile and good news."

Helen met him at the door. He grinned and pulled her into his arms.

"You have decided. I see it in your eyes and in your body"

"Get your coat and let's walk. It's not too cold."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"I accepted an offer from the Smythe people.

"Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yep. There is one hitch. We may have to supplement my income for the first 60 days." He explained. "Mrs. Foster, the head bookkeeper, will be my mentor. Paul says he can't pay me more than she is making during that period of training. I agreed but am astounded at the small salary a woman is paid for such a heavy job. That is a damn shame."

Helen said, "With my salary, we have enough for the present. Your deal is only for sixty days. I presume you do not feel put down because of this salary thing."

"No I don't, honey. I just think it's a damn shame the way women are treated in the work place."

Mike gave her a complete run down of the day including how Paul, the controller, defied the wishes of his boss, the general manager, insisting that Paul finish the interview with Mike.

"I like the fact that I will be working directly for him during these first weeks."

"From all I learned, this family corporation is an absolute straight shooter. I was pleased to note no high-pressure tactics on potential customers. I believe I will have my chance to grow rapidly and be in a position to influence at least some minor decisions in a short period of time they are growing at a fast pace.

Helen said "After all, if it doesn't work out in sixty days, you can put it on your resume and move on, although I'm sure that won't be necessary. You have sound judgment, Mike."

Helen gave him a congratulatory embrace "I am so pleased for you and for us. The money is minor at this point. It seems to be what you want to do. So let's grab the brass ring and go for a spin."

Mike always tried to be first in the office. The early time was helpful in clearing up paper work without interruption. He had stopped at the back door of the florist shop, picked up a rose and put it on Mrs. Foster's desk

She was the bookkeeper who was teaching him the company accounting system during the first weeks of his employment. She was an efficient teacher in addition to being a great bookkeeper and manager of a small staff.

Within two days, they became fast friends. She liked his gentle ways of asking questions. He did not mind asking again when he was unsure of a response he had received. Being a quick study it took him very little time to be of real help to Mrs. Foster.

Without being asked, Mike spent some overtime hours helping her meet some deadlines. She was overwhelmed with an antiquated system, partially dictated by the standards and needs of Ford Motor Company.

She responded to Mike's friendship and special help in some extra little ways. She found out that he had a sweet tooth, so she rewarded him with a small bag of Hershey kisses.

One day, she handed him an apple pie as he was leaving "Just a thank you for that extra work you did." He, in turn, brought in a small plant for her windowsill.

In those few weeks they developed a deep relationship, she a grandmother and he a bright young man, early in his career. She saw Mike as another son in her life. Mike loved it.

"Mike, did Paul ever ask you how much accounting you knew when he assigned you to me."

"No Mrs. F, but for your information I had two years at Penn State along with a courses in finance."

"I thought so. You could probably teach me some things. This company had better appreciate what they have in you."

Late one afternoon, after the rest of her staff had gone home, Mrs. F and Mike started in on an analysis of the way her staff worked. With some questioning, he was able to help her rearrange some assignments that would save her some time.

She was pleased with the results they attained. Mike then showed her a few math tricks he learned during his course in cost accounting. She beamed and with a hug said, "My husband will thank you because I am going to get home a little earlier each evening."

Before she left that day, she wrote a note to Paul, telling him of Mike's contribution.

Paul was already in the office. "Good morning, Paul. Are we goon g to race again about being first?"

"Nah. I had to clear these contracts by nine thirty so this quiet time is the way to do that."

They went about their tasks.

Paul had been Mike's boss and now his colleague. They had become good friends although Paul was old enough to be his father and as the controller, he was high up the chain while Mike was just a beginner.

Mike shed his raincoat just inside the front door of the agency the next morning. The rain was heavy, punctuated with downpours of showers that flooded some side streets.

During the mid-morning break for a cup of coffee on Mike's first morning at work, Paul had made a comment. "By the way, Mike, you handled yourself with aplomb with Mr. J and the rest of us. How did you get there so young? You acted like a real veteran, like someone well beyond your age"

Mike laughed, "I don't know about some of it. Maybe it was my life experience to date. I talked with a couple of interviewers and croquet them as a learning experience."

"After those conversations, I thought of myself as a cut above interviewers."

Paul laughed. “Frankly I have never in all my experience seen a set of first interviews that took this path, especially with one looking for his first position. In retrospect, while we thought we were in charge, you were actually doing the interview and leading it. That was masterful.”

“I am going to enjoy you, although you may be a bit much for Mr. J. What would you say are the things of most importance to you?”

“Paul, you will find me very old fashioned in spite of the cynicism I experienced during the war. Growing up in a poor family might have made me think that survival and making money were the most important goals. Yet I find myself traveling a different path.”

“Family and faith are high in my life. Honesty and integrity are two special traits important to me.”

“I found that ‘love your neighbor’ is high on my list. I remember my parish priest saying, when I took charge as he expected I would, that I was to remember compassion.”

The satisfaction that comes from being able to help someone is important. It leads to community whether at work, in the family or in the neighborhood.”

“Staying alert to your neighbor pays big dividends. If I had a motto it would be ‘Put others interest on a par with my own self-interest.’”

“It will be interesting to see if in the jungle called the business world, whether I have to resort to competitive behavior in order to survive or whether I can live according to my values and still be a major business contributor for my employer.”

“I hope I am not taking too big a risk because I’m betting that if I live up to my end, then Smythe will do right by me, monetarily and otherwise.”

Paul said, “You can bet your boots on that. The Smythes are absolute square shooters.”

Mike said, “It’s time for others to arrive, but let me share one other thought.

I also happen to believe that women get the short end of the stick in life. They are underrated and have suffered male dominance, limiting their reaching their potential in life.”

“Without complaining, my grandmother told me stories of life with grandfather. Although she made no judgmental statements, I have the feeling that male chauvinism was the order of the day.”

“That is pretty untraditional, Mike. How did you come to that sensitivity?”

Mike said “Something triggered it in me I guess watching my mother’s skillful handling of minimal funds during the lean years. I observed women at work in the military, always paid less than their male counterparts for the same work.

In fact, Paul, it happens right here at Smythes. If you were working with a male bookkeeper the firm would be paying a minimum of twenty five percent higher wages than you pay Mrs. Foster. What do you think?”

Paul said, “There is no doubt about your facts. I don’t think that is going to change soon.”

“But don’t you feel ridiculous having to pay me a pittance because of what you pay Mrs. Foster. Come on; don’t tell me you haven’t thought of that during the hiring process.”

Paul said, “Damn, you are reading minds too.”

“No, it just happens to be the way men of integrity think while they feel unable to do anything about it.”

“Well, let’s get to work but I want to hear more of this late, perhaps after we complete your orientation. I believe you and I will become very good friends.”

During the afternoon break Paul raised the question of women being limited. Mike told him how he had insisted that “obey” not appear in their wedding vows.

“Paul, women are beginning to make a big issue of this.”

Paul wasn’t as sure although he knew that disparity was the rule of the day.

“By the way, Paul, who was the young man I saw going in and out of Mr. J’s office.

“Oh, that is Andrew Nance who is Mr. J’s executive assistant.”

Mike asked, “What does that title mean?”

Paul replied, “He is Mr. J’s dog’s body. Whatever Mr. J wants, he does it.”

Mike smiled “Looks like I have some competition even before I get started. I take it that Mr. J has a special interest in him.” Mike thought of the young man as Young Andrew.

“He is a distant relative who recently came over from England. Mr. J thinks he has great potential.”

Paul thought, “It should be interesting to see the two of you competing.”

“Nepotism is sometimes hard to beat, but I feel you have the right stuff, Mike.”

After they separated, Paul reviewed their conversation within his own mind. He summed it up thinking “He will make a great addition to this firm because of two great traits. He is insightful and has been given a true moral compass by those who nurtured him early in life.

Mike decided to initiate a new tradition, On Friday evenings he would stop by the florist for a small bouquet of flowers for Helen.

This morning Mike had made the arrangement with the apartment building gardener so that he could pick some spring flowers.

At the office he had stashed some cards on which to write little love notes. Making a detour on the way home he picked up a bouquet, attaching a note that read “To my pixie with love.”

Helen practically gushed with pleasure as she hugged him and planted a wet kiss on his lips. She had just the right vase for his lovely bunch of daffodils.

On the next morning, Mike had risen early simply out of habit, leaving Helen to get a little more rest. He came out of the bath wearing only a towel wrapped about his waist and began his morning yoga exercise

As he was nearing the end and in deep meditation, he felt Helen soft hands moving across the muscles of his shoulders and slowly down the outside of his arms.

From her kneeling position she put her lips to his ear and whispered “Good morning, hunk. Looking at those muscles caused a yearning to caress your body and to have you do the same to me.”

Then she moved to kneel directly facing him.

The rosebuds of her silky breast were as inviting as her smile. She leaned forward and gently pushed his head back so that her lips were seeking his

He pulled her face closer and moved his lips to hers. His sensual smile turned into a slow sensual kiss probing and exploring as Helen responded in kind. Their exploration changed to highly charged emotional exchanges that were a prelude to what was to come.

After catching their breaths, Helen continued to keep him pinned down and Mike seemed pleased, lying on his back with a big grin on his face.

Helen said, “The wonderful and amazing thing is that just seeing your naked torso makes me want to totally undress you and starts my juices flowing. I think it will be our destiny for the rest of our lives.”

“I can never thank you enough for freeing me of the bindings that were the result of being raped.”

After a busy Saturday taking Helen shopping for groceries and then for some household items for the apartment, the two of them took a nice walk.

They stopped at their favorite neighborhood café for dinner. The staff and some young regulars greeted them warmly. A lot of bantering and light conversation took place while they had their dinner but Helen introduced a serious tone during coffee.

“Mike, it is hard to believe the difference you have made in my life in just a few months. I look forward to each day. I recognize the value in my work. I am excitedly waiting for your arrival so I can share my day and learn about yours.

Above all, that is the way I anticipate the first signal that I am being invited to make love with you.”

She reached for his hand. “The biggest pleasure is that I am free to inmate the love making. You have released me from some sort of prison.

The other morning when I seduced you during your yoga exercise, I was aglow all day. Thank you.”

Mike said, “It’s hard to take credit for something that gives me such great pleasure and the love by and from an exceptional partner.”

When they arrived home, Mike suggested some background music while they had a necking party on the sofa.

“Honey, I am getting anxious about the end of the probationary period.”

She wrapped her arms a little tighter and asked, “Do you feel like talking about it? There is no way that it shows on the outside. You know you always project a strong self-confidence to the outside world, don’t you?”

“That’s true and I am self-assured most of the time, but like any human being, I have my weaknesses and my anxious times. One of those anxious times comes when I can’t measure the response I am getting from a source or person that is important to me.”

“Take the case of my relationship to Mr. J. Looking for clues about his view of me is useless. He plays it closer to the vest than I do.”

“It is not unlike doing some favor for a person in need and getting no thanks, even any sort of feedback.”

“That surprises me, Mike. Your self-evaluation of any action is very accurate. What makes you doubt your evaluation of your performance? I know from our daily sharing that you feel extremely good about all your actions. Besides you know that if they don’t see it your way that we will move on.”

“I know but I also know that it will be hard for you.”

“You are a dear to be concerned about that, but you know that I am with you all the way about going to the bay area anytime you are ready. If tomorrow is the day, I will apply for a transfer and start packing the bags. I would remind you of a great biblical saying “Be ye not anxious.” Nurses are in great demand. I don’t have to stay in the navy.””

“Thank you, dear. Your support makes it easier but I have never found a way to deal with that weakness. I am going to continue to need you to be my constant support at times like this.”

“Mike, I predict that a little more experience will get you past that but meanwhile you have me in your corner.”

“Come to bed now so we can lose ourselves in each other.”

The arrangement for learning was 60 days .He had been promised a final review and a major change in compensation. He remembered saying, “Paul that means 60 days. Less if possible but no more, Okay?”

Paul had agreed. The 60th days had arrived.

Mike was a little tense that morning. At breakfast Helen asked, “How do you feel on the big day?”

In his mind it was up or out. No fooling around she took his hand in hers.

“I know that I’ve accomplished more than Paul expected. He is pleased but the final approval is in the hands of Mr. J. I still can’t read him.”

“Relax, honey. They will live up to their end of the bargain

Mike was relaxed when he arrived but the tension built up as time passed.

Not a word from Mr. J or from Paul. At 11:30, he turned to Paul “Paul today is the day and not a word. The day is almost over. I promised you that if you did not come through on this day it was out the front door for me. There are a lot of people dying for good help.”

Paul roared. “You are something, Mike. The day still has 5 or more hours to go.”

Mike retorted “Well, someone has made their mind up and I don’t need to be kept waiting. This is a big decision day for me and maybe for Smythe.”

Paul chuckled and asked, “Can you wait until lunch time?” Mr. Smythe has set up a luncheon at his club. He won’t be there but the rest of our gang will be... The subject of your future is the main course.”

Mike blushed. “Thank you, Paul. Whatever shall be shall wait until lunch. That is only twenty minutes away.”

Paul laughed. “You will have to wait until after 12:30 today.”

At twelve thirty they piled into Mr. J’s Lincoln and headed for the club. It was impressive.

The opening to the club was in between two red brick small towers covered in clinging ivy. Even in the winter months, there was color in the gardens around the curved driveway.

They were shown to a private mahogany paneled dining room. The floor was covered in lush warm light brown carpeting. The single round table was covered in white linen with full table settings.

Mike’s seat was across from Mr. J.

Lunch consisted of a delicious club steak with salad, home fries, a salad and ice cream for dessert.

The early conversation covered the general news and moved to some agency business related to the service department with Mike hardly able to take it in given the state of his mind.

His outward appearance remained calm. He knew that he was being tested.

As they were finishing dessert, Mr. J. asked Mike how he enjoyed working at Smythes.

“This has been a great learning experience and a pleasure, thanks to Paul and Mrs. Foster. I hope that I’ve met the firm’s expectations.

Silently, he told himself that he had done more than that. He sensed himself relaxing as he ran over his accomplishments.

Mr. J said, "You have exceeded our expectation. From our view point we would like you to consider a change in positions, reporting to Bob as Sales Manager. As you pointed out on that first day, Bob can't do his real job without backup. How does that sound?"

Mike liked what he heard and in a positive voice "I would like that. I have done a little work for Bob and I think I understand some of the problems there."

He waited for what had to follow. The whole gang smiled indicating their approval of his response.

Mr. J went on. "The position we are planning would be that you would be Bob's liaison with Mr. Smythe, with Paul and occasionally interfacing with me."

Mike liked the sound of that. He was going to be near the top decision makers. He sensed an excitement in his gut and it showed.

With a big grin on his face, Mr. J said, "You are not much of a poker face."

Mike laughed and said, "I promised you that what you saw is what you would get. Besides, when I was guessing, I thought you might assign me to Mrs. Foster."

Paul interjected. "She made a strong pitch for you. She says you were a real surprise. After two weeks you were totally clued and serving as her right arm."

Mr. J said "At the risk of inflating your ego, I need to tell you that Mrs. Foster came to my office to tell me how quickly you had learned our system and told me that she had learned some new techniques from you and that I should give you a raise."

"I think your offer is much more challenging and I am pleased to serve with Bob but there is one more ingredient before I really approve."

Mr. J said, "There you go again. You are direct and somewhat impatient and I will have to get used to that."

Mike said, "I am also kind, gentle and tactful when required." They all laughed.

Mr. J said "All right, we are prepared to back up our expectation by offering you double your salary and a small percentage of profits from the used car department's net income. Would that be satisfactory for the next six months?"

Mike beamed and said "You can see the answer on my face." That broke up the whole gang.

As the workday was coming to an end, Helen began preparing for Mike's arrival. She was certain in her own mind that Mike would be rewarded. The combination of his caring, his responsibility combined with his brilliant mind was hard missing.

Mike could hardly wait to tell Helen the news. He finally left the office at 5:40, grinning from ear to ear as he drove home.

During the drive, he thought about the new offer and was aware that he now made more money than Young Andrew. Working in the bookkeeping department with Mrs. Foster gave him access to payroll records. He needed to size up the position of young Andrew compared to himself.

He had been disappointed to find that Andrew was earning seventy five percent more than Mike's starting salary during that training period. .

Helen could see on his face that they were staying here for some time.

"You don't have to tell me, sailor boy, I see it on your face. She handed Mike his scotch and took her juice to the living room.

He sat in his wingback and she on his lap listening to the details. He explained the big jump in salary and then the details of the bonus plan.

“That sounds fair, especially with the percentage deal. I’ll bet you find a way to make us and them a little richer after you start.”

“You are my hero, Mike. I’ve said it before and now again. I don’t think there is anything that you can’t do if you put your mind to it.”

He felt his ego being massaged. She kissed him on the ear.

“Mike I think you need to shower off the grime of the day.”

She smiled. He laughed. :

“You’re a sly temptress. Eve had nothing on you.”

“I am not tempting you. This is a direct hit as a special reward. We have plenty of time before the slow roast is ready.”

Much later, “You sure know how to congratulate a guy.”

“You have a gracious and loving way of accepting, I noticed. Sailor boy, you keep going at this pace I will become an expert offering my congratulations.”

After dinner, they tuned in their favorite classical station to listen to “Sleeping Beauty” ballet music by Tchaikovsky. They sat on the sofa holding hands both captured by the violin and flute duet in the suite.

Helen turned to Mike. “We have found so much joy and peace in our private times together. I had never ever listened to music with the same appreciation before we started this together.”

Mike smiled “I like our alternate reading of special books too. That was your great idea. I get so involved that all other things drop away from my mind. Yes, I agree about the joy and peace.”

Chapter 5.

Mike’s move to sales caused a tension among the sales staff that. They were standoffish and leery of this new young man who had been working in bookkeeping.

Was he someone they had to report to when Bob was not present? Bob was out of the office a great deal.

Did more overhead expense foretell a cut in commissions?

The scuttlebutt was that he had no automobile sales experience.

Mike sensed the tension as well as their questioning and their hostility. If it wasn’t hostility, then it was wariness. He would hear whispers that ceased when he happened to come near.

Mike figured they had a right to be leery. He wondered why Bob did not make it clear that Mike was staff not line management and therefore had no authority.

One of Mike's responsibilities was maintaining the data board up to date. He decided he would do that each morning before the staff arrived. There was also paper work related to each car in the yard, showing cost of purchase or trade, details and costs of work in the repair department as well as the final sales price.

Mike had to compute the final net profit and potential for salesman's commissions. The information was also needed for the department monthly bonus.

The data on the units still for sale gave Bob the opportunity to make forecasts for his weekly meetings with Mr. J, the manager, Paul, the controller and Mr. Smiles, the service manager.

When the staff saw their paper work moving more smoothly and their records updated daily on the white board, they were pleased.

Two weeks went by and no sense of their fears was realized. They began to understand that Mike was a skillful administrator, hired to make life easier for them and for Bob.

The wariness began to melt. One of the older salesmen, William English, invited him to lunch just to get acquainted and to give him a company history lesson.

The information was helpful to Mike. The meeting helped ease the way for others to approach him.

On one occasion, he had no time for lunch, being in the middle of a very busy day. Tom, one of the newer salesmen, went around the corner and brought Mike a sandwich and a cup of coffee. That was a real breakthrough. Mike felt that they were starting to become a team.

One morning Mr. J called the sales staff together "We have a problem. The auto carriers went on strike this morning. We have six units coming off the assembly line this afternoon. I need some volunteers to drive the cars off the line and bring them here. We have four admin team members and need two volunteers from the sales staff who will be paid a fee for the drive. "

Mike gathered he was in, like it or not. He was.

The six of them were taxied to the assembly plant. As they pulled up in front, a daunting scene met them.

Angry looking strikers were blocking their way, their hostility evident. The bane of all strikers was scabs and they viewed these interlopers just like scabs.

Police were clearing the way on the public street. The strikers were voicing threats and cursing as Mike and his associates proceeded through the plant gates.

Mike was assigned to a blue sedan near the down ramp at the end of the assembly line. He turned the key and hit the starter. Not a sound. The engine would not turn over.

Some plant employees pushed him to the ramp. His stalled vehicle was blocking the line.

Down he went and pulled over to an area set aside for such problems.

By the time the mechanics got him started, the rest of his associates were gone.

Mike inched his way out of the parking lot and now was facing menacing faces and men holding clubs making threats and cussing a blue streak,

The police were having a hard time keeping the roadway clear.

Mike decided that the only way was to face them directly. He blew the horn again and again and inched forward. Afraid that he might actually run one of them down, he drove very slowly but doggedly.

Yelling and pounding the car with their fists, they gave way inch by inch. It took Mike over a half hour to finally get past the end of the screaming drivers who turned toward the next enemy.

His shirt was soaking wet from the sweat and his hands clammy.

“Wow. I walked into that completely blind.”

When he pulled in, Paul and Mr. J met him looking relieved.

Mr. J. said “We were worried about the long delay.”

Paul took him into his office, pulled out some bourbon and offered Mike a drink. As they sipped the drink, Paul said “A former colleague of Mr. J called and told us how tough it was for you as the last one of our men leaving. The whole crowd was able to focus on you. He said that even when you were out of his sight, he could hear he drivers screaming at you.”

“Paul, I was scared shitless as we used to say in the navy. They looked mean enough to break the windows and haul my ass off to someplace. I just kept my eyes on the one man in front of me and inched him backward.”

Paul said “I am proud of you. Mr. J agreed that you will not be called for any repeat of this .We will hire scab drivers if that be the case. Well done.”

“Paul, you need to know that I was raised in an avid union family. My step dad got screwed over by US Steel after twenty four years working for them. When they closed the plant where he worked, he was blackballed in all US Steel plants around the country. He would have been entitled to a twenty dollar a month pension after twenty five years. Imagine screwing a guy out of a pittance after serving his company for all those years.”

“I had a hard decision about going there today It was pure hell for me. If I had been with the firm for a longer period time, I would have declined, even at the risk of being terminated. I am glad Mr. J has decided not to repeat calling on me for that job or else I would be saying sayonara.”

“It’s not that I believe that unions are always in the right. It is that I felt like a traitor to my step dad and all that he stood for and fought for.”

“If I had a chance to learn both sides of the story, I would have made an objective decision. Without the info, I was torn with emotion.”

Mike arrived home late .Helen met him at the door with a big hug and a deep kiss.

She asked “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t try to kid me, sailor boy. You never ever come home with liquor on your breath.”

“I thought I could keep a secret for a little while because it’s hard to talk about.”

“Remember, no secrets. Do you want another drink?”

Mike said no. She took his face in her hand and giving him a sweet kiss. “Come on, out with it.”

He gave her the whole bit from morning until he left the office.

He noticed a few tear drops on her cheek when he talked of his fright.

“Mike, that took guts. The decision to go must have been tough, knowing about your dad and his experience with non-union companies.”

She wrapped her arms around him.

“I have the right antidote for your poisonous day.

She took his hand and led him to the bath.

“I’m betting that a hot bath with my back to wash will lighten your spirit.”

Mike was up early as usual. He lay in bed for a few minutes before he started his morning exercise. "Dear God, thank you for Helen. She is my strength in times of turmoil. Every man should be so blessed with a strong supportive lover as I have."

Helen got out of bed when he finished his yoga, kissed him, and then took him by the hand, leading him to the shower.

They laughed their way through the shower and the toweling as was their practice. Mike made the coffee while Helen whipped up some pancakes and bacon.

Helen sensed that the night had washed away most of the soil of his experience of the previous day.

Mike looked across the table. "Thank you, honey."

Those words and his caressing look said "I love you", bringing a big smile to her lovely face.

On his drive to the office, he suddenly thought Young Andrew was not one of us assigned to that tough job yesterday.

"He must be something special to Mr. J. I need to invite him to lunch so I can size up this character but that will have to wait for another day."

Paul introduced Mike to a new man, Roger, who had just arrived, transferred from the Smythes Mercury agency across town.

Mike, wanting to make him feel welcome, invited Roger to have lunch.

Mr. J gave him some new indefinite title that seemed to be assistant Commercial Sales manager. He was a small table and a movable file drawer on the display floor.

Roger talked some about his history with the Smythes. He had been the office manager at the Mercury agency.

Now that they were growing, they needed someone with more accounting experience to head up their office staff.

Roger was unclear as he described his most recent assignment here at the Ford agency. Mike could only judge that Roger was not very successful at sales and had little financial skills.

Mike probed as well as one can on a first lunch date. Roger thought he was a good administrator. He felt that Mr. J also thought so. That was the reason he was transferred to handle certain paper work for truck sales.

Mr. J expressed his hope that something could be done to boost commercial used vehicle sales.

As far as Mike could see, there were few trucks in their inventory. He asked Roger if he was going to be responsible for buying or selling used trucks.

Roger was a little fuzzy answering Mike's question. Mike guessed he was not going to be around long. Managers are required to manage, not push paper work.

Probing deeper Mike came to the conclusion that Roger was in the wrong job and Mr. J knew that, but did not have a slot for Roger.

Mike figured that Roger had been a faithful employee for years and the Smythes wanted toll help, him, if possible.

The two of them lunched a few more times. Mike liked Roger and felt they could work together but he was in no position to help Roger at this time.

Roger didn't seem comfortable in the sales business. Mike thought about the fact that Roger might be doing Mike's job if Mike had not come along.

Roger was gone two months later.

Roger had potential as an administrator in Mike's mind. He made copious notes of his conversations with Roger, figuring that at some time in the future the agency might need a man like Roger.

At lunch with Bob one day, Mike asked why they had so few used trucks in inventory. Bob said that their experience was so limited. They needed to know more about margins, about cost of bringing a vehicle's condition up to good standards for selling.

The Smythes wanted sound products going out the door. They wanted to maintain the high regard people had for their agency.

"Beside, Mike, the world at this moment is full of people wanting to get rid of their older models as they shop for more modern vehicles."

Mike had come to like Bob. He was a good supervisor. He had laid out Mike's responsibilities. Together they worked out the plan to monitor Mike's work, keeping Bob informed but free to be a sales manager.

Bob was charming, liked by the salesmen and persons who were his personal customers. The men liked him for another reason; He would cultivate a customer and then hand him over to one of his men, rotating his referrals.

Late one afternoon as work was winding down Paul called Bob "Are you and Mike about done? If so, I'd be happy to buy you both a drink."

Five minutes later, in Paul's office, with drinks in hand, they toasted each other.

"I know you wonder why I called this meeting. Well, having just finished the books for last month I needed company to share the bad news. Unit sales are down a little, but more importantly net profit per sale is also on the down end. I figured a little gabfest on the subject was in order."

Bob expressed complete surprise, not about unit sales but about the net profits.

"Are you sure, Paul? I assume used car buyers figure new cars will be more available soon and are delaying the purchase of older models. We need some ideas for reversing that trend."

Mike decided to chip in. "Bob, maybe it's time to open up again the subject of focusing on commercial units. As I said earlier, I think we are missing a bet."

"I am open to any ideas."

Paul and Mike both started to respond at the same time.

"Go ahead, Mike."

Mike asked Bob. "Did you say that one of your problems might be figuring what it would cost to service a used truck to meet agency standards?"

Bob said that Mike heard right.

"Have you talked to Russ about that? During a recent coffee break I strolled over to our used car repair shop to meet the foreman, Russ. In the middle of the conversation with him, he struck me as knowing a hell of a lot about trucks as well as autos.

"I think you need to talk with him. If you get some good answers, we can spend some time doing theoretical problems on various types of trucks."

"I'd like to help you figure something out that would increase our margin. Maybe I can find some magic."

"Thanks, Mike, I like the idea. What made you take a coffee break with Russ?"

“I thought it might pay dividends if he felt the front office was interested in his work. You know that I am usually ahead of schedule so I poke around various departments to see if I can learn something.”

Bob said, “I’ll be damned...”

Paul just smiled. He was thinking, “That’s my man.”

Mike continued “It’s my opinion that we might look at fairly good sized trucks. They offer the potential for wider margins. In the meantime, with the info we get from Russ, I can do some projections.

Paul chipped in. “I think you ought to go with Mike’s idea, Bob. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose.”

An hour later, Mike was starting his search for truck ads in newspapers and a reminder to check out some used truck asking prices at some agencies.

He found some catalogues from parts manufacturers that featured extras for large commercial vehicles.

The following Friday afternoon Mike saw a huge semi and trailer pull into the lot. Out jumped Bob.

Mike was thinking, “I wonder what that is about.”

Bob breezed in. “Mike do you think you can compute a reasonable sales price? I decided to follow your thinking. You guys were onto something at that meeting.”

“I can give it a good try. I may have something for you by tomorrow.”

Mike pulled out all the resource material. Used commercial vehicles had various optional ways to compute the resale price. A tractor and semi like this one had a lot of extras attached.

Mike used three different models for computing. Each resulted in different numbers. One model resulted in a much higher price than the other two. Mike thought “Maybe I did find some magic.”

Meanwhile, Mike had asked Russ to estimate the cost of prepping the rig for sale.

Mike asked Bob to get an estimate of repairs from the service department. Bob placed a call and said, “The service manager is going over it and will have an estimate soon.

Bob handed Mike the service department estimate an hour later. That figure was significantly higher than Russ’ numbers.

He went back to Russ who confirmed his numbers and said, “Mike, if I had an additional man on my staff, I could save us a lot of money.”

“I would ask Bob to use us instead of the service department for pepping all used vehicles for resale.”

“Mike’s eyes lit up. “How can we prove that?” After all, the current plan of using the service department is a long standing policy.”

“I know. I have to convince Bob that we can do more. I have as much or more repair experience that than my counterpart who does have more administrative knowledge than I.”

“We can compare my figures on the next six trade-ins versus the charges you get from Service.”

Mike spent a couple of hours crunching numbers.

Bob was excited. “Where the hell did you get those numbers?”

Mike said “I am sure of my numbers. Mr. J is gone for the day. Why don’t you and I get Paul and work these numbers over. I would be happy to have someone else prove me right or wrong. In fact, we could bring in our numbers genius, Mrs. F.”

They decided not to bother Mrs. F. An hour later Paul and Bob agreed that Mike had worked the miracle.

Bob said "This makes a difference."

"Thank you, Mike, for the suggestion and the ability to solve this issue."

"I'm sure I can develop a sales strategy that will bring in a high gross."

"Now, I need to convince the boss to consider some policy changes that will decrease costs and increase our bottom line."

"If this works out, I will get Mr. J to up your percentage of the bonus using separate numbers for commercial vehicles. I will also make a note in your personnel file."

"Bob, if you have time, I'd like to offer an idea for you to consider."

"Shoot."

"Taking advantage of the Smythe reputation for quality, I think we can get a strong grip on a part of the used commercial market by concentrating on big rig complimented by a special advertising program."

Pau interjected. "That's a hell of an idea, Bob. If you're open to the idea, I'll help you sell the idea to Mr. J."

Bob's answer was in the wide grin on his face.

Helen didn't hear Mike's car pull into the driveway. She was at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes. The aroma of a lamb roast hit Mike's nostrils. He moved quietly up to and put his arms around her waist.

She mockingly asked. "Who is the wise guy taking advantage of me in my own kitchen?"

She wiped her hands on her apron so she could give him what he deserved, a warm hug.

At the end of dinner, over coffee, Mike told her in complete detail about the new trend along with his role.

"This company is all I could hope for, Helen. They are going to reward me with a revised contract for my recent contribution."

Helen smiled. "You seem to have made a great decision to find a smaller company where you can be rewarded quickly for such contributions."

She continued. "That puts us on a sound financial footing and a chance to talk about a small problem at work."

Mike frowned. "What kind of problem? You never mentioned or hinted of a concern."

"At first, it seemed trivial but he leaps pressing me.

"Who is that?"

"My boss has been making passes. At first, it was annoying but now it is a problem. He is threatening to give me a poor report unless I sleep with him."

"Damn him. I'll kill the bastard."

"Calm down, honey. I have a solution."

"Whatever it is, it will have to include some kind of punishment for him."

"Sadly, I can't bring charges because there is no way to prove that he is harassing me. He is too clever for that. I have a much better solution."

Mike waited.

"I have seven weeks of leave accumulated. I'll take leave. Since we talked about getting out of this apartment, I can start looking for a home to buy or a larger apartment.

"I can take a few days to visit my family."

“We’ve talked about having me checked out at a clinic to determine if it really a fact that I cannot conceive. I could fly to the Mayo Clinic for the two day procedure.”

“And at the end of your leave, what will you do?”

“Meanwhile, I will talk with some top administrators about a move to another department. I have Captain Forest, who should know about my boss even thou I can’t bring charges.”

“Honey, you’ve been doing a lot of thinking. How long has this been going on?”
Don’t worry about it. Just promise that you will let me handle the matter.”

“All right. I promise, if you keep me apprised of any complications”

Chapter 6.

The apartment garner kept a beautiful flower garden the year round. Spring daffodils were absolutely splendid.

As Mike was leaving, the gardener said. "Mike, we have so many daffodils. Please help yourself any time

Mike picked a nice bouquet. In the office he searched until he found a vase and placed the flowers for the girls in the payroll department. That caused a twitter when the girls came in.

The girls tried to guess the source of their lovely flowers. In the late morning, Mrs. Foster said "I'll bet its Mike."

Andrew Nance was Mike's luncheon gust at the cafe around the corner. Responding to Mike's inquiry, Young Andrew said "I'm single, having fun with American girls. I graduated last year from the University in London. My family thought that America was the place to start my career, especially since I have a family sponsor. How about you, Michael?"

"Please call me Mike. Everyone does."

Mike gave him a brief description, and then asked "How do you like the automobile business?"

Young Andrew replied. "I think its fine. I hope to learn enough quickly so that I can move into management sometime soon. Mr. J thinks I have great potential."

Mike did not like the sound of that. He felt he needed some way to earn more consideration from Mr. J who, after all, was the powerhouse in this organization.

Mike continued to gently probe Andrew through the lunch period.

Mike had come to like Mr. J in spite of his officious outer layer. Mr. J was short and always neat and sharp in his dress. He had been born in London, but came to the states in his teens. He had maintained his accent, probably intentionally.

He expected Mike to be a typical subordinate showing complete honor and respect in Mike's demeanor

Mike had a different way of showing respect. Mike would do everything and more than required of him, but he spoke his mind with gentleness and also with directness.

His associates always knew where he stood. Some misread his gentleness for weakness. That was a mistake.

Paul had convinced Mr. J to put aside his old fashioned ideas when it came to Mike so that he could see the real gem that they had in Mike. The truth was that Paul, who was older than Mr. J, had told him that their problem down the road would be to keep Mike, who would be getting offers from other business competitors.

Mr. J agreed on a temporary basis to go along with Paul. Mike remained aware that Mr. J had positive feeling about Andrew's potential.

Me. J called Mike at two that afternoon. "If you're free, please come in."

“We’re getting ready to meet with the union bargaining committee about renewing our contract. I would like you to take detailed notes of our negotiations, including a recording. They will be doing the same. We have agreed on that procedure.”

“I want you there for the experience and to see if you can determine when their spokesman is speaking the truth or playing games. “

“You and the union recorder will be in the ante-room and my secretary will be off on some errands on those occasions.”

“I want you to be in charge of the physical setup as well as the recording machines.”

Mike went to his desk, picked up the phone and arranged for chair rentals to be delivered at 1 1:0 PM the next day. He went full speed at his paper work so he could be free the next afternoon.

He knew he would have to take some work home tonight to ensure that the sales staff would not feel short changed tomorrow.

Mike reflected on the coming event. One of the good courses at Penn State had been a course in Labor Relations, taught by a gentleman who was a Federal Mediator. Mike felt it had been one of his best courses in his four years at State.

He remembered a core teaching. “The adversaries often talk past each other. They are so ready to talk they do not listen to what the other party is saying. That is why mediators are important. It is too bad that the parties get into adversarial positions so quickly. You students need to keep that in mind wherever you may be. Learn to listen. It will probably give you an edge if you do.”

Mike would have chance to observe and listen tomorrow.

Just before quitting time, Marie, from payroll, walked into his office. “Thank you, Mike. You made our day. We not only enjoyed the flowers but we had fun most of the day trying to fathom the hero who did that for us. Mrs. F gave us the clue. Thanks, again.”

At home, Mike shared the events of the day with Helen before dinner. “Mike, how do you feel about your life at the agency?”

Mike took his time before answering.

“First, I like Bob and I like Paul. Ever so quickly, we are becoming a team, an informal operational committee, so to speak. With their help I expect to do my job with excellence.”

“In light of that, I will keep looking for people or opportunities that seem to be falling through the cracks. When I see them, I will do my darnedest to help make a correction to the best of my ability. If Mr. J gives me the freedom to use my talent, then I see some positive changes that will help create a good place to work, maybe helping the bottom line. If those things happen, I will feel rewarded.

“Mike, I believe you will make it all happen even in the face of some opposition. That’s who you are. I will support you in every way that I can because I want to ride to the stars with you.”

“By the way, my request for leave has been approved for six of the seven weeks.”

At 1:50 the next afternoon, five men came through from the service department. Three of the men were known to Mike, They were employees in the service department accompanied by two men who obviously were business agents of the union local.

Mike was aware that no one was present from the used car service department.

Mike reflected. "Is there some division of opinion? I'll have to do some nosing around to read the score during the next few weeks."

The meeting started promptly at 2:00. Mr. J and Bob represented management. Most of the subjects included a rehearsal by the union reps regarding bargaining rights under federal law.

When the union reps were finished, there were no questions. Mr. J was playing it cool. He probably knew more about the federal laws than the union rep.

Mike was sure the union men would underrate Mr. J, who was a speed reader, who read voluminously and who had a mind like a steel trap. That was one of Mr. J's traits that Mike admired, probably because it was one way they resembled each other.

The meeting was brief. The union spokesman listed their demands for a three year contract with wage increases at the beginning of each year. Two more lavatories and three shower stalls were included in the list along with a five minute break every hour in addition to the standard fifteen minute every four hours.

Mr. J's comments were as expected. "That list is pretty steep in light of the country's economic downturn and talk of an increase in the war in Vietnam."

Jones, the spokesman, grunted and suggested that Mr. J consider carefully, implying a strike could be in the offing.

They adjourned with agreement to meet next week, same place, and same time.

Bob and Mr. J asked Mike and Andrew to join them. Mike, without being asked, said that he had good notes and would have them transcribed by Mr. J's secretary and distributed with a copy for Mr. Smythe..

Mr. J's smile was a bit thin. Andrew was preempted.

Mike had a problem. While he sympathized with his dad's union position, he knew that unions like businesses pushed to extremes their arguments and did not mind lying in order to get power.

He was more critical and looked for sound information that might bring fairness to any negotiation. He was mindful of the fact that in the entire world, power was the name of the game, even to a mild extent in a good marriage; power could and often was at stake.

It could be seen in the competitiveness of the sales department, even in his own struggles with Mr. J. It was a fact of life, always to be kept in mind

Mike, feeling that he had made his point at the first meeting, suggested to Andrew that he be the one responsible for the minutes of the second meeting.

The meeting became rather heated at the end of two hours. Mr. J and Mr. Jones were talking past each; other.

Bob, who had little to say, finally intervened and suggested they cool off for a week. The meeting was adjourned.

Andrew did an excellent job with the minutes. Mike, while going over each item in detail, found the quote he was looking for.

He thought, "Andrew, you did it."

The four met to review the met afternoon. The room was silent as they scanned the minutes.

Mie said, "Excellent minutes, Andrew, especially the detail in the midst of the heat near the end."

The other three bent their heads over the minutes to reread the notes."

Bob asked, "What's special, Mike?"

Mr. J smiled. "I guess I missed that comment during the exchange. I was a bit emotional. Thank you, Andrew for catching the whole statement."

He turned to Bob. "Mike caught the meaning immediately and we missed in the heat of the moment.

"Jones is ready to accept our last offer. We can conclude the negotiations and prepare the new contract. Nice ears and eyes, Mike."

"By the way, you should all know that Mr. Smythe has made it official.

"All prep work for used commercial vehicles and used automobile's shall be performed in the newly formed "Used Vehicle Repaid Division".

Meantime the newer and younger sales staff was out looking for commercial vehicles, primarily big rigs that they could help the company to buy. Large gross profits meant more money in their pockets.

Mike overheard two men talking about a potential buy that was over 45 miles away. Their reputation would be wide spread.

Mike was swamped with computations when the men came in "I have a chance to get this rig. How high can I go?"

Within a month, they were all experts and did their own estimating.

The used car business was booming. One of the side benefits was their reputation of fairness with heir sellers and their buyers.

The salesmen were, in most cases, able to pay the asking price to sellers and the company could still make good profits. It boded well for the future, building a good reputation.

One morning early, Mike was joined by Mrs. F who handed him a cup of hot coffee. "Good morning, handsome. How are things?"

Mike grinned and said life was good.

She laughed. "I figured that, based on some eavesdropping I did yesterday. I hear that you have the sales staff eating out of your hand. I listened, purely by accident, to some conversation between Tom and Tim, extolling your contributions and implying that the feeling was pretty general among their compatriots."

With a big grin, Mike put his arms around her. "You are indeed an angel, bearing good news to a poor soul."

"No surprise to me, Mike. I told you several months ago that you would become a strong asset to this firm. I have to go but wanted your day to begin on a good note."

She blew him a kiss on the way out.

Bob came in later that morning and said "Mike, we have to get you some help. Mr. J agrees. We don't have any room in here.

Mike asked, "Why don't we get Paul and go to lunch to discuss this?" It was agreed.

Mike laughed as he opened the conversation. "I have an idea .If you buy into the idea then the tab for this lunch gets paid by your expense account, Bob.

Paul said, "It's your fault, Bob. You are teaching him to negotiate."

They busted out laughing as Bob agreed.

Mike said. "I know who I want and it may surprise you. I want Roger back."

Both looked surprised.

“He is a good paper man and was never slotted in the right spot. I could not tell Mr. J that. I was just too new and green during his brief stay with us.”

“I kept in touch. I know he has a job but he has more talent than the job requires. Do you think you can help me sell the boss?”

Bob asked “Why go for Roger? Have you given thought to some kind of joint work with Andrew Nance? He doesn’t seem to have that much to do.”

Paul smiled, waiting for Mike’s answer

“Bob, that relative of Mr. J is my competition. First, I think he would disdain working for me. Secondly, I am not interested in furthering his career in this agency. I intend to stay one step ahead of him.”

“In fact, if I had known of his employment when Paul and I talked, I might not have even taken this position.”

“I am glad I am here but I do not want to get stuck behind some relative of the big boss.”

Bob said, “Smart cookie. I like your style.”

Paul asked “Are you going to be comfortable having an older and more experienced man assisting you?”

Mike asked “Do you think I can handle that?”

Bob, after some reflection said, “Yes, but I am worried. I know you have a lot of self-confidence and that is to your credit, but the depth of your experience is still somewhat shallow.”

“The person you are considering has a poor track record and could be set in his ways. That gives you a doubly tough task. I think you are treading on dangerous ground and should not to take the risk.”

“Bob, I appreciate your concern about my security and your judgment about my lack of experience but I have given this a lot of thought. I had spent some time with Roger before he was terminated and subsequently, which is what gives me the sense that I can pull this off.

Bob said “Damn it, Mike. If you blow this, Mr. J. will feel justified in his ideas that you are too confident and a little brash. What do you think, Paul?”

Paul answered Bob “I agree with you about the risk, Bob, and about Mr. J, but I don’t have any doubt that Mike can accomplish anything he has planned out”

“I have been watching my protégé and I believe we will not have to work too hard to sell Mr. J. He’ll make one of his jibes like “Who the hell does he think he is at his age?” but he will admit that if Mike says he can do it, his track record will sell Mr. J.”

“Tell me, Mike, what made you decide on Roger instead of one of those great applicants we have on file?”

“I guess part of it is my empathy for people who have talent but cannot find themselves. I have seen Bob try to help one of his men who are not doing well. I have seen him make the tough decision to tell a young man that he wasn’t fit for this work.”

Right, Bob?”

Bob nodded.

Mike continued. “This is just the inverse of that. I see a spot for a talent that we misused the first time around. It must be that part of me that is ingrained by my grandmother.”

They all seemed to understand that.

“Where can we put Roger?”

Mike said, "I have another subject, if you have time. I thought I would give you advance notice of my intent. A neighbor and I spent a hundred and fifty bucks for a non-resident spring-summer membership at a semi private club. I plan to bust my ass keeping up my usual and then some"

"I want to play a game a week somehow. With Roger to be my dog's body, he will knock himself out to make sure I get in the golf. You'll see."

"Good luck" Bob said, cynically.

Paul just smiled. He was sure Mike would work it out.

Two days later, Paul said to Mike, "You have a deal .Mr. J keeps hoping to put you in a different box, but he respects you."

"He wondered where the hell you got this idea to bring back Roger. He likes Roger and is secretly pleased about this. By the way, he was most complimentary about your contributions on the union negotiations..."

Chapter 7.

Mike told Helen about his plan regarding Roger because he wanted her opinion. He knew that she had a special insight about people she had met. She encouraged Mike to pursue his idea of bringing Roger back into the firm.

Mike called Roger to see it was okay to stop by later.

Roger's wife, Ann, greeted him at the door. The kids were out of sight, Mike assuming they were in bed. Knowing how close they were as a couple, he asked Ann to stay for his conversation with Roger.

Roger had the scotch bottle ready for a pour. Mike demurred. "How would you like to start a new career, Roger? You don't sound happy with your present set up."

"Mike, I need a change Do you think you can help me find something?"

"Would you be comfortable working with a man younger than you by twenty years?"

"Do you mean, working for you? .That would be exciting but do you think Mr. J would have me back?' He certainly didn't think much of me when he let me go."

“Roger, I think you were in the wrong job. He liked you, even gave you a second chance but did not know what your strengths were.”

Ann popped in. “I tried to tell Roger that, but he was too hurt to listen. Do you think Mr. J would be okay with Roger in the firm?”

“If Roger is willing to consider my offer, I think we can work that out. Roger, I am overwhelmed with work. I have been assigned more responsibilities and our commercial sales have more than doubled.

I need somebody to handle the paper work for me and therefore for Bob. I think that is right up your alley. Would your pride get in the way?”

“ God no, Mike. I see you for what you are, maybe not a genius but the next thing to it. You are more than Mr. J deserves, but I am sure Mr. Smythe appreciates you “

“I am sure that Mr. J is a little put off with directness, which I appreciate. I would be honored to work with you.”

“Roger, you just said the right words. I am asking you to work with me not for me. That is a big difference you and I will start building a team. We will weave Bob onto that team even before he knows it.”

If it’s a deal, here’s what we are offering.”

He laid out the numbers. When Ann heard the figures, she ran over and hugged and kissed him .She had tears in her eyes.

“Mike, you are our hero, our savior. If he doesn’t live up to your needs, tell me. I’ll bring him in line.”

Mike hugged her and said, “I am not worried. It is not in Roger’s character to let anyone down.”

Teary eyed Roger asked, “When?”

“Give notice and let me know twenty four hours before you can come in.”

Roger was at work the next Monday. He walked in right after Mike arrived.

“Nice and early Roger. Welcome.”

After greeting him, Mike made some coffee and they sat down to start the orientation. Two hours later, Roger went to his new desk on the sales floor.

Mike made the announcement of Roger coming aboard. He knew that Roger had been a likeable associate during the brief time of his previous employment.

The salesmen on duty had made him feel welcome.

Roger had his first assignment and got right to work.

Mr. J and Paul and Bob all came to him as they arrived and welcomed Roger back.

He had a warm glow as a result of their welcoming attitude. He was determined to outperform Mike’s expectations

Mike had made him promise that he would not waste too much time if he were unsure of what had to be done. Mike was there to help and the sooner the better. No false pride should cause delays in meeting the challenges, whatever they may be.

Mike had said that “You are not expected to know everything. You will come up short on occasion. Come to me without fear of judgment on my part. I made that judgment when I came to see you.”

Roger had never worked with any one like Mike.

Helen wanted to know about Roger’s first day.

Mike briefed her saying “He is on his own and I can get to those other things that have been waiting for me.”

“I have been spending some time with a young salesman name Ron who looks like he has potential. Bob is so busy with our commercial department that he is overlooking some of his new men...”

Helen asked, “Why do think Ron is special?”

“He has just come from the service department. He had been an apprentice mechanic before he was drafted and sent to Vietnam.”

“I understand he became a sergeant in a short time. I don’t know the details but he was given a field promotion to Lieutenant along the way.”

“His buddy, who was telling this to me, was glowing He had known Ron since they were kids. That kind of man needs a little nurturing and will become a powerhouse if we can keep him.”

“Sounds a bit like you, sweetie,”

“Ah shucks, you are just prejudiced.”

“You bet I am.”

“One other thing happened. I’ve told you that Mr. Smythe always acknowledges me but has never stopped to talk. Well, he did today.”

“He is pleased that we are giving Roger an opportunity. He also was pleased to hear that I am trying to learn to play golf.”

He said, “I am aware that you work long hours but you need to relax and golf is a good vehicle for that.”

Helen said, “That’s great. It pays to know the big boss in any organization.”

“Now, how about helping me prepare dinner?”

Over dinner, Mike asked, “How was your interview with the hospital administrator?”

“I thought you would never ask. I have great news. I am one of three supervising nurses in the Intensive Care Unit. I will have a week of seven to three and a week of three to eleven.”

“Marta wants to stay on the night shift, for some reason.”

“Wow. How does that feel?”

“I love the idea of being in ICU and, if it’s okay with you about thee swing shift, I’m for it.”

“This is only for three months. Since my nemesis is taking early retirement, I will be going back to my regular job. I’ve always wanted some experience in ICU.”

Mike wasn’t sure about the three months, but he knew that it was what Helen wanted.

“I’m glad it worked out, Honey, but some evening are going to drag.”

She chuckled. “There may be rewards for patience.”

“The other news is not good. The specialist, at the Mayo Clinic, after extensive tests, has determined that nothing can be done about conceiving. We need to plan a conversation on the subject of family.”

A week later, Roger saw Mr. Smythe with his arm around Mike as the left out the back door.

A young man joined them as a third player in the group. Mike was introduced to the next president of the agency, young Mr. Smythe

The son was a better golfer than Mike but not by much. It was a delightful afternoon capped off with a drink in the clubhouse.

In the course of the conversation, Mr. Smythe said to his son “This young man is going to be a big help to you when you join us in this fall.

“His suggestion made our job quite easy at the recent union negotiations. I’ll fill you in this evening since I understand you and Nan are having dinner with us.”

Unknown to Mike, when he had departed, Mr. Smythe continued on the same subject with John.

“Since you are about to replace me here at the agency I want you to have every advantage possible.

John, even though Mike is only a little older than you, you will be well served to pay attention to what he is doing. He doesn’t talk too much but listen when he does. It usually is insightful.”

“In my talks with his superiors I find that he does not suffer fools. He does not major in minors and he speaks directly.”

“I don’t know where he learned it, but he will be a big help if you play it right. He seems to have come through great poverty with all the drive but none of the scars that I have seen in others.”

“More than listening tries to watch him when you can. He seems to be filled with ways that are helpful directly and indirectly to the agency and our personnel.”

On his drive home, Mike had a satisfied feeling about how life at Smythes was developing. All was well except for having young Nance with a little more seniority and being a relative of the boss.

Mike again remembered a comment about getting stuck behind someone with more seniority.

Mike felt that he might have to resort to something drastic to help clear his path forward.

He arrived home later than usual. One look at his smile when he walked in, she asked “What gives sailor boy? I can see it in your eyes, in your grin and in your body language.”

She whispered in his ear “Did some hussy lure you into bed this afternoon? Did you get a raise?”

After the kiss that stirred her, she laughed “Well at least it wasn’t the hussy. I can tell that you have been celebrating something, do you want another drink?”

He took the scotch from her hand and gave her the whole bit from morning to the present.

“You continue to amaze me for one so gentle and so patient. You make major hurdles seem so easy to take on successfully. I do feel so lucky and I do love you.”

The next morning, he came in very early as usual. Paul came in at seven and saw Mike. He could see from the amount of paper on his desk that Mike had been there quite a while.

Paul had brought a thermos of coffee and waved Mike to join him.

“Big day, yesterday, Mike?”

Mike smiled. Yep.”

“You deserved it. Even Mr. J. was impressed, especially when he found out that it was a golf game with Mr. Smythes son, John. I think he now believes you are for real.”

“I am glad to hear you say that. He did not seem to be too happy with me when I first interrupted the meeting with my question about strategy.”

“I do have some new ideas for him. When I have them more firmly in hand, I would like to get together with you for a test run. If you think they are worthwhile I will take them to the boss.”

Paul said he would be delighted. "I keep rubbing it gently into the boss's craw. By the way, what is your preliminary take on Roger?"

Mike replied "I'd bet on him, Paul, now that he is in the right slot. I have come in early and checked his work each day. All is AOK."

Mike made a point of catching Ron Yeager at the end of Ron's floor shift and asked if he felt like grabbing a sandwich. When Ron agreed, they went around the corner.

Ron asked him, "I understand you flew in Vietnam. Mike told him a bit about his being one of the first to fly the Intruder.

Mike prodded him. "I hear you were commissioned in the field. That says something about you."

"Yeah, but it is hell because I just saw my lieutenant killed a half hour earlier. I am glad that is over and the less I think about it the better I feel."

Mike switched the subject. "How are you doing in your new job as salesman? It's a big change from the service department."

Ron said. "Not too well, yet. I have a lot to learn. I am teamed up with the oldest salesman on the force. He isn't much of a teacher but I am learning by watching him. He is good and he has a big list of past customers. I have to develop something like that."

Mike tucked that info into his head so that he could discuss it with Bob. "How are things at home? Someone mentioned a very sick youngster."

Mike noticed a catch in Ron's voice. "Things could be better. The bills are piling up a little faster than I would like,"

Mike interpreted that as an understatement, implying that money was short. That kind of pressure could lead to disaster, either causing serious depression making it hard to succeed at work or even causing Ron to look elsewhere to make more money. Mike knew that something had to be done.

He asked Ron, "Have you been scouting around trying to find some big rigs. They are important and can make you some cast until you get some customer. I can help you with evaluations to make a bid when you have some seller interested"

"Thanks, Mike, I may take you up on that."

That afternoon Mike caught up with Bob. "Bob, how do you train new young men like Ron? He is charming but awfully green."

Bob said "I don't have much time and you are right. He needs some individual attention."

Mike asked "Mind if I make a suggestion?"

Bob laughed. "Do I dare say no?"

Mike laughed, too, and said "I hope not."

"When you make a deal, the house isn't paying you any commission but you participate in the gross, right? Why don't you have him hang on your coat tails? If you make a deal, you can help him earn half a commission while you give him the pointers he needs, either in selling or buying."

Bob said "Why the hell didn't I think of that."

Mike laughed "Because you are a doer and a driver leaving yourself little time to think. You hired me to fill in on the thinking."

"While you are in a receptive mood, I want to make another suggestion. Why don't you invite Andrew Nance to move into sales as part of his education in the auto business? I think he has more talent as a sales person than as a manger or executive, at least at this time of his life."

Bob laughed” You are amazing. You want him out of your way but you want him to succeed. Okay, I’ll see if he and or Mr. J are willing.”

The day after Ron’s shift on the floor, Mike saw Bob taking Ron under the arm and leading him to Bob’s car.

A couple of days later, he and Paul were having a sandwich together, Paul says “I see your hand in something I haven’t seen for a while.”

Mike asked “What’s that?”

Paul laughed “Don’t give me that innocent look. I’d bet that Bob’s trailing Ron is your idea. Bob hasn’t done that with a new man for a long time. They have had to find their way alone. Right?”

Mike grinned. “No way can I shit you. I figured any guy who can go from dog face to Lieutenant in battle has got something going for him. The very fact that he gave up a steady wage with a wife and kid at home said something to me about personal drive.”

“During a recent conversation, I found out that he had some financial pressure. I don’t think we should lose him and I would hate to see him fail this early in his career. ”

Paul said “How the hell did you even know that much about him?”

Mike said “Every new body that shows up on the sales floor gets my attention. Nobody asked me but I am always looking for talent.”

“When I come in early, I go to the personnel files, which should be locked, by the way. You are aware of my need to know as much as I can about my associates.”

“Mike, there is nothing like that in your job description. Why do you give so much to this firm?”

Mike did not say anything for a while. He reached for Paul’s thermos and poured out two coffees.

“It is just my nature to give all I can. I told you once before that my grandmother still lives in me as well as the nuns, my mom and my uncle Frank.”

“Above that, I see great possibilities. Since Mr. J has loosened up and I get the feeling he approves, I feel more motivated.”

“I see in Mr. Smythe and probably in John the willingness to gamble on expansion beyond their current holdings. If that happens or if I have some idea that they might consider, I want them to see someone they can trust and maybe invest in.”

“Paul, some of it is self-interest too. Somewhere in my past, probably during my university years I learned something about long term self-interest and it seems to be serving me well”

Paul said, “I sure feel good about insisting on holding on to you that first afternoon. I wish the hell I were twenty years younger so I could be with you as you ride through life.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have a son that I could foist upon you. You probably have no idea how unique you are for one so young in years. Some Friday afternoon I want to get Bob to join you and me for a couple of drinks and have you tell me about your life. I need to understand the real Mike. Would you do that?”

“Yes, only for your ears. You two have been my confidants and my support. I would be honored to have you listen to my story.”

Paul said “By the way, if at any time you feel you are not getting the support you need, I want you to come to me directly. I am old enough and secure enough to take on anyone.”

Mike promised.

Paul commented “Before you came aboard, I spent little time other than on direct business meetings with Bob .We three seem to have become a team with you as the catalyst. I like that.”

Chapter 8

Mike was still awake at one in the morning, waiting for Helen who was late coming off her duty on the swing shift. His gut told him that Helen had a rough shift and he was right.

He rushed to the door when he heard the key push into the lock. Her eyes were blood shot although the tears were gone.

She slumped into his arms and then buried her face into his breast.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the living room, where he placed her gently on the sofa.

“I’ll get you a hot toddy, honey.”

Five minutes later she was telling him about the rush at ten that evening.

“We had code blue called three times from three different rooms within a five minute period.

Despite the speed with which we moved, we lost all three patients before an hour had elapsed.”

“Mike, it was the first death, or should I say deaths, in ICU during my watch and I felt left out. My teams moved with dispatch, doing all they could but to no avail.”

“Two of the families were present. I went to call the chaplain but she was already on the floor, talking with one of the families.”

“Although my relief arrived, I could not leave until the last case was closed and sealed.”

I felt so weak and I had no idea why I was so upset, given all that I had witnessed in Vietnam.”

Suddenly, her body shuddered. “Hold me tighter, honey. I’m cold.”

Mike lifted her and walked to the bedroom. He put her under the covers, still fully clothed and climbed in to offer his body heat to keep her warm.

He caressed her hair and arm while he diverted her attention with stories of his boyhood. He hummed a few of their love songs; until she drifted off.

It was an hour later that he undressed her so that she could sleep in comfort.

Mike called the office to leave a note that he would be late. He made breakfast when she awakened about eleven that morning.

When she came into the kitchen, she gave him a weak smile that broadened when he took her into his arms.

“Thanks honey. You were the right medicine for me last night. You are a gentle and loving man.”

Mike spent some serious time analyzing Roger’s work that afternoon. He found no errors and called Roger to thank him and tell him what a great job he was doing.

“Mike, thank you. You made my day. By the way, some of the processes seem to be taking too much time. Would you mind a brain session in which we might review and look at some changes?”

Mike said “That would be great. How about tomorrow at 10:30?”

Roger stood up “I’ll be ready.”

The following morning Roger and Mike met, then walked away satisfied with some changes that Roger made causing Roger to go away beaming and Mike feeling pretty good about his decision to hire Roger .

The new team of Bob, Mike and Roger seemed completely in sync. Mike knew that the salesmen were delighted with the team support.

Mike placed a letter of commendation in Roger’s jacket.

Shortly thereafter, Bob called Mike into his office for some conversation.

“Mike, I talked with Mr. J about Andrew moving into sales. He said that he would consider the suggestion.

After conversation with Andrew, Mr. Jay decided that he preferred to keep Andrew working on a special project.

“Bob, I owe you big. That is not what I hoped for but it does lighten the path ahead.

Bob laughed. “I was happy to help. You remind me of that old saw about an iron fist in a velvet glove. You are a softie with people who need you and a man of steel who knows what he wants. Thanks for coming to my team, friend.”

“Thanks Bob. With that information, I will try to foresee other speed bumps in the road ahead.

Business was brisk in the months that followed. Everybody in sales and in the used car repair department was taking home some extra money every month.

Roger was completely fulfilling Mike’s confidence in him.

Mike was up early each morning for his workout. During the week that Helen worked the swing shift, she slept late.

On the weekends, Mike played 18 holes, early Saturday mornings. He was really into the game.

The club professional previously was a tour player Mike took some lessons and enjoyed the pro’s’ company when they played late evenings during the week.

He improved his game by trying to copy some of Hank’s swings, especially on the short chip shots.

One morning after an afternoon of golf, Mr. J asked Mike to come in. They talked a bit of business

Mr. J suddenly switched subjects. “Mike, aren’t you taking advantage of us? You have left early one day each of the last three weeks.”

Mike wasn’t really surprised, so he did not respond directly “Boss, are you unhappy with my work?”

“Well, no.”

Mike went on “Has anybody complained?”

“No, but that is not the way for a young man to promote his future. You also are setting a bad example.”

“Mr. J, I believe that you know I am not driven by promoting my future, even though I am aware that my performance will affect my future. Each of my days is focused right here. I am in a job that I enjoy and I feel that everyone around me approves of my contribution.”

“I certainly pay no attention to the number of hours, but if I were to add them up I am sure no one comes close to the total of my weekly time.

“Besides I am always refreshed the morning after a game. Are you not pleased with the results of my work?”

“Mike, you have made significant contributions. I am aware of each one, but you have been here about six months and, at times, you behave as if you were a top rank executive taking advantage of rank.”

Mike asked, “In other ways other than my time off for golf?”

Mr. J admitted that nothing else came to mind.

“Mr. J, I just received a very high compliment from Bob regarding my work.”

“I want to continue to make creative contributions to Smythes. If I am not free to be creative with my time, I will come to a place of boredom .I don’t want that to happen.”

“I wouldn’t want to see that either. Maybe you are right, Mike. In fact we are very pleased with all that you have contributed.”

“I guess I am old fashioned. Young men should serve their apprenticeship in humility. I guess I will have to make an exception in your case.”

“I pray that you will. I am not just a green kid out of college. In fact, I know that I am older than my years.”

“I began working during my early teens and I developed some gray hair flying Intruders in Vietnam.”

Mr. J nodded his understanding.

“I hadn’t thought about that. Thanks for coming in, Mike I will try to remember this conversation.”

“I am not sure I totally agree but this subject will not be on our table again. I have never met a young man like you.”

Mike thanked him and went to his own desk.

Roger wanted to know about the long meeting “Roger that was private and nothing to do with our work.”

As Mike was driving home, his thoughts were centered on that confrontation with Mr. J. Although the ending was satisfactory, he was concerned that, given a reason, Mr. J might decide that the firm would benefit without a wise ass like young Mike.

From the very beginning, Mike had sensed a tension in his relationship with Mr. J. He wondered if the differences in their philosophy were going to limit his advancements in this firm. The idea was not making him comfortable.

With his mind so occupied, he never saw the car coming from his right that broad sided his car with such force that the left front door was sprung open and Mike spilled out onto his shoulder into the intersection, bouncing a few times before coming to a halt. He could hear tires squealing, horns blowing and the shrill sound of a policeman’s whistle, then nothing.

The ambulance arrived and rushed him to the hospital.

Mike awakened in strange surroundings. He saw Helen’s worried face.

Helen saw his eyes flutter open and Mike saw tears streaming down her face which had suddenly broken into a smile

“He’s awake.”

He was looking into two faces as they crowded around. The nurse moved to his side. She gave Mike a smile.

“Nice going, young man. We were worried for a while in spite of what your doctor told us. Would you like a sip of water?”

Mike nodded. She moistened his dry lips and put a straw to his mouth.

Helen said “Sailor boy, you gave us a scare. Have you any idea what happened?”

Mike replied, “I remember being hit on the right side and tumbling from the car, hearing noises of all sorts.”

Helen gave him a brief rundown of the event as told to her by the policeman who had been directing traffic.

“It was entirely the fault of the driver who is totally remorseful. In fact he sat in the waiting room for two hours after the accident. He has been examined but had no injuries.”

The nurse sent Helen packing. It was getting late in the evening and Mike needed rest.

The resident on duty dropped in when Mike was awake in the morning. “You are relatively lucky. You suffered a concussion from which you seem to be recovering. You have a broken left ankle.”

We expect you to be with us for a week and then a couple of weeks rest at home. How are feeling right now?”

Mike chuckle. “Like every bone and muscle has just been through a wringer. Is it possible to have a stronger pain killer?”

The doctor said “You will have to put up with the pain. I have you on a two hour schedule. The good news is that each two hours will bring you less pain because of the healing as well as the medication. Sorry.”

When he awakened, his mind drifted off with thoughts about work. Considering his last conversation with Mr. J, he could not help wonder if his absence might help Mr. J to replace Mike. This could be the time for Andrew.

Paul came in during the noon hour. “Hi buddy. You look like hell. I’ll bet you are hurting too.”

Mike started to laugh but his muscles rebelled with pain. He winced. “No more jokes, Paul.”

The response was “Sorry.”

Paul sat down and unloaded about twelve get well cards. Mike gave a quick glance at the names of the senders. “Not a card from Mr. J.

“I don’t like that.” He turned to look at Paul with a small smile.

Paul asked “How are you feeling?”

Mike winced again. “Like I was hit by a tank, not just an auto.”

“Helen called me this morning. I notified the staff. Most of them borrowed cards from Mrs. Foster who keeps a whole supply on hand.

I called the hospital and was informed that the number of visitors is limited. We decided on one a day from the agency in order to comply. I won the toss with Mrs. F who will be here tomorrow.”

“I am going to be out for three weeks minimum, Paul. Who is going to do my work?”

Paul said “You are not to worry. Mrs. F, Bob, Roger and I will take full responsibility, dividing the job among ourselves. You try to rest. Do some reading. The agency will still be there three weeks from now.”

Paul stood. “I promised the nurse not to tire you.”

He shook Mike’s hand and took Mike’s greetings with him to the office.

Helen moved her chair close to the bed so that they could hold hands while he napped for a while.

After he was awake, she gave him a very warm kiss, telling him that she needed to get back to work.

Mike's mind went back to Paul's visit. He looked at the cards a second time, hoping that he had missed the card from Mt. J.

He had a card from Mr. Smythe and Mr. Smythes secretary.

He wondered, "Is Mr. J going to fill my spot with a new hire or Andrew?"

The thought brought on more tension.

During his visit the next morning, the resident said "Mike you are as tense as a drum. Relax. You are going to make a complete recovery. In fact you will be able to golf next season, even carry your own clubs. That is my prediction based on experience."

Mike said to him "I believe you, doc. I am more worried about affairs back at the office. I have heard from everyone except my big boss."

"Sorry, Mike. I can do nothing about that, except to say that you need to forget or find out. We need you relaxed to allow the body to heal."

Mrs. Foster came in at noon. She hugged and kissed him gently. "You look tense, Michael. I need you to relax."

Mike smiled. "You have been talking to my doctor."

She put the single rose on the side table alongside a box of fudge

She laughed. "Well, yes, but I would give you that advice without his urging. He told me about your worry. I can give you one piece of news about that which may help. Mr. J. does not know about your injury. He was called away on family business the evening of the day you had the accident. We expect to hear from him tomorrow."

Mike told her about his last conversation with Mr. J.

"In fact, that was what was on my mind at the time I was creamed by that driver.

"What can I say, Michael? Still, I think you are putting too much negativity into that memory. Mr. J is a fair man. I believe he respects you and thinks your input has been very important"

They switched subjects discussing some of her recent employees who were doing well. She talked a little about her family and asked about Helen.

Just as she was leaving, Helen walked in. The two of them got to gabbing, leaving Mike to his own thoughts. He did not know how to take the news about Mr. J being out of town.

Trying to go to sleep was a long process. His mind whirled with thought of work. He made a mental list of things that had to be done when he got back.

"That is if I am welcome back. I wish that last conversation could be erased from both our memories.

In the morning, the resident chided him again but knew it was up to Mike. He decided not to pressure Mike.

Bob, his buddy and supervisor, came in at noon. At the end of their conversation, Mike asked Bob about Mr. J.

Bob said, "Mike, relax. Mrs. F. told me you were worried. Mr. J will be back late today. I will see him the first thing tomorrow. You are very important to me and therefore to the firm."

"If push comes to shove I will demand your continuance but I think you have it all wrong. He will not let you go. He knows you are invaluable. Trust me. Now take a nap before your next visitor arrives. He shook Mike's hand and left.

Helen gave him a smile, a hug and a lingering kiss She said, "Something has relaxed you, sailor boy. Have you heard from Mr. J.?"

Mike told her of Bob's visit.

"Bob will go to bat for me. Even if Mr. J. stays upset, Bob will be sure I stay. At the worst, I have a chance to make it up, if necessary."

"I am glad you feel more comfortable. I could have told you not to worry but that would be useless. I wasn't going there".

He took her hands in his. "Thank you, dear. Now tell me how are you' feeling. I have been wallowing in self-pity.

Helen gave him a warm smile. "I am doing great."

She took his mind elsewhere with some stories she heard in the doctors' ready room.

He spent little time thinking about the office during the rest of the day.

In the morning, at 8:15, he had a phone call from Mr. J.

"Mike, I am so sorry to find you in the hospital. I have been out of town on some sad family business and just had a conversation with Bob. "

"Thank you, Mr. J. It is nice to hear your voice. I hope your family concern is not too serious."

Mr. J said that it was a death of a brother-in-law who had been ill for some time.

"The family is handling it well. I understand that you will be out for at least three weeks. Take your time so that you will be really well when you return.

"In the meantime, we have a temp clerk doing the paper work. Roger is proving to be a gem. You did a fine thing when you brought him back into the fold. We miss you."

Mike thanked him for the call.

The resident, who entered just as Mike hung up the phone, saw Mike's smile and relaxed signals.

"Nice going. I guess your worries were of no consequence. We will put on your cast tomorrow. The swelling should be gone."

"We will have the therapist teach you how to handle crutches. She will be in later today to talk with you about the exercises you will need to perform in order to get totally well."

Mike wasn't totally comfortable about his thoughts regarding Mr. J's phone call. "I think it's time to start casting about. If I choose to resign now, I am sure I can get good references. I know I have a lot to offer other employers."

During the hours when Helen was away from home, Mike initiated some phone calls to his new friends made while involved in the community.

He discovered, through his subtle questioning, two or even three good positions going begging because of the lack of skilled or talented executives available.

He composed some letters of application to be typed when he could get someone to bring him a portable typewriter.

He didn't want Helen to start worrying, thus keeping his planning secret for the present.

His plan to keep the secret did not work out. Helen, while dusting the furniture, found his hand written letters and burst into tears.

"Mike," she cried. "Why are you keeping secrets from me? What has gotten into you? If you want to make a move, let's talk. You promised me no secrets."

"Helen, I am so sorry. I did not want you to worry. Nothing may come of it. I was just trying to be ready."

They both were full of tears and Mike reached for her hand pulling her close to him. With her head on his chest, she wept inconsolably. Mike kept wiping away her tears until she could weep no more.

“Darn you, Mike. If you are unhappy and want to move then let’s do it. If you are going to change jobs, why look here. Let’s just go up the coast.

After a long conversation, both were in doubt that Mike’s long range vocational future would be at the Ford Agency.

“Mike, promise me. No more foolishly hiding from me, not even to protect me. You made a pledge.”

“I promise, Helen.”

“Mike, during the next few evenings, let’s do some planning about the kind of work you want to consider.”

Helen drove Mike to the agency for his return to work. As he approached the front door, Roger spied him and rushed to open the door for Mike.

One of Mrs. Foster’s young ladies saw him. “Mike is back”, she yelled.

All her associates and Mts. F came out of the bookkeeping department to welcome Mike.

Bob came out to shake his hand.

Mike went to his desk, laying his crutches down next to his chair. The bouquet from bookkeeping staff was lovely and welcoming.

The phone rang “Welcome home, buddy.” It was Paul who said he was buying lunch.

Paul hosted lunch for Bob, Roger and Mike at the café around the corner. As they started walking, everyone started talking at once.

By the time lunch was served, Mike was updated. Paul had complained again about the lateness of the financial reports coming from bookkeeping.

Mike asked Paul. ”Have you had a chance to analyze their procedures to see if revisions might help? I do not think Mrs. F. would object. She probably would welcome any help she could get.”

“I know from our conversations that she is having trouble getting good help;”

Mike asked “Do you mind if I talk to Mrs. Foster on your behalf?”

Paul said “You are just getting back to work. How will you have time?”

Mike said “I have been in touch with Roger who has really stepped up. We can find some time.”

“Please have a go and bring me another miracle.”

That evening he involved Helen in a conversation regarding a plan to help Paul.

”Helen, as a woman in a responsible job, how would you feel about a young man, not in your department, offering to help you.”

“Mike, don’t be obtuse. Do you want to offer help to Mrs. Foster? If so, there’s no problem. That woman loves you. She may be old enough to be your mother but she stands right behind me in her love for you. What are you planning?”

Mike outlined a plan he had been considering. Helen asked “Do you have the time? That is the only question.”

Mike indicated that he would find the time. “With the way we are staffed and with the way many associates are willing and eager for responsibility, my part of the office runs like a

well-oiled machine. That gives me opportunity to look around for areas that need help. Time isn't the problem. If there is a problem, then it is usually the people."

"Then go for it. When she is better off, you will be her hero and gain her undying love forever."

The next morning, on his walk, he picked a rose from the garden. He walked into Mrs. Foster's office putting the rose on top of her paper work.

"You sly guy, thank you and what do you want? You can have anything you desire."

He winked "Really anything?" She giggled.

"Mrs. F, I have in mind a joint venture that might be of some help. That's how Helen and I approach problems at home."

She giggled again "If it is like you and Helen, do it, I'm in."

They both had a good laugh.

"Can you take an hour for lunch as my guest today without feeling guilty?"

She got serious "If you think it can be productive, the answer is yes."

Mike said "It will be a working lunch."

They both ordered light. They had a booth in the very back of the row. The table was large enough for doing some paper work.

Mike brought the paper in case she wanted to start right in on the project.

"Paul and you agree that both of you are frustrated trying to meet deadlines for Paul.

Right

"God, Yes."

Mike said "I would like to help if possible, but you have to tell me you want it and, if so, where are the trouble spots."

"You know enough about me that anything we talk about is absolutely confidential."

She smiled "I know that about you, dear boy. Yes I want it and I will give you all the info including my concerns and what I think are my weaknesses for your ears only."

He reached across the table and took her hand. "We have a deal and I hope we can find some answers."

"First I want to have you take on Roger for two weeks. Find some position, such as your temporary assistant."

"What I really want him to do is observed and analyzes your work flow He is really good at spotting procedural glitches or road blocks.

"He saved us hours of work three weeks after he came aboard. Do you think that would be useful?"

She grinned. "It would be heaven sent. I keep saying to myself that I need to take time and do that. Will Bob approve?"

"I am pretty much chained to my desk and can handle Roger's work for a few weeks."

"Okay."

Mike asked, "How about the quality of work and the abilities of your young women and men?"

She replied "A couple of them are duds. I need to replace them."

Mike said, "If you like I can see your notes and give them an interim evaluation. If they have any potential I will work out a plan with your approval."

"If they are true duds, I will terminate them for you and we can go looking for replacements."

"When that happens, I will be happy to sit in on the final interviews if you like."

She beamed “Mike, I like it. Do you have the time to do this for me?” If you do, then it’s a go and I will owe you in big way.

He gave her a smile “I’ve already collected. Mrs. F, you were my anchor and my support system for one green kid last December .I already owe you and I will have the time”

She said “Let’s do it.”

As they walked back, she held his hand, saying “You know that there is an old biblical saying, “Cast your bread upon the waters, etc. I believe mine came back a thousand fold. You are a dream, a gentle but driving force.”

“I hope Mr. Smythe knows what a gem you are...”

She stopped and turned to him giving him a kiss on the cheek

Mike cleared with Bob reassigning Roger for two weeks. Bob didn’t even raise a “why’. He felt that if Mike wanted to do something different, it must be good for the company. He sensed something good was going to surprise the boss.

Mike took over Roger’s work as part of his interim evaluation process. He found time to interview three of the critical persons on the bookkeeping staff.

Two girls were hopeless, especially in their attitudes toward working here. He gave pink slips within the hour and they were gone.

Mike was impressed with the potential of the young lady who was a clerk in accounts receivable. Her name was Jane. She was sharp and understood her job and what she had to do. She admitted to being clumsy in learning to use her sophisticated calculator.

As Mike probed more deeply, he found she was excellent on the phone and enjoyed talking to customers even people with complaints about their bills.

Right after his interviews, he dropped in to see Mrs. F, telling her that she needed to find two new employees.

She said that she had already called the employment agency when she signed their termination checks.

Mike told her about Jane and his feeling that a change would be helpful .They decided to do nothing until Roger completed his analysis.

Mrs. F and Mike jointly did the final interviews for the two positions. Mike sat across from Mrs. F so they could signal to each other. They worked well as a team and decided a yes on one and no on the other. The next day they agreed on the second position

Roger produced his report in six working days. Mrs. F was delighted and saw at least ten hours or more labor reduction in a revision of work flow. Roger helped rearrange Jane’s work with one of the new employees.

Mr. Foster came to see Mike the following morning. She brought him a cup of coffee “Just to say thank you once more, Mike. You keep doing little things that make us work more smoothly. It’s like team work on a ball team. You not only push us together, but you are the oil that keeps running smoothly.”

Mike blushed.

“That’s okay, Mike. You do not have to say anything. The oracle has spoken.”

They both laughed.

The following week Paul came to Mike. “I owe you a special lunch. Mrs. F was right on the button with the timing of the financial report. Bob and I will host you at Jack’s, the premier restaurant in the area.

That same morning, when Mike came in, there were several things on his desk .He found a large bag of fresh veggies, a rose and a box of chocolates with Helen’s name on it?

He looked across toward bookkeeping and saw that Mrs. F had pre ceded him to work and was smiling. She blew him a kiss He smiled and returned the kiss.

Mike exchanged the crutches for his cane on September 1st.

In the middle of September, Homer, the used car manager at the Lincoln agency across town came to see Mike, who asked him to wait about ten minutes while he finished a report for Bob.

When he was finishing, Bob came along to say hello to Homer. They both had come to the Ford agency about the same time. Later, Homer transferred to the other agency. They chatted for few minutes while Mike finished up.

As Mike joined them he heard Bob saying, “a great and sharp guy. Listen carefully.”

They stopped immediately upon Mike’s entry. Bob introduced Homer and left.

Homer told Mike that he was the used car manager at the Lincoln–Mercury dealership. There was a new car sales manager as well as the General Manager.

Mike learned that the other dealerships in Florida were all Lincoln–Mercury and the management organization was the same as this one.

“My boss told me that I should find out how your administration handles the used car deals that is if you are agreeable.”

Mike said “I am agreeable but your boss should clear this with Mr. J and Bob. If that works out, we can plan a time, say tomorrow morning at 9:00 to start.

Homer said, “Point me to a phone and I will try to arrange right now.”

Mike said “Use mine. I have a few short errands to run. I’ll be back.”

When he returned, Homer said “All set. You can talk to your people.”

Mike walked over to Bob’s desk who told him that Mr. J agreed.

Homer and Mike set up the appointment.

The two of them spent about 90 minutes together. Mike brought in Roger for the final orientation. Homer was thoroughly pleased and offered them lunch.

Mike demurred but sent Roger, who always enjoyed a free lunch.

Mike was unaware that Homer and Mr. J were friendly, that Mr. J had his eye on Homer as a possible new player in the growth plans of the Ford agency.

Homer was a good salesman and an extraordinarily fine administrator.

Mike did know of Bob’s friendship with Homer. It would have made Mike a bit more nervous to think someone might be put in between Bob and himself.

A week later, at the weekly communication meeting, Mr. Smythe joined them after the regular agenda was completed.

Mr. Smythe announced “The Lincoln-Mercury agency has adopted the used car plan as you gave it to them, Mike. They’re excited with no doubts that it will work as well as yours has here I will keep; you posted. Thanks again Mike.”

As they were leaving, Mr. Smythe took Mike’s arm “Is this the day you usually golf with Henry?”

“Yes sir.”

“If it is ok with you, I can set it up for the two of you to play at my club Have you played since the injury?”

“No, sir but that would be wonderful, Thank you.”

Mike and his friend, Hank, were greeted at the parking lot by an attendant who was expecting them “I’ll have your clubs and keys on the first tee in twenty minutes. Please use lockers 122 and 124 to store your street clothes and personal items.”

There were no other golfers visible as they teed off. Mike achieved his goal of breaking 100 with a 99 that day. That was a bonus on this good news day

A waiter came into the locker room and took their drink orders. The drinks were on a side table when they emerged from the showers.

Hank asked “How did this come about?”

Mike smiled. “Mr. Smythe is thanking me for a small favor. I helped his Lincoln-Mercury used car manager devise a new system for administering their department.”

Hank smiled “Nice going, Mike. You seem to be doing well with the Smythes.”

Mike smiled and thanked him.

Chapter 9.

Mike wondered why a special lunch was being hosted by Mr. J. The attenders were the same as at any regular communications luncheon.

The steaks were perfect and the lemon pie exceptional. It was Paul who announced the special news during dessert.

“A year ago I was fortunate enough to interview a Vietnam War veteran who was looking for a place to start his business career.

We had no way of knowing how lucky we were. He has contributed in many ways beyond the scope of his assignment and has earned the respect of the entire agency.

Mike’s mind was on the dessert but the mention of his name brought his attention back to the table.

Paul handed him a corporate check for five hundred dollars as a bonus.

He was taken aback. That wasn’t corporate policy.

Paul smiled. “This is Mr. Smythes idea.”

That brought grins to all three faces.

Bob replaced Paul.

“I am delighted to present this letter of commendation signed by Mr. J.”

The letter was a stunning surprise for Mike. He handed him a typed letter signed by Mr. J am dread “Smythe Chevrolet is pleased to announce a promotion of Michael Wallech to the position of Sales Administrator. This promotion is accompanied by an increase in salary commensurate with new responsibilities.”

Mike gasped and everyone laughed even more. His salary was being doubled

The afternoon routine was interrupted when Ron drove in with a tractor and a 28 foot trailer in beautiful shape. Every one rushed out to see him jump down with a big grin on his face. Ron was the newest and most recently trained by Bob.

He signaled a number with his fingers to Mike who did a mental calculation and knew that Ron would be out of debt on his draw. Mike returned thumbs up and left everyone to ooh and ash.

Later, Ron told Mike “I took your advice. I hung around the various truck stops, getting to talk with the drivers. They love talking about their experiences. They get to know each other. They know about each other’s successes and their pain.”

“That is how I found this unit. The owner needs to sell. His wife is ill. He cannot afford to be gone on long trips. I offered him a hundred and fifty more than he asked, knowing in my mind that there is still profit for us. Am I right?”

“Nice going, Ron. I ran a quick check without knowing all of the optional features. There are enough margins to satisfy the house. You will do well and no longer owing the house for your draw. This is a good start for you.”

Ron beamed “I am glad to hear it. I was afraid I might have cut it too thin but I wanted that guy to have a square shake.”

Mike was leaving a little early so that he could spend more time with Helen.

On his way out, he met Homer, the used car manager from the Mercury agency, who was just arriving. He wondered what that was about.

The big event of the month of October was the fitting of another desk in Mr. Smythes office. His son, John, was coming on the payroll, full time.

His primary responsibility was to learn what was happening in all departments.

This would guide him to understanding the operations in all their agencies.

The longer term plan was for him to relieve his dad so that his dad could serve more effectively as the chairman of all the corporation boards as well as the holding company.

Mike spent quite a few hours giving John orientation re the sales department. He clued John on his feel for the abilities of the various sales staff.

Every once in a while, John would take him to lunch. The subject was usually about Mike’s opinion of what John was hearing from department managers. He had found out that Mike was a good judge of what was going on throughout the agency.

Mike asked him once “Why ask me, John?”

John said, “Paul says that you have open eyes and wide ears and could help me verify reports in general. He sure has a lot of faith in you.”

“I trust him. I have known him forever and he has been a big help to me as the owner’s son. He has never ever pulled any punches or given me bad advice. He has been my confidant as a teenager growing up with a very successful and astute father.”

That can be challenging for a young boy. I owe an awful lot to Paul.”

“John, keep telling that to Paul. I feel the same way even though our relationship is so short compared to yours. Are you at all religious?”

John was taken back “Well, we go to the First Presbyterian Church.”

“This is interesting. Helen and I go to Christ Presbyterian church. We are not overly religious but we find good spiritual nourishment and a loving community there.”

“The reason I asked is that your comments reminded me of a prayer written by a friend. I carry it with me as a reminder about being thankful. I’ll have a copy typed up for you. If it is meaningful, keep it or otherwise, toss it. Interested?”

John nodded. Mike had a copy typed and sent to John.

“”Lord, help us to be grateful for the gifts others have prepared for us.

Only on roads built by others do we travel,

On food grown by another do we dine?

In homes constructed by others do we dwell,

In a temple built by others do we worship?

By another’s song do we rejoice?

By another’s sacrifice are we made safe?

By another’s counsel can we grow?

Keep us from persuading ourselves that we can get along

Without the good will of others who share this planet.”

Mike had a note from John, thanking him, saying he would have the prayer handy at his desk.

Not everyone saw Mike as a successful, helpful young man. A good salesman, by the name of Clay, occasionally would cast little negative comments about “suck ass Mike.”

He kept telling other salesmen that Mike was over rated and had no real sales ability.”

Roger clued Mike about Clay’s behavior.

Mike said “Don’t let it worry you, Roger. He is a good salesman and may not be getting enough kudos from management. Mention that to Bob and see if he cares to give it any attention.”

That reminded him that he had a promotion and an increased paycheck. He wondered when they would give him the title and what changes were in store.

In the meantime, major building remodeling was taking its toll on everyone. Departments had to make do in temporary buildings or in temporary new sights in the old buildings.

They all managed in spite of the discomfort. The problem was the cold. Winter was on the way. Days were still warmish bur the mornings were frosty.

When Mike had the time, he would stop in to see Mrs. Foster in bookkeeping. If she needed a hand, he would If not, he would give her a hug and a kiss and apologize that winters made it hard to get roses.

“God, Mike, I wish you were one of my own kids.”

Mike was involved in a number of strategy meetings with Mr. J, Paul, Bob, and John. They were a task force created by Mr. J. to consider the reorganizing of the sales staff. The overall structure seemed easy to deal with. Assigning current personnel was a more difficult task.

There were a series of meetings when Mike was not available so he did not see the final report.

He did learn that a new unit, called Commercial Department was being created.

Mike noticed that Homer from the Lincoln agency seemed to be involved in some of the discussions with Mr. J. during that period.

He was also aware that Mr. J. was having more visitors than usual during the last two weeks including Homer and Mr. J’s relative, Young Andrew Nance.

Mike guessed that they were candidates for the new management position being created by the task force. He knew he had an interest in in the choice of manager since it would, in some way, affect him.

If Homer or Andrew were chosen, he certainly hoped he would not be assigned to that department. In fact, his preference would be to continue reporting to Bob. He figured that it was possible that his future rested on that decision, especially if young Nance was put between Bob and himself.

The task force finally finished all their meetings and took the plan to Mr. Smythe who told Mr. J that it was their decision. Since his son had sat in on the meetings, Mr. Smythe felt informed and the group decision was final.

The task force, including Mike, met in the sales office. John put up the chart, which had been done very professionally. The chart was very clear, spelling out all the relationships. All the names were filled in. Mike looked them over and in his opinion he thought they did a good job.

He noticed one space taped over a name. He also noted that Homer’s name did not appear at any spot on the chart.

John, trying hard to mask a smile, said “Oh I didn’t realize that we missed uncovering one name. Please take off the tape, Mike”

Mike rose to walk up to the chart and was sure that the name underneath the tape was ‘Homer’.

He could see big smiles breaking out on some of the faces as he walked over to the chart. He pulled the tape to see his name in the box as the manager of the new commercial sales department.

He was literally blown over and tears appeared on the verge of spilling over onto his cheeks.

This wasn’t possible, not in his wildest dreams.

I am too young to be given this responsibility”

They all cheered and came around to offer their hands in congratulations. Mike could not say a word.

Everyone knew that he did not expect it since it was evident that he was surprised and choked up. They gave him time to digest the news.

A careful second look at the chart by Mike indicated that he would have great support since he was to report to Bob, who was the new general sales manager.

What Mike did not know was that Mr. J was the last to agree to Mike as the choice.

As word seeped out to the entire sales staff, many came in to congratulate Mike, Not all did so. Mike was aware that among those missing was Clay, his critic. Mike overheard Clay griping to one of the others what a big mistake the company made choosing Mike, which caused Mike to think that particular situation needed some attention. He would ponder that for a couple more days.

Mike kept having second thoughts about the promotion. He was aware that he had an easy time of making good contact with individuals. The question he had, concerned his experience in making strategic decisions.

“Do I have the ability to choose the proper marketing decisions that will further the progress of the agency?”

“Well, the ball is my court and I had better produce. Some people believe I can do it or I would not be in this position. When I talk with Helen I will be able to see more clearly.”

He called Helen who was ecstatic. She took off early in order to be home in time for his welcome. He had her complete attention for a half hour as he gave her the details.

She erased all doubts about his knowledge of marketing.

“With your keen mind and the right books plus picking Bob’s brain, you will be a rising star. Besides, you have the ability to find the right people to back you up.”

“I’ve planned our celebration. Success earns rewards. Two hours after we enter the bedroom, the caterers will ring the doorbell. Before they arrive, we will find some joyous way to spend the time.”

“How does that sound, sailor?”

The answer came in the way he led her to the bedroom.

Nothing changed in the office the next day. Paul was ordering a buffet lunch for Monday to unveil the changes that had been agreed upon.

Mike left early, his mind filled with questions and ideas. Much had to be done throughout the sales department to make the changes that would leave him free to take up the new responsibilities.

“Would Roger rise to his new assignments?”

In the morning, as Mike was read to start his yoga he felt Helen’s arms reaching around his waist from his backside. “Sailor, you have a student eager to learn and get back into shape. I need that sexy look to entice my lover in the near future. I don’t want you running off with some bimbo.”

Laughing, he turned and wrapped his arms around her, and then taking her seriously, he began her first lesson.

Mike came in early as usual and was working his way through a pile of paper when Paul walked in. He clapped Mike on the shoulder. “Congratulations on the promotion.”

Mike grinned. A couple of minutes later, Bob came and did the same

“Bob, we need to get together. I haven’t the slightest idea of what, where or how to start. You are still my boss although the job is different. You know how surprised I was, thinking Homer would be named in that spot.”

“Mike, you underrated yourself. Homer has been here getting more information on some of the ideas that you helped implement. His boss likes what he hears and wants to try to duplicate our success.”

“On the matter of planning, you are right and we do need to get together maybe more than once for an overall planning session, The first should be a long session .Maybe we ought to have a dinner meeting and take 3 or 4 hours ,if necessary. I will try to set it up. Any special evenings work best for you?”

This is the highest priority in my career at this time. You choose the time.”

Mike attacked the daily work and had his daily coherence with Roger.

At one point, he sensed someone at his back. Before he could turn around, Mrs. F put her arms around him and planted a kiss on the side of his cheek. Tears formed in his eyes.

He stood and held her close for a minute. No words were necessary. Their actions spoke volumes.

An hour later, he called Paul. “Hey buddy; if you are free I will spring for lunch.”

Paul said he was and it was good to spend some other department’s money.

Mike sprung for a glass of wine before they ordered. “Paul I am going to need your help. I have a planning session coming up with Bob. We will be talking about a lot of things including budget. I need some real help even to start that conversation and I am looking for your support so I do not look too foolish.”

“Mike, you will never look foolish to Bob or to me. We know you are a novice but such a quick study. You can bet we will be in your corner I will do a preliminary work up, get Mr. J’s thinking and put something in writing for Bob and you.”

“Mr. J will try to keep you thin as you start out. That is his nature. You just need to work it so you have some wiggle room after you are deeper into understanding the real needs and opportunities. Will that be a good start?”

Thank you, Paul. It is more than I hoped for but that is the way you always are with me.”

Bob and Mike met on a Friday evening, starting with dinner .Bob found a nice restaurant with private booths almost sound proof. The owner set up some special table lamps to enhance the lighting so they could do their paper work. They started out speaking in generalities.

First there were the broad goals. They were estimating the budget that might be available. They discussed staffing. The space was predetermined by the blue prints. Construction was already in process.

They agreed that specific goals and objectives could be delayed but agreed that it would be ideal to have those set in place before they could finalize a budge.

Both knew that Mr. J worked otherwise and would try to get away with some minimum figure.

Both laughed “We better work out a minimum number to hold up to Mr. J.”

Bob thought Mike would need an assistant like Roger but he hoped Mike would find someone new to break in since Bob needed the experience of Roger to assume Mike’s current responsibilities.

Mike should also have a personal secretary-typist, filing clerk, etc. Mike said that decision could wait.

Mike made detail notes of their discussion He promised Bob a copy of the notes. They put away their papers. Mike bought a round of drinks for a night cap.

On Monday morning Mr. J called Mike and asked if he had time to do some preliminary planning. Mike affirmed that, saying that he and Bob had recently had a first planning session.

“Mike, can we get together tomorrow morning in order to talk finances?”

“What time, Mr. J?”

“Let’s do it at 11:00.’

“I’ll be in your office at 11:00. Shouldn’t we include Bob since my new office reports to him?”

That caught Mr. J unawares but he acquiesced.

Mike called Bob and informed him of the meeting.

Bob and Mike were on time. Mr. J asked them to wait ten minutes while he completed a phone call with the Ford plant. Precisely ten minutes later, they were called.

“Do you guys have a number for me?”

Bob cut in. “Not yet. We need to see if you agree with our preliminary planning.”

Mr. J said “Shoot.”

Bob looked at Mike who took the lead. He laid out the staffing. Mr. J agreed.

Mike asked if his department would be charged any pro rata of the overhead such as utilities, telephone, office supplies, etc. The question surprised Mr. J who said they would have to work that out.

Mike then asked “Will we have our own budget for marketing and advertising or will the agency include that as part of their overall program.

It was obvious that Mr. J hadn’t considered that. “Perhaps this session is a bit premature. Let’s reset this for Friday morning.”

They left and separated just after Bob gave Mike a thumb up. Mike wasn’t sure about the thumbs up. He may have won the battle but the general, Mr. J, wasn’t too happy about being found unprepared. That did not bode well, in Mike’s opinion.

The next day after lunch, Paul waved Mike into his office. “You sure wowed the boss yesterday.”

“Paul, I only did what came out of our second meeting on this subject.”

Paul said, “You did it with finesse and grace. The boss thinks that is another feather in your cap. He is glowing about his decision to name you to that job. “

“Paul that surprises me. I figured he would be upset since he was asked questions he could not answer.”

Paul laughed “That may be, but he is fair and gives credit where credit is due. In the long run, you two will come to loggerheads but for now you are a star.”

Helen brought the drinks and sat in Mike’s lap eager to hear about his day. As he brought her up to date, she laughed and said “The next thing that will happen is Mr. J resigning and turning his job over to you. I don’t know why you worry about Mr. J and your relationship. He recognizes your contributions.

He joined her in the laughter.

“You are a wonderfully prejudiced lover. I’ll take that into account while I accept your compliment.”

“Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Come rub my back and pat my fanny while I finish up.”

Mike obliged happily. In between pats he set the table, poured the water and the milk.

Dinner conversation was focused on some personnel problems at the hospital and news from her folks in a letter that she read to Mike.

The next two days at the office were filled with a variety of activities. A great deal of time was spent orienting Roger in the added tasks he was assuming had been Mike’s bailiwick.

Since the remodeling was to be completed within a week, Mike had to arrange for furniture and window coverings and carpeting. Helen agreed to work with Mrs. Foster to help in the décor.

In the midst of all this, he was interviewing some young ladies for his combination job of secretary and partial dog’s body. He had interviewed five young women, none of which quite met his idea, some without the skills and others lacking the attitude.

His sixth interview was Susan who was the whole ball of wax that he was looking for. She could take dictation, type seventy words per minute, had some experience in setting up a filing system.

She had run an office and supervised five women clerks and typists. She was direct in her conversation.

“If you give me the support I need, you will find a loyal associate looking out for your interests.”

“You seem like the kind of boss that would be a pleasure to work with.”

In addition to being the kind of person who appealed to Mike, she was a beautiful woman, a knock out.

She was well dressed in conservative business suit with a care to show her femininity.

Mike was thinking “She looks like the very right candidate but how will Helen react to having me spending more daylight time with Susan than with her. I haven’t noticed jealousy but this woman is a knockout.”

Mike asked if Susan minded meeting some of his associates so they could affirm his interest in offering her employment.

She agreed and they made the rounds, spending some time conversing so that she and they could make an evaluation.

The last stop was in Mrs. Foster's office where Helen and Mrs. F were looking at carpet samples.

Mrs. Foster smiled at Susan.

Helen immediately understood that she was being asked her opinion and approval. The first thing she noticed was Susan's figure and the lovely features of her face. Just as Mike had thought, she, too, considered, briefly, the idea of Susan spending more waking hours with Mike than she would.

To herself, "Ridiculous. Not worth thinking about."

She gave Susan a warm welcome, introduced herself as Mike's wife.

"I hope he makes you the right offer so that you can become a part of his team."

Susan smiled and said "Thank you, I hope he does too."

They returned to Mike's desk.

"I am ready to make you an offer if you are ready to say yes."

Susan said "I have never in my life had or even dreamed of having this kind of an interview. I feel like I have been x-rayed from every angle. I have had a chance to meet the important players so that I could decide whether I fit."

"This has been a real experience. I am ready. Is this kind of interviewing a standard for this firm?"

"Not really, but I hope I can convince other department heads to do so. I hope I can convince them that is how to start team building."

"If you make me a reasonable offer I will be delighted to join your team."

They came to a financial arrangement including some benefits that were more than she expected. "May I ask who will be the third party working with us?"

Mike said he had hoped to get Roger but that Mike's boss needed Roger to take Mike's place.

"Are you firmly set on that staffing plan?"

Mike said that he was always open to changing to any plan that met their need.

Susan said "Mr. Wallech, you are a wonder. I have worked for three bosses, none of whom are in your league. This is going to be a blast."

"I want to be daring enough to make a suggestion. May I?"

Mike said she should go ahead. He liked this woman. She reminded him of somebody he knew, himself.

"As you know, I am single and not lacking in men friends Right now I have no special interest in that area, leaving me free to work long hours if I want to do so. Why don't you and I start out and come to some mutual plan for staffing?"

"That gives me a chance to be your number one dog's body outranking the next employee, male or female. Are you willing to consider your number two as a female?"

"Susan, you are putting me to the test even before you are on the payroll. You are as daring as I was the first day of my interview last year. I have no objections. In fact, I like it."

"You and I may have to stand shoulder to shoulder against some future show of bias, but I am willing. I believe you will find acceptance, with my support, from most of the brass here."

"The exception may be Mr. J, our General Manager, who is quite traditional. He is very fair and will be impressed with results in spite of his traditional ideas."

“Since you brought up the subject, I will ask you a personal question which you may decline to answer. You are a beautiful woman and you know it. I would be interested in why you still are single at the age of 28. Care to respond?”

“I don’t mind. The answer is short and to the point. I will not settle for anything less than I believe will be my equal and who will let me be my own person.

So far, every eligible man I have dated falls short of my ideal. Some would not fathom a woman being equal to them.”

“Most do not believe that women have a place superior to men in the work place. To my surprise, most the macho men I know are macho on the outside while looking for another mother in their lives.”

“Incidentally, from the way your wife responded to me in that short time, I gathered you two see each other as equals in a partnership. Am I right?”

“That is why I dared make the suggestion to you.”

Mike grinned. “You are right about Helen and me. In fact, I insisted that the word ‘obey’ be stricken from our wedding vows.”

“The minister was shocked but accepted our idea. Thank you. I think that helps clear the way for our future joint venture. That is the term that Helen and I use to describe our life together. My other description is team work.”

Chapter 10.

“Welcome home, sailor boy. Did you hire Susan? She impressed me in that short time. She seemed self-confident. Mrs. Foster was impressed. She felt you would hire her. Did you?”

Mike invited Helen to take a walk. As they joined hands, Mike leaned over to plant another kiss square on the lips. “Uhhh, nice, but you haven’t answered my question, although I think I know the answer.”

“Helen, aren’t you worried about a gorgeous woman like that being with your husband more daylight hours than you are. She is pretty hot looking.”

Helen laughed “So is that hot tomato in the payroll department. That doesn’t worry me. You’re having the right staff people is the more important thing, but if I see you staying late too often, I will call you on it.”

“I hope you don’t make me fight for you because I will by seducing you so often you won’t be able to think of another woman.”

Mike saw that it was okay but he sensed a tension that must be like a lioness ready to fight for the mate or her cubs. He would make sure that she would not have cause. He gave her a hug.

“Helen, you are special. I knew that would not be an issue but I was glad you were there in the office. Your opinion is always important to me. In fact, you sized her up perfectly.”

“She wants to be my number two and suggested she and I run things for now and together we decide on future hiring.”

“I agreed. We are going to be breaking new ground in terms of women in decision making positions.”

“I asked her about being single. She, like you, needs to find the right guy. She has a pessimistic view of eligible males.” “

“Until the right man comes along, she is willing to work long hours until we decide on future hires.”

Helen affirmed Mike’s decision. “You may have a fight on your hands but you will win. Your track record speaks loudly. No matter how management feels, they will go along. The only risk is Susan’s drive and ability to bring it off.”

Their walk was bringing them near their neighborhood café.

“Helen, let’s save you from cooking and have dinner here.

“Sailor, you know the way to a woman’s heart, right through her stomach.

Later in the week at the weekly communication lunch table, the discussion took its normal course, bringing Mr. J up to date.

Paul moved into the subject of the new commercial department. “How are your plans developing?”

Mike gave them a brief report but held back on the staff matter until Mr. J asked, “When are you going to hire your number 2?”

Mike replied. “Oh I already have that under control. Susan will be my number 2.”

The entire room went silent.

John asked “Mike is you serious? Men find it hard to have women bosses. Won’t you find it hard to fill the next position?”

Mike said “That maybe the case. If that is an attitude that rears its head, then I am talking to the wrong candidate.”

“This woman is talented. She has left three jobs because she was bored to death.”

“Her bosses told me that they were devastated at losing her. She is willing to put in any extra time to keep up until we find new people, but she wants an even chance at up grading a woman in the job.”

“She has pledged to make it happen if I take the chance. I told her I did not think I was taking a chance.”

Every one broke into a grin except Mr. Smiles and Mr. J, who, in a clipped voice, asked Mike “Aren’t you putting the company at risk just to make a point.”

Suddenly, tension struck the group and the room was very still as everyone waited for Mike to respond.

Mike said, “Mr. J, if I thought that were the case, I would not have made that move. In fact, you all can see the risk. I have put my own position on the line.”

“Mr. J and you too, Paul, took a risk with me. It turned out to be no risk at all. I have just had the same experience with Susan. I hope you will all go out of your way to make her feel welcome. “

“After all, I put her in your path last week and all of you were delighted and gave me thumbs up.”

John glanced at Mr. J’s dead pan face and said, “I assumed you were considering her for a secretarial position.”

Paul said “You know I will welcome her with open arms.”

Mr. J interrupted. “Mike, you keep surprising me with new-fangled approaches, but you have come up aces every time.”

“I will be in your corner but with an extra special eye on this plan.”

“Nevertheless, I will worry about what this could do to us as a business community.”

Mike, in a respectful tone, said, "Thank you, Mr. J. I would expect and want, that eagle eye. I always respect your judgment and I recognize that everything I do reflect on you."

"By the way, let me wax philosophical for a moment. In many ways, this firm is successful because it stays ahead of the pack. In the days ahead, women will be pushing for more responsible jobs. The war time period opened that box. Once out of the box, there is no stopping any movement even though we resist with all our might. This will be like Pandora's Box."

"I think it is best to move with the tide. That tide is just at its infancy."

Mr. J asked, "Does our new young president approve, John?"

John laughed "I'm in all the way. Besides, Mike is increasing the pulchritude in this joint."

He continued. "Incidentally, you may not have noticed, but we have a substantial increase in the number of women buying our cars. Marketing samples show the same information nationally."

He turned toward Mike. "Tell me what makes you so sure about Susan?"

Mike took his question with seriousness. "John, I looked for a number of things including attitude. I look for skills, talent and intelligence. It has been my opinion that when one sees the right combination of those traits in another then one is looking at the making of a star."

"I see that in Susan. I feel sure she will be more than just an adequate employee."

Mr. J stood, interrupting Mike's comments, indicating the meeting was closed.

Ever one except Mr. Smiles, the service manager, made it a point next Monday to find a minute to make Susan feel welcome. She sensed a real welcome and offers of support.

At home, Helen asked, "Why the frown, sailor?"

"I think I hit another speed bump today, a larger one than I expected. Mr. J is not happy with my choice of Susan as my number two."

"You may erase the frown. You know that she will deliver and make Mr. J a happy supporter, sooner than later."

"I'm sure she will but it seems that Mr. J is a reluctant approver of ideas that I bring to the table. That may not bode well for my future."

Mike made an appointment to take Susan to see Mr. J, who was his most gracious self, telling her she could go around Mike and come directly to Mr. J, if necessary.

That had always been his policy and Mike told her so when they left.

Mrs. Foster, who seldom left for lunch, invited Susan to go to lunch with her so she could give her a bit of history while filling her in on some of the politics of the firm.

Susan came back, enthused and said, "This firm is more family than corporate, isn't it?"

"Yep."

Susan went on "I take it that she is one of your multitudes of admirers."

Mike reddened a little. "She was my first teacher here. We became good friends in spite of the age difference."

Roger overheard Clay on the subject of Susan coming to work for Mike.

"I'll bet he hired her to be his special something on the side. She's too good looking to have any brains. He'll be sorry."

Susan started right in. She arranged with the custodial people to make the offices sparkle. She arranged for the delivery of all the contents, including the spotting of the phones.

She planned for all the office supplies and worked with Paul's people to get the required purchase order forms and invoice forms and then had a white board installed and an easel with large paper pads for demonstrations during meetings.

She arranged through Roger for a Mike-Bob meeting to discuss sales personnel concerns. She told Mike that Bob also wanted to discuss the hiring of a secretary for Bob.

Paul, Bob and Mike went to work on the budget. Mr. J worked out the answer to Mike's questions. Only the phones were to be in Mike's budget.

The other items discussed were general corporate expense. They would have to work out the kind of marketing and advertising. Special commercial department marketing might have to be in Mike's budget but they would work that out as business warranted.

Mike was able to keep his regular hours at closing time. Susan now had a key and most often was still at work when Mike left.

Mike noticed that Clay had the late shift on the floor.

Bob called Mike directly. "Ready to discuss staffing? If ok, let's do lunch today. I also need to talk about a secretary while we are talking staff."

Mike stopped by Bob's office at 12:30. They walked around the corner and found their usual table.

Bob said to the owner, "Only two today Pietro. Save the table and put us in a booth."

"Si, Signor."

They started talking while Bob had a drink awaiting their orders to be delivered.

"Mike I think we ought to hold off hiring any more sales staff, which means no special salesmen for your department. You can hold special training in commercial sales for the entire staff.

"Ford is having trouble on their assembly line, which means we are not getting new cars or trucks at the rate we expected. Some of the new fellows are having trouble clearing enough to get beyond their draw. Any reaction?"

"Well that is a change. I have been so busy that I wasn't aware of that. We could give that a try".

"By the way, what have you done about an assistant sales manager or deputy? I know that Roger will handle everything on the administrative side, but I hope you don't plan to connect him to sales in any way."

"No. I am aware of that. I do not want to see that mistake happen to him or to the company. I need to fill that slot and I need to find a secretary to handle the dictation and some filing. I can use your help, if you have the time."

"Let's put the secretary on the back burner for the moment. How is Ron doing?"

"Ron is doing well. He is very savvy and a quick study. His volume is suffering because of the plant problems. Why? Do you think he can be of help?"

"If you can see a way to pay him a stipend for extra time, I would like to work with him to become a sales trainer, specifically in commercial sales. You could be my super trainer, training him. Then he can be the trainer of the sales department in relationship to commercial vehicles. I would sit in on all the sessions and become his backup."

"That sounds good. I agree he is a good candidate and I know he can use the extra money with a new baby on the way. He never worries about the hours he has to put in."

"We can accomplish a number of things including saving a good staff person for the future of this agency."

"Mike, you always have these creative solutions. By the way, How s Susan doing?"

“It is because of Susan that I can be of help to you and have time to think instead of just doing and running. Shall we tackle your other problems? How about an assistant.”

“Well, if we use Ron in the way suggested, we can put aside the assistant position for a while. He may decide he would like to work into that job. Let’s wait and see. In regard to the secretary position, if I can recruit four or five possibilities, I would like you to sit in with me while I make the final selection.”

Mike said “No problem. Why me?”

“Mrs. Foster told me what you did for her department to loosen up the work flow. She said you actually terminated some poor employees and helped her choose two very good replacements as well as salvaging a good employee in the wrong job.

“I believe you can and will save my ass, since I do not know the first thing about hiring a secretary.”

“All right, Bob. Get Roger to help recruit some interviewees. By the way, he will be the most help in arranging a work process for the new employee. He did a great job for Mrs. F.”

Bob and Mike took Ron to lunch. They discussed their idea and Ron jumped at it.

“I have been wondering how we were going to meet our new financial responsibilities at home. Along comes a miracle from Mike again, Am I right?”

Bob nodded yes and Mike looked a little embarrassed. He changed the subject.

“If moving into management instead of sales is part of your thinking, I have an idea of some ways that might help you on that track. Have you been thinking or hoping along those lines.”

Ron said, “Mike, you must be intuitive.”

Mike smiled “Do you think you could take a six week course, two evenings a week taking speech lessons at night school. I think it would be great for your future. After that you might join a public speaking group like ‘Toastmasters’.

“It would cause you a temporary time problem but could be of real advantage down the road.”

Ron said he would talk it over with his wife.

Weeks later, Mike walked into the agency. He looked into the conference room. Ron had three salesmen for an orientation re commercial sales. One of them was Clay, a suggestion from Mike to Ron.

There was a significant difference in the experience of each of the men.

Mike knew that Ron would take that into consideration. The other two were the most experienced in the agency. That would be a smart way to have them come together.

Ron caught the impression that Mike wanted Clay to know that Mike had chosen him to be in the first group. He let that tidbit drop.

Clay’s reaction was just a sour expression. Ron, later, mentioned that to Mike.

Mike remembered that Ron was sharper than most people gave himself credit for. Mike was sure that the speech class and the Toastmasters would give him more self-confidence. He was going to make one hell of an asset to the agency down the road.

Susan was waiting for him in their office.

“Mike, we are about to take delivery of 5 half ton pickups and a one and half ton flat bed. Two of the pickups and the flat bed will be in for service and out the door.”

“We need to find storage space for the other units and any additional that may be coming soon. I had been working for you on that, but up to now, no success”

Mike looked at her. “I presume you are ahead of me and have some plan in mind.”

Susan smiled. "I have a suggestion."

She waited to see if he had any objection.

"There is a vacant lot down the street that is available. I checked with the agent who manages the property. He is willing to deal. The lot is much larger than we need. Do you think Bob can arrange for splitting the rent? New cars will have the same problem, now that production is increasing."

"If we split the cost, we can let him have our share of the lot here and we can have both new and used commercial vehicles located on that lot."

Mike said, "That sounds like something I can sell to Bob. We also need to negotiate upfront money to handle a small trailer office for the lot."

Susan said "I hadn't thought about that. I'll work up some numbers today and will have them for you in the morning."

"Nice going, Susan. You were ahead of me and me like that. I will be sure the right people know whose thinking solved our problem. Thanks."

Susan's numbers were on the desk when he arrived at 7:10. Bob was impressed and doubly so when Mike told him who had presented the problem and the solution.

After Bob's questions were answered, he assured Mike that he would convince Mr. J and come back with the fait accompli.

Mike brought up the situation with Clay

"I don't care for myself but it is like a sore festering within the community. In addition to those negative comments, he tried to put a hit on Susan recently. He is a good salesman but the situation needs to be addressed."

Bob thanked Mike and said he would take care of the matter.'

Mike spent some time making notes re the coming interviews. He and Bob had an understanding of what they were seeking in the potential hire. They were looking for skills but more important was the attitude. They were bringing in another member of an extended family. Attitude was important.

The first and second of the applicants were so, so. They had the skills and experience but were not quite right.

The third woman, Grace, was the perfect fit in Mike's mind. She was ready to take charge of her boss's desk and manage his work life. She was direct but tactful.

It was obvious she was looking for a boss who knew his job and let her do hers.

Bob and Mike exchanged glances of approval.

Bob asked Grace to wait for a half hour.

She said she could stay.

"Is there a place to get some coffee?"

Mike took Grace to his office and asked Susan to have a cup of coffee with Grace.

Susan caught the picture and led Grace to the rest area for coffee, tea or cocoa.

On the way she introduced her to Mrs. F, who got the picture and joined them for ten minutes, giving a positive nod to Susan as she left.

Bob was waiting.

Mike returned and said, "I have Susan giving her a slanted view of working for us. It's in your hands. You don't need me anymore. Give her all the rope she wants. She will not hang herself."

Mike went to retrieve Grace, asking her to return to Bob and that he would follow in a minute.

Susan gave him thumbs up from Mts. F and herself. He walked to Bob's office where he gave a double thumb up behind Grace's back.

Grace would be the newest addition to the team.

It didn't take long for the decision regarding the storage yard which was to become storage for new and used trucks with a small office.

That presented another problem. How were they going to staff the lot? Would the car salesmen be willing to take an additional 8 hour shift on the truck lot?

Mike would have to clear that with Bob and if he got the okay, he would have to talk to all the salesmen individually.

He got Bob's okay before the end of the day. Tomorrow, he and Susan would develop a strategy to sell the men on the extra shift.

At seven fifteen the next morning, Susan suggested that they should sweeten the pot a little.

"The location is new and it might take time to develop some traffic. With little traffic there would be limited sales for a while, meaning no commissions for the salesmen."

"Why not offer the men a stipend for each shift in which no sales commission was earned."

"Good thinking, Susan. Let's go with that. I also want to try a new idea which we can start on the lot. I would like the salesmen to see if they can get the name and address of any one coming in."

"From that, we can start a mailing list for direct mailing pieces some time down the road. If that gets sufficient results, I want to suggest the same thing for walk in traffic here in the agency."

"If you are game to start, I think this may be an opportunity as the temporary deputy to the Commercial Sales Manager."

Susan looked to see if he was serious. She got her answer. He was serious.

"You want me to talk with a couple of the guys to enlist their volunteering to take their stints on the truck lot?"

"Yep."

"I'd love to put my toes in that water .but you are taking a risk with me. What if it doesn't pan out? Will we have blown our chance?"

"I don't think so. Why don't you take some time to work out a plan with a suggested sales pitch and or questions? We can go over them later today. Try to pick a couple of men where you feel that you have an established working relationship I'll bet on your success."

They met at four that afternoon. Mike approved her topics of discussion and questions to put to the men.

He noticed that Clay was not on the list. In his opinion, she picked the right two men.

"So here we go."

He made excuses to be with Paul and Mrs. F., giving Susan the office and the elbow room. He walked over to talk to Russ in the used car service department. He stopped to talk with Mr. Smiles about prepping the new trucks that were delivered

He wanted the vehicles out the door and invoiced by the end of the next day. Mr. Smiles promised, satisfying Mike, who knew that Mr. Smiles would deliver. He always kept his time promises.

He also found Mr. Smiles showing him a little more respect since the incident of the padded invoices.

He walked back to his office. Empty. He called Helen to see if all was well. She did not answer.

Susan strolled in, her face a dead pan. Mike could see underneath that pose. He said “Congratulations, I see you had two successes.”

She broke out into a wide grin.

“How do you know that?”

“I just read it in your body language even though you tried to hide it for a minute.

She laughed. “God, do I have to hide my thoughts too?”

“Don’t worry. I do not read minds, only happy body language. Nice going. You may as well go with the rest of the staff. You have the leaders. The rest should follow. Let Clay be your last choice.”

The regular communications meeting was as a special luncheon held at John’s club in a private dining room. Special guests included were Mrs. Foster, Susan and Russ.

The room was decorated in a Christmas theme suggesting that this was a holiday celebration. The menu featured roast beef, mashed potatoes, two vegetables, yams and Yorkshire pudding. It would be hard getting back to work with all this food inside the body.

Before dessert was served Mr. J stood and called for attention,

“This is our first annual luncheon celebrating the work of special contributors to the life of this agency. Mr. Smythe senior has donated a special engraving wall piece in honor of the recipient of the award.

It should be no surprise to any of you that the first annual award goes to Michael Walleck for outstanding contribution not only to this firm but to each individual at this table including yours truly.”

The entire body rose and applauded Mike. Who blushed and said nothing. His tears and choking prevented any comment at the moment.

Mr. J went on “We are also celebrating the one year anniversary of Mile’s joining us. He came to us fresh from naval service and brought with him more creative ideas than any of us may have in a lifetime.

Mrs. Foster told me that after her two and half weeks of training, Mike was an assistant not a trainee.

Russ tells me that Mike silently made sure that two of Russ’s employees with special problems got the help they needed.

I, personally, know seven associates who have benefited because of Mike’s caring about them.”

“A personal note from me. In the early months I had some difficulty with Mike. I had some traditional ideas of how young new trainees ought to behave. I still do hold to a lot of those ideas.

What I failed to see was that he passed that trainee stage in a few weeks and was one of our young executives, almost from the beginning. His youth belies the maturity of his place in this firm.”

I apologize for not recognizing that sooner. The kind of maturity that you exemplify does not often come in packages less than 35 years old. Mike, I can see you are speechless and we don’t expect you to reply. Just enjoy the day.”

With a choked voice, Mike said, “Thank you, Mr. J. I think we must be ready for dessert.

Everyone applauded just as the waiters entered with flaming cherries jubilee. John stood while the waiter was serving.

“Some time ago Mike started me reading poetry and for a minute I want to read a part of a poem that I think is fitting for Mike’s special moment because it reminds me of Mike.

“Oh please, wherever I go today
Help me to leave heart prints
Prints of feeling and compassion
Of kindness and loving concern
Prints of love and acceptance”

All joined in with an Amen.

When Mike opened the envelope that Mr. J handed to him with the plaque, he found a check for twenty five hundred dollars. Not a word had been said about that part of the award.

About 4:30 Paul phoned him. “If you have a minute, would you come to my office?”

Mike walked over. Bob and Paul were there. Paul pulled out a bottle of Haig and Haig.

He poured the scotch for Mike. He and Bob were drinking bourbon.

“This is a special gathering of three horsemen who traveled your first year together. We two want to offer our special thanks, not just because you have helped us but also for you just being you and giving us the chance to be your friends.”

They raised and touched their glasses. “Here’s to friendship.”

It was too cold to expect Helen to meet him at the door, but she stood at the top of the stairs with open arms. She saw the smile on his face and of course smelled the scotch on his breath as they kissed.

“Welcome home, baby. I see you have been celebrating at the Christmas party.”

His grin widened.

“There is something else. Don’t hold back on me.”

She pushed him onto the sofa and snuggled.

She put her ear to his lips and said “Whisper to me, darling. From the size of your grin, it must be good news. Did they make you chairman of the board?”

She giggled.

Mike got all choked up as he tried to tell her the news. He quit talking and handed her the plaque.

She, too, broke into tears of joy

They decided to celebrate with dinner around the corner. The whole gang welcomed them.

Later, they sat on the sofa holding hands, occasionally exchanging a kiss or a nibble.

Mike planted a soft kiss on her lips and teasingly slipped a hand inside her blouse.

With a smile in her voice “What are you doing, sailor boy?”

“I thought I could buy some of your time tonight if you are not busy with other customers.”

She laughed. “Well, I did have an arrangement which seems to have faded away. This is going to cost you.”

“I think I can meet your price for a one night stand.”

“Well, okay, but I demand cash, up front.”

“Will a check do?” He handed her the check for \$2500.00. She literally jumped up, wrapping her arms around him.

“Sailor boy, I am all yours.”

Helen and Mike flew to San Jose for the Christmas weekend.

The foursome drove to San Francisco on evening to see the lighted sky scrapers in their entire seasonal splendor and enjoy dinner at the Top of the Mark.

The clear but crisp days allowed for a couple rounds of golf.

While, the men were on the course, Helen was taking her first lesson. She said to her mother, “Mike wants me to learn sol that we can spend a couple of days each month as you and Dad did for many years.”

Mike’s gift of a necklace and matching earrings for Helen and her mom was the hit of the gift exchange.

On the first day back at work, Mike and Susan took a long lunch hour to do some planning. It was always better to be outside the office where interruptions were less likely to distract the planning process.

They had both been noodling about ways to increase the volume of units moving out the door. The Ford plant seemed to be getting its act together.

Susan asked “Do you think some of our salesmen would be interested in calling upon any organizations that need special bodies for transporting goods. They might be sold on using a Ford chassis on which to put special bodies?”

“Well, let’s give it a try. Why don’t you talk to a few individually and get there ideas? I suggest that one area might be school districts that need school buses for their students.

Of course, there are commercial companies who have the same need to transport material, i.e. contractors, wholesale flower distributors, wholesale vegetable distributors. In fact the list is endless”

Susan said “We need to clear this with Bob since all our sales force is comprised of his people.”

Mike said “Why don’t you talk with Bob? This is another opportunity for you to be seen at the forefront of new approaches.”

The next morning Susan appeared just before Bob arrived. She had two steaming cups of coffee that she had picked up on the way in.

She marched right into his office while he was shedding his outer coat.

He grinned when he saw the coffee. “I didn’t know your new duties included coffee for the execs of this outfit.”

She grinned. “Only for you and on specific occasions.”

They both laughed. Bob invited her to take a seat. He became animated about her idea and was sure most of the sale staff would want to participate.

Some of the older veterans might not because they had their traditional way of finding prospects, including small commercial vehicles.

Bob suggested three men for Susan to invite to a first meeting. "You do it alone. That way, they will get the idea that you are at the root of this endeavor."

Susan smiled. "I want to add one more name at the request of Mike. He wants to test Clay, who has been making slurring remarks about Mike."

Bob Okayed the suggestion and Susan retired to her office to initiate the plan.

When her plan was in outline form, she brought it to Mike. He looked it over and said "It looks fairly complete. How do you select the prospects for their calls?"

Susan smiled "That is easy. The yellow pages have done our work for us."

"What do you believe will get them inside the decision maker's office?"

She replied. "I want to send out letters suggesting why our prospects should consider us and include some Ford advertising puffs about the quality of Ford trucks.

"Susan, your planning is inclusive. Work it up in detail and when you are ready, I will get you invited to our communications weekly lunch so you can present it to our informal executive committee."

"This is a major change and it warrants asking for total cooperation."

She smiled. She gave herself enough time, planning on being ready two days after the New Year.

Bob stopped by Mike's office.

He said, "Roger informed me about Clay. Just for your information, I had a very open conversation with Clay I let him tell me what was on his mind. He did. I told him that he was wrong but entitled to his opinions but those opinions were not to be vocalized here."

"I offered him a chance to move to our sister agency or leave. He chose the first of those options. I have alerted their management of his attitude. If it continues, then he will be at the end of the road."

Mike gave Susan the inside story.

She said "I am glad. He scared me. He resented my turning him down for a date."

John dropped into Mike's office

I have some good news to share. Paul has just been elected by the board to be our treasurer as well as our controller and two additional staff to ease his load.

He will have a new title, also getting a nice bump in his take home so he can afford to treat us today.

Paul made an observation to Bob. "Do you realize how many team combinations we have developed? There is this team of four. There is your team of four, with one overlap to this team. There is Mike's team with one overlap in this group. There is this newer team of Mrs. F, Mike, myself with two overlaps to this group.

We could call this a true joint venture in management. Mike seems to be in the middle or abutting each of the teams."

Bob said, "What I see happening is flattening of the vertical management chart, all this happening, although unintended. That's a good thing but definitely not traditional."

Mike called Mr. J to find some time for a brief conversation. Mr. J said the time was right. When Mike entered, Mr. J waved him to a seat.

"I hope you had a pleasant New Year celebration."

Mike said that they did.

“How is Helen doing?”

“She is doing well. May I assume your family is well?”

Mr. J nodded. “What’s on your mind, Mike? Something new, I bet.”

Mike smiled “Susan is doing a great job, Mr. J. We have been noodling about some new ways to increase sales. She has an idea that I would like to take up on our next communications meeting.”

“First, I would like to know if you want a briefing and then I would like to have her invited to make the presentation.”

“Mike, I certainly do not need a briefing. You are free to bring to the agenda anything you believe is of value.”

“After she briefs me, I will invite Susan and notify the others of her attendance. We will put her first on the agenda and, if we have no special business, it would be nice to have her stay for the entire meeting, just to get a feel of things. “

“Thank you, Mr. J. I will tell her the good news”

They had their special table, set for seven since all were present including Susan. The meeting started officially before dessert and coffee were served.

Susan laid out in clear terms the plan for salesmen calling on special organizations who had needs for special bodies.

She handed out the written plan and supplemented that with talking points. It was clear to Mike that she had convinced all of them that it was a sound plan, well prepared. It was ready for implementation.

Mr. Smiles asked “Do you think the salesmen will be willing?”

Susan said “I have talked with three of the key salesmen who are excited. I believe the others will have the same reaction.”

Mr. J thanked her and said “I do think it is good bold move. Thank you. Please feel free to stay for the balance of our meeting.”

Back in the office, she hugged Mike and thanked him for making it all happen.

He said, "Susan you did it. I am only the catalyst. I thank you on behalf of the entire committee. Even Mr. Smiles was smiling, a very good sign.”

Now get the rest of the crew aboard and set the schedule with their input. .”

Within two days she had everyone aboard. Within three days they had three orders from two new customers. There was no question that the plan would be successful. In fact, all the sales staff was excited about their chances of getting a bigger piece of the pie.

Mike submitted a request to Bob and Mr. J for a change of title for Susan. Her new title would be “Assistant Manager of the Commercial Sales Department. He also recommended a commensurate increase in salary.

He said nothing to Susan. On the 31st of January, a special staff meeting was called for the sales department. Bob made a few announcements of special interest. He announced the dollars in the bonus pool so that each salesman could compute his share.

He said “I have a final announcement. We have just filled a vacancy that we have had on our staffing chart for a while. The position of Assistant Manager of the Commercial Sales Department is now complete.

The position is awarded to our own Susan.”

A precedent had been set. Once more, Smythe was at the forefront.

Susan was overcome by the promotion and the acceptance by the sales staff.

The tears hung on the edge but did not overflow to her cheeks. No one expected a word.

Mike smiled and said she would make her acknowledgment speech at the next meeting. Everyone clapped.

Mr. J, who, of course, had given his blessing to the whole event, came to the office to offer his congratulations to Susan and to Mike.

Susann thanked Mike for paving the way. She then said, "By the way, I believe I have finally found the man of my life. I am eager to have you and Helen meet him. Are the two of you available Saturday night to have dinner at my apartment?"

Helen was thrilled to get a blow by blow description. She said "Mike, you have struck a blow for women's power. Thank you."

The dinner at Susan's for four was a smash. The wine was first class. Susan went all out. The steaks were done to each one's request. Conversation went from discussing Susan's new job to the upcoming program of the San Diego orchestra, to the latest movies.

They discussed local politics.

On the way home from the dinner, Helen asked "What are your reactions to Jerry, the man in Susan's life?"

"I liked him. We had some nice chats while you two were in the kitchen. I thought he was sharp when we were all together. I liked his dinner conversation."

Helen went on "Notice any comparisons?"

"No, I can't figure he looks like anyone I know."

"Don't you know any one five feet eleven, blond, blue eyes, sparkles at dinner, knows his politics and his public affairs?"

Mike burst out laughing. "You think he resembles me?"

"Mike, his facial features are not yours but every little atom of his being is a spitting image of you. I think Susan was looking for you even before she met you. I think you ended up being the picture she needed. She found him and he found her."

"If she hadn't found Jerry, she might not have been able to keep her hands off you. I bet we hear wedding bells before this year is out."

"If you say so, Helen. I guess I am blind."

He smiled to himself, having just heard his lover inflate his ego.

Chapter 11.

Mike and John were getting antsy waiting for some warm weather so they could get out on the golf course. John had a couple of putters in his office and would, on occasion, invite Mike in for a friendly bet, putting into a water glass across the carpet of his office.

John, on the recommendation of Mr. J and Paul, brought Mike into conversations as much for Mike's learning as for John seeking confirmation of his ideas from Mike. He liked to do that before taking ideas to Mr. J or to his own dad.

Mike and John were working into Mr. Smythes idea for the future management of the family business.

One day in March, John invited Mike to some conversation "Mike, Susan is doing so well that there is less pressure on you. Am I right?"

"Right on."

"I have a suggestion. Come with me this afternoon. I need to visit and get some reports from the Lincoln agency. You can get to know the management there. You might confirm my judgment on some of the information I will be getting."

"You can check on their progress of the compensation plan that you helped them install."

It was agreed. Mike informed Susan who said "so long" and turned to her work.

"Susan, it's time to start looking for our third."

He smiled and left.

They received a warm welcome. Mike met all the top people. He was privy to the oral reports and said he did not need paper copies.

Most of the news was good. John and the management team decided on a few minor tweaks in their promotional plans for the next 30 days.

On the way back, John asked Mike, "Would it be possible for you and Helen to take a ten day trip with my Nancy and my folks starting in two weeks?"

Mike was taken aback. His mind raced with the implications. He said "It may be possible, but where and why?"

"We usually fly to Florida in the late winter. Dad and I visit the agencies. We play some golf, get some sun and relax. Dad tells me you have not had a real vacation and he suggested the invitation. I would like you alongside me when we visit the agencies."

Mike answered. "I would love to do it and will talk to Helen tonight. May I call you this evening?"

"That would be great."

"Oh Mike, what an invitation. I want to go but I need to get permission from the commanding officer. I need to get new clothes for summer wear. There is so much planning to do. God, I am excited."

Mike called John. Nancy answered. She was pleased to hear a yes.

"Let me talk with Helen."

The two women talked for a half hour. Helen beamed the whole time and continued when she was off the phone.

"I'll call mom."

Mike said, "Make the call. Please do not worry about money. There is more to this trip for me than what appears on the surface, I just don't know what it is."

"Buy the basic essentials. I am sure you and Nancy will find plenty of the right clothing when you shop in the Florida resorts."

Mike had to clear the plans with Mr. J, Bob and Susan. There were no obstacles.

Mr. J said he would be leaving for ten days in the south the very day that Mike was returning

“Susan, you are to sit in for me at every meeting while I am gone. Get Bob to invite you to sit in any sales meetings he holds. Thank you for holding down the fort.”

All seven of them flew Eastern Airways to Miami on a Monday morning. The trip was extended to two full weeks.

A large Lincoln from the Miami dealership met them. The chauffeur loaded the baggage and drove them to the hotel in Miami Beach.

Helen and Mike had a small suite facing the ocean. It was utterly grand, breath taking; neither had ever had an experience like this.

Nancy called Helen an hour later. “Get into your bathing suit. We need some of this Florida sun and beach. Bring the sun screen. See you in the lobby in twenty.”

Mike urged her.

“Shoo. Stay as long as you like but do not burn. You can buy a large brimmed sunhat somewhere on the beach, I am sure. Now kiss me and go, Knock them dead. You two are beauties.”

He watched from the balcony seeing them emerge, one already lightly tanned and dark haired, the other still pale with honey colored hair. He saw them head for a kiosk that had hats for sale.

Helen came back about two hours later .She had a start on her tan.

She said “We are invited to cocktails at the senior’s suite at six thirty.

The cocktail time was informal There were two guests, the general manager of the Lincoln agency and his wife .The conversation was mostly general, focusing on the economy, international politics and women’s fashions.

The dinner was for the six of them. Mike was seated next to John’s mom who insisted on being called Martha

Very smoothly, she got Mike talking about his navy days, then back to his days at Penn State. Before dinner was over he was sharing stories of growing up.

The night was almost full moon lit. Helen and Mike lay on the chaise lounge. They could see the lights of passing ships far out at sea. Gleeful sounds of parties floated up from the beach.

The distant wail of a clarinet could be heard from a combo playing at one of the bars.

Mike said “Helen, that Martha is smooth. I sure would like to have her working for me. A little conversation about my navy days ended up in a full blown biography of my life. I am sure it was planned.”

Helen just listened.

They began teasing each other until Mike asked “Say, hot stuff, is you ready to be bedded by this sailor boy?”

Helen laughed as he carried her, wending their way to nirvana.

The limo took the men to the Miami Mercury-Lincoln agency. Mr. Smythe had arranged separate meetings with the general manager and the two sales managers.

The six of them had a working lunch. Mike and John sat in on every meeting only as observers.

Mike made notes after each meeting. He and John agreed on this and would share the notes later.

At two o'clock they were driven to a private golf club. Mike was able to buy shorts, shirt, socks and golf shoes. Mr. Smythe had arranged club rentals and caddies.

They concentrated on the golf. This was time for relaxation.

Conversation turned to business during the after golf drinks. Mr. Smythe said "Mike, get your notes and let's review the morning and lunch".

He was pleased with the notes.

"You two study those notes this evening and each evening after we finish."

"Today will be repeated at Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach."

We'll golf here tomorrow morning and move north tomorrow afternoon.

The women sunbathed, shopped and window shopped while the men did their thing.

In Palm Beach, the women spent the afternoon at a classy modeling event with stunning hip swinging beauties walking the runway.

Most evenings the six of them had dinner together. Mike was partnered with Martha, Nan with Mr. Smythe, leaving John to partner with Helen.

Martha chatted about John as a teenager. She asked questions about Mike's work. He told her a little about his work with and for Mrs. Foster, whom Martha had known for over twenty years.

Martha made Mike blush when she told him some complimentary things she had heard about him from Mrs. F.

He told her more stories of his time in the navy He shared the story of meeting Helen.

Mike's relationship with Martha was enriched during those dinners.

The last of the business meetings was held in Palm Beach on Monday morning. The men golfed that afternoon.

On Tuesday morning the three men met for brunch in a private dining room of the hotel. The agenda was a cross examination of John and Mike of what they learned at each of the agencies.

Did they spot any areas that needed special attention or support? Mr. Smythe seemed pleased with their responses.

"Mike, would you find a secretarial service between now and golf time. Dictate and have the notes typed in triplicate for us."

"Yes sir."

They landed back in San Diego on a Sunday afternoon and were picked up in two Lincolns.

Mike was a little late arriving home after the first day at work. Helen was eager to tell him about a certain phone call she had a few minutes ago.

"Finish your drink, and then come into the kitchen to tell me what a great cook I am."

She said "I had a call from Nan today. We talked about the things we did on the trip. She wondered if I had any after effects from the sun bathing."

"She also told me that you were a big hit with John's mom. In fact, his mom wished you were their son along with John. How about that, sailor boy?"

Mike blushed and said nothing. She turned her body to face him, put her arms around his waist and her head on his chest.

"Nice going, Honey."

John and Mr. J. asked Mike to represent the firm in this year's annual United Way campaign for the greater San Diego area.

During the first planning meeting, Mike accepted the assignment to work with two major electronic manufacturing firms.

His partner, a young executive from Conair Corporation, a major supplier of aircraft parts to Boeing and Lockheed. The two developed a close relationship during the weeks they worked closely together.

Gene Dobbs was the son-in-law of the Chairman of ConAir.

At the end of their day working for the United Way, Gene invited Mike to join him for a drink at his club.

Their visits were almost like a happy hour, both sipping a delightful white wine, killing a nice bottle, drinking in the French style with a small amount of water being sipped occasionally between sips of wine.

Both regaled the other with stories, some funny and some serious, from their growing up years and their recent vocations.

Mike surprised himself when he realized that both had revealed some very personal things such as might happen between old time friends.

One evening, Gene handed Mike two of his business cards and asked Mike for his.

"Mike, if Smythe is interested in selling some vehicles to ConAir, have your man give this card to the manager of our purchasing department. He should get a decent hearing."

"Thank you Gene. I appreciate it and will definitely send one of our reps."

"Mike, would you like to meet me for lunch next Monday at our executive dining room?"

"I'd like that, Gene."

Three days after Mike handed Gene's business card to Susan, she walked into a meeting between Bob and Mie, flourishing a purchase order for six pickup trucks to be delivered within two weeks to ConAir.

"Thanks Mike."

Promptly at noon on Monday, Mike was escorted by a sharp looking receptionist to the dining room where Gene met him at the door.

As Gene walked them to toward their table, he stopped twice to introduce Mike, the first to Conair's vice president of sales and then to the VP of operations.

After telling a couple of fun stories, Gene transitioned to the growing problems at ConAir.

Gene asked Mike about his role and feelings about his work.

Mike answered these probes with frank responses.

Gene changed the subject as their main courses arrived. They chatted about the prospects for San Diego sports teams. The discussion then moved to the economy and public attitudes about the Vietnam War.

As the dessert was served, Gene said "Mike, during our time together last week, I was taken with the kinds of things you have contributed to the Smythe organization."

“I hope you will not take offense but after some conversation with the two gentlemen you just met, I took the initiative to order a background check on you. The reason I did so, was because we would like to talk with you about possibly joining the ConAir family.”

Mike was stunned, not expecting anything like this to be on today’s agenda. “I don’t know what to say, Gene. That came right out of left field”

“Just say you are willing to talk. Nothing more needs to be said today. We can plan a time that is fully convenient in some neutral place so that you will not be compromised. As I said I would be pleased if you just say you are willing to talk.”

“The answer is yes. I would be a fool not to be willing to pursue this conversation.”

“That’s great, Mike. You will probably want to discuss this with your family, so what say I call you in a few days to set up a conversation. One of the private rooms at my club might serve as a discreet place to meet.”

Mike agreed.

Before he started to tell Helen about the day, she said “Sailor boy, something is on your mind. I can see it in your eyes.”

He invited her to sit down next to him so he could lock his eyes on hers to really see her reaction.

“Mike, that is exciting and a real compliment. Any idea what kind of position?”

“Not the least and probably won’t have any way of knowing until our meeting.”

“Have you thought about your idea of not wanting to get stuck at some lower level of a large corporation?”

“Yes, that will be on my mind and a part of our decision making. I say our, because we both together will make any final decision about making a move.”

He slowly ran the ball of his thumb from her left ear down to her cleavage and then put his lips to her throat, Helen’s special weakness, then to her ear whispering “How’s your energy level?”

She was on her feet in an instant. “I’ll race you to bed. Last one in is a monkey.”

Chapter 12

Mike's phone rang. "This is Gene. Sorry for the delay. Did you have a chance to discuss our conversation?"

"Yes, I did and we both agreed that a conversation should take place if you have not changed your mind."

"Good news. Would this Friday evening for dinner at the club be appropriate?"

Mike said he was available.

"Gene said "It's a date."

Mike was accompanied by the doorman into the vestibule of the club. Gene greeted him warmly. They were ushered to a private dining room where their drinks, as ordered by Gene, were being set on the table.

"Mike, with a little more detective work, I found out about some major contributions that you have made to the operations of the Smythe agency. My associates and I are very impressed."

Mike said thanks and wondered how they were able to find out such inside info but knew he could not ask.

Gene went on. "We are very serious about making a significant proposal in order to recruit you. The first big question is whether you have some specific reason that would keep you from being open to such a proposal."

They were interrupted when the maître d informed them that dinner was about to be served. Gene switched the conversation to matters unrelated while they had dinner and dessert.

He then asked Mike for his response.

"Gene, I have had a resistance to joining a large company for a number of reasons. One, it takes a lot of time for a young man to reach a level where significant contributions to policy can be made. That level of participation at Smythe has been very satisfactory,"

“Second, getting in line behind another executive on a fast track can provide serious limitations for recognition and promotion, particularly if that senior person is a long way from retirement. That has been my thinking.”

“Those are valid reasons and do apply more to public corporations than in our case which is essentially still a family owned business. One thing I can assure you is that the level at which we hope you will join us does eliminate your second concern. While you will not have direct participation in executive decisions, there will be opportunities for input from either of two positions we are considering.”

That statement got Mike’s attention. He nodded his head approving of what he was hearing.

“Mike, we have two slots which we believe you can fill. The positions would be either as Special Assistant to the VP of Sales or VP of Operations. Our preference is to have you in Operations but either is available to you.”

“That sounds like positions high on the organizational chart, Gene. There must be assistant VP positions reporting to the VP in each unit.”

“Yes, but both are within a few years of retirement and are not what we need as we plan to expand.”

Mike listened for any undertones but sensed he was getting the full scoop from Gene.

“By the way Gene, what is your position with the firm?”

Gene laughed “I am the special recruiter for Personnel and sit on the board since my wife and I hold a significant block of voting stock. By the way the employment package includes a better retirement plan than you may have at Smythe, special perks, really fine medical coverage, a personal Lincoln, purchased from Smythe and a golf membership on one of the clubs.”

“Those sound great, Gene, but I need to know about the real work I will be doing. Fulfillment through my vocational pursuit is high on my needs list.”

“I understand. What we need to do is make time for you to visit with both VP’s so you can decide. How about after your work hours someday next week? Both men are available until seven or so.”

So it was arranged.

Mike met with both VP’s the next evening after work. He liked both men and was impressed with their openness about problems to be solved. Both were over worked and needed good assistance right now. In fact, last week would have not have been too soon for either one

Helen and he spent hours late into the night discussing the pros and cons.

Helen said “There is no question about your finding fulfillment in either job but particularly in the operations department. The perks and salary are fantastic.”

Mike added, “Gene was right about my being close to major decision makers although there is no way to measure openness to new ideas. I did feel Mr. Clark in operations was more flexible.”

“Well, sailor boy, the rubber hits the road. In the navy lingo, sink or swim. You know that I will support you and overcome any of my imagined problems if you say yes to Gene.”

It was late and two tired lovers fell asleep with Helen in Mike’s arms.

When Mike awakened early, his thoughts jumped to last night's conversation. This was a tough decision. It was an opportunity of his short lifetime. He could hardly believe his good fortune arising out of his willingness to participate in community affairs.

He knew and regretted that in ConAir, he probably would never serve as the top executive but would soar high enough.

His face darkened as he thought about the necessity of attending social affairs with moneyed people who probably did not share the same outlook on life as did Helen and he.

"Damn, this is tough but Helen said she was sure they could live with the problems, which meant overcoming them."

He made his decision.

Two days later, Gene was waiting at a table at the restaurant when Mike arrived. His drink followed him to the table.

"Mike, no matter what you decide, I want you to know that I want to continue our friendship"

"I'm glad, Gene, because our friendship has been a part of my thinking throughout. However I have decided not to make a move for one primary reason."

"My developing dream has been and continues to be either the owner of my own business or as the head of a business."

"If I came to ConAir, you would end up being my competition to attain my goal. I want to continue to be your friend not your competitor."

"I am truly sorry, Gene. The offer, the work and the future being offered are extraordinary."

"I'm sorry too, Mike. I believe we would have made a great team and together made great contributions to the business."

Lifting his glass and touching Mike's "Here's to you finding what you are hoping for. I have no doubt you will. Everything I have come to know in our times together and through my research says that ConAir will have missed someone special."

They parted, knowing their friendship would last but their chances of seeing each other would be limited.

That evening when he told Helen that he had made his decision and had told Gene that he would not be joining ConAir, she pulled him down to lie with her on the sofa.

As she snuggled, she said, "It feels like the absolutely right decision, although the offer itself was heady. Mike, I want you to know I feel that you have already taken us to the stars. We continue to fly from one to the other and have yet to decide the one we shall call our own."

It was too much outright admiration for Mike who broke into tears.

Three days later, Maria's voice on the intercom announced a call from Gene. "Good morning, Gene."

"Hi, Mike. I just had a brain storm. Do you play hand ball? No. Would you like to learn? It's a great way to stay in shape. How about meeting me the day after tomorrow at noon at the Y? Bring some shorts, a tee shirt and high top tennis shoes. I'll reserve a court and we can start some lessons."

"Sounds great, Gene. See you then."

Mike arrived a few minutes early but Gene was waiting at the registration desk. He bought Mike a pair of handball gloves and headed for the dressing room.

On the court, Gene took him through some of the basics. After a bout of twenty minutes of this, Gene suggested that Mike and he compete.

Mike would earn a point if he could make Gene move two steps. Mike laughed, figuring he could do that but he did not reckon with the skill of a top player.

Gene won the match 15 to 2.

They continued to meet twice a week, Mike, who was a quick study improved rapidly so that Gene invited a couple of others for a friendly game, One was a local municipal judge and the other a police captain of the local precinct.

Of course, the other couple won and invited them for a return match the following week. Later that same week Gene set up another match with a police commander and a fellow exec of Gene.

Over the course of months, while Mike improved his skills, he competed with a number of well- known public figures as well as business leaders.

When Mike had a chance to confer with his boss, Bob told him that Susan was a cool customer never losing her patience in the midst of very difficult situations. Her voice never indicated frustration which she must have felt.

“Mike, you have made your point in spades. At least, this company will have no hesitation to hire women in positions of management as long as they show their mettle and skill. As you know she is the highest paid of the three assistant managers? Kudos to you, buddy”

Mike strolled into John’s office. John waved him into a chair.”

Mike you look like a lost sou. What gives?”

Mike replied, “Everything is running smoothly my staff and Roger have everything under control. Bob is out in the field and Paul is busy. I wondered if you were free for lunch later on.”

“I am glad you stopped by. I am free for lunch and will buy if you can take time to join me on my weekly communication meeting at the Mercury location after lunch.”

“You know that everyone puts the best spin possible on their reports to the boss. If we do this jointly, you might alert me to potential overstatements. I am still new enough and a little too naïve, I think. Could you do that?”

“I’d be delighted I am not sure what I can contribute but I would like to try. What time shall we leave?”

John thought 12:15. “See you then”

At the agency, everyone was seated waiting for them. One of the staff scurried to find a chair for Mike. He was introduced to those he had not previously met. It could be assumed that the entire group wondered why Mike was present.

Most of the reports were routine: The number of units sold and delivered, the number still in stock, Gross dollars less factory cost as well as the cost of prepping the vehicles.

The service and used car departments made their reports. All reports were in writing as well as given orally. Mike made a couple of notes.

Some of the staff was dismissed before the profit and loss statements were distributed. The report was the combined summary report for the agency, not broken down by departments.

When the meeting was adjourning, John thanked the top brass, drove to his club for a drink and a debriefing.

“Well, any comments?”

Mike said “On the surface, it looks very good, almost too good, which makes me nervous. I would suggest you ask for a change of format. The profit and loss should be broken down by the two types of vehicles, maybe even by models for Mercury and the same for Lincoln with a separate one for the used car department.”

“You might also ask for more detail such as service costs related to prepping per vehicle instead of a total number. Ask to have invoices on standby if necessary to substantiate some numbers. You might never need to do that, but alerting them to the possibility will make each responsible party more specific as they prepare their numbers for you.”

“Those are good suggestions. I hadn’t thought of them this format that we are using is the one that Dad used.”

“When your dad did this, the volume was much less. Also his years of experience would alert him to ask for more information if he thought it necessary.

It’s not that people are underhanded. Most just work hard to impress their superiors in business. Your demand for more detail will force them to be more factual as opposed to selling you and putting a spin on things in the report. .”

“Thank you, Mike. Where did you get all this knows how anyway?”

“I’m not sure, John. Possibly my studies at State college, curiosity and listening. I just seem to adopt mentally most of what I hear and what I read. Who really knows how we learn.”

“Let’s get back to your concerns. John, have you taken time to study the personnel files of your major executives, including what we in the navy called fitness reports?”

“I am just getting to start the fitness report idea in my department. In any case; I am thoroughly familiar with the personnel files at our agency.”

“Again, Mike, thank you for a great suggestion. I will get to know the executives in both agencies. I would also like to explore with you a more formal manner of evaluating our people. We are pretty casual at the present time.”

John drove Mike back to the agency and waved good bye as he dropped him out front. Mike went to his desk and made a note to talk to some of his colleagues at the United Way, regarding their methods of evaluating senior staff.

He planned to ask Susan to pick up a book or two from the library.

He headed for home.

After dinner, Mike rinsed and Helen stacked the dishes. They retired to the sofa for some hugging and smooching while they listened to their favorite classical station. When the concert hour came to an end, Mike turned off the radio.

“Helen, John took me with him to the Mercury agency to hear their monthly reports and help him evaluate the information. I was able to give some hints about the nature of the information. I think he will adopt my suggestions.

Also, he and I are going to redo our evaluation program for executives.”

“. I am sure that you and John will make a great team at whatever you work on.”

“Right now, I am ready for sleep. I spent a lot of time on my feet today.”

On the agenda of the next communication meeting was the matter of evaluations of the performance of executives.

John had suggested the item. Mr. J put this item last so that full attention would be given.

John introduced the subject. "I am hoping that we can get a start on a program that we can use at all out locations here and in Florida. We probably should have done this sooner. The informal way we did things earlier was due to the fact that the company was so much smaller and people knew one another rather well. How do the rest of you feel about that?"

Mr. J. agreed that the task should be addressed immediately.

"I suggest we ask Mike to head up a team to do it."

Mike demurred. "I really know so little. My only familiarity is the navy system wherein the personnel jacket contained the fitness report written up annually by one's superior officer with limited input from the person being evaluated. I didn't like it then and would not like to see that form implemented here."

Mr. J asked "Does a one else have experience that can contribute to this process?"

Susan indicated she had been reviewed in her last job but remembered little of what had occurred.

John piped up. "I have an idea. Mike, why don't you take some time to do a bit of research with some colleagues at the United Way or with some of the corporation execs to whom you made pitches last year?"

Mr. J "Would you do that, Mike?"

Mike laughed "I guess I just got nominated. Of course I will do my best to bring us the info with several recommendations. It does seem to me that this must become a group decision by those being evaluated as well as the potential evaluators."

Mike decided on seeking information from the United Way, ConAir, IBM and two larger retailers in San Diego.

Offhand, he could not remember the name of the personnel consultants' downtown, but he planned on talking to them.

In his report, he decided not to identify the company using a plan he described. He had promised confidentiality.

One company used a plan that was essential the navy plan. Executives were rated by their immediate superiors. Two others did the same but consulted with the person being evaluated.

The responses were either included or the report was amended to reflect the alternate point of view, if such a point varied from that of the evaluator.

Mike considered that plan to be worthwhile consideration.

The fourth he like even better. It was similar in nature but included a self-evaluation alongside the evaluation of the superior manager.

A consultation was then held between the two parties and the final report usually was a jointly agreed upon report. In the event of strong disagreement, both reports were entered into the records.

Eight weeks after introducing the item on the agenda, Mike was ready with his report. He submitted three plans with no reference to the corporate user of the plan.

A lively discussion ensued. They all dismissed plan one from the outset. There was almost a split between the second and third plans. Mike remained neutral with only informational comments responding to questions. They adjourned the meeting without a decision. The item was tabled for two weeks.

Mike knew how he would vote, if it came to that, when the item was returned for a final decision.

In the meantime, Mike had given the full information to the manager of the personnel department. He asked her to get an idea from at least one other source using an annual review plan.

Mike had her invited to the next meeting on the subject. She was not to reveal the plans she had reviewed but Mike assured her a chance to speak if she so desired. He cleared her presence with John and Mr. J.

A straw vote at the beginning showed a majority preferred plan three with the self-evaluation process.

John asked the personnel manager if she had a preference. She said she had talked to other agencies but none had considered either plan two or plan three.

John asked her which seemed to be the fairest plan of the two. Having heard the discussion, she hesitated since it was obvious that John and Mr. J favored plan two. She said with a tremor in her voice that she liked plan three.

John turned to Mike, "Okay, wise guy, it's time to take a stand. How will you vote?"

Mike, with no hesitation, said, "I will vote for plan three. When a disagreement occurs between two executives, plan three offers the best chances of maintaining the employee. It also offers a clearer record for the future when the junior executive may be reporting to another senior who will need to know more about his new associate"

John spoke to the issue. "Mr. J and I are still not convinced but we agreed before the meeting that we would go with the majority, if the majority vote was significant. Let's see a show of hands."

All the others raised their hands in favor of plan three.

This was the first time that Mr. J and Mike did not end up in agreement. Although they had disagreed on many subjects during the past, they usually ended up in a position of agreement.

Mike felt a sense of discomfort. He did appreciate that management had agreed to go with a majority vote, but that didn't sit easy with him. He felt he had to deal with the unease in some way. It was obvious to Mike that he and Mr. J had different ideas of management.

Mr. J had the responsibility while Mike was only in advisory positions on matters of policy. Then it was only if asked.

As he was wont to do, he invited Paul to have lunch. Paul had voted with the majority, of course, but he was a veteran in the organization compared to Mike.

While they were eating, Mike raised the question with Paul "What is your sense of what happened regarding the review process, Paul? Did you note any undertones?"

I am feeling uneasy, not about the final decision but about what was happening with Mr. J."

"I have the same feeling, Mike. I am not sure. Maybe we ought to speculate a little."

"My first guess is that he is feeling like he is losing control of some things. The upcoming matter of the union is weighing heavily on his mind."

"Translate that to his junior executive team and he may have the same feelings developing. The review process gives them some power usually reserved for their superiors."

“You may be right, Paul. Something similar has been running through my mind. If that is the case, then I may be headed for some rougher sledding than I have enjoyed this past year.”

“You know where I stand on that kind of management. It had worked in the past but it can be improved by widening the use of the talent that bright young people are bringing into corporate life.”

“You are probably right Mike. Old habits die hard, especially when there is a record of success. One would think that your example would be enough to convince Mr. J but that goes hard against his grain.”

“I could go to John to explore this Paul, but you have been like a godfather to him in a personal as well as a business way. Do you think you might find out? Is our speculation valid? Is there something more? How does Mr. Smythe feel about what is happening?”

“I’ll give it a try, Mike. I can see that it worries you deeply. If our guess is right, what does that mean for you?”

“Well, I am not sure that I want to spend a long time with a firm that gets even partially stuck in the past. I keep receiving invites to conversations with other corporations. I keep turning down the invitations.”

“I have been so happy here. I have been given a lot of rope and I believe the result has been an improved agency.”

“In fact, the reorganization of the sales department has freed me to work outside and hardly a worry about what those three young managers are doing.”

“My being outside has led us to new avenues of business. Just between the two of us, if I sense that I am stifled, it will be difficult to continue. It would be true for at least two of my young associates.”

“However, it is my idea not to buy tomorrow’s problems today. Let’s try to find out.”

When Mike crossed the sales room after lunch he said good afternoon to Mr. J who was on his way to John’s office. Mike received a curt greeting that made him wonder.

Mike dropped into Bob’s office to see if there were any items that required either of them or both of them to consider.

“Nothing that won’t wait until our scheduled time. Anything on your mind?”

Mike replied that he didn’t feel easy about the group decision on the subject of reviews.

Bob said, “That seemed a little peculiar, but he and John went along, although seeming unhappy about that.”

“Bob, have you noticed any change in Mr. J since then?”

Bob said “He seems a little remote but I have seen him go through that time and again. He has returned a little to his authoritative way of speaking but I can’t account for it. As you know, it cannot be the state of sales it is winter and while not the most exciting time, we are holding our own and in fact better than last year for this season. Is something bothering you?”

“A little, I guess. I just have a feeling and will have to wait it out.”

Mike said nothing about his conversation with Paul.

He dropped in on his young associates. They were busy with their own routines so he did not linger. He returned to his office, answered a couple of calls, picked up a couple of folders and headed home.

It was a week later that Paul called and said “Let’s do lunch.”

They went to another restaurant where they were unlikely to be interrupted. Paul suggested they have a drink.

Paul started right in. "Mike, our guts were right. Mr. J has decided that he needed to take a harder line with employees. He has John convinced, putting before John the success of the past which has put Smythe at the head of the list of all agencies served by the Foes plant and sixth in the nation among all Ford dealers.

He is convinced that our newly adopted review plan will flop and will need to be overhauled after our first go around."

Mike asked "How do you read John? Do you think he has bought into Mr. J's plans and ideas?"

"It's hard to say. On the surface he is going along. I asked him if he had a chance to talk to his dad. He said no. His dad is just returning from a long trip to Florida.

He thinks his dad wants him to make up his own mind about things. You need to remember that his dad has always been high on Mr. J who has brought this agency a long way since his arrival."

"Do you believe he will raise the question with his dad?"

Paul replied "Yes I do, mostly because I suggested it. His long relationship with me will cause him to raise the question. I pointed out that his dad will never fault him for seeking counsel when the issue is important enough and he believes he is lacking the experience."

"Thank you, Paul. I feel a little better about the possibility of Mr. Smythe having a different point of view. I am sorry that I find myself so far apart from Mr. J.

After all it is their business. They have the right to run it as they see fit."

"Mike, are you considering seriously the idea of leaving?"

"Paul, as I said, I am in a quandary. I can't see myself spending a lifetime being subject to the whims of a benevolent employer. If I stay here, I will be doing just that."

"I do love the experience I have had and what I saw was happening here this past year, but I get edgy thinking we will not take advantage of what the future promises. "

"What will you do if you do decide to leave?"

Mike did not answer for a full minute. "I am not sure. I haven't made any plans because I haven't been planning to leave. Maybe it is time to think of alternatives."

"I may have to find something I can plan to initiate, a business of my own. That means raising funds.

Going to work for a big corporation will not suit me, because I am too young to be hired at a high enough level to be involved as I have been here."

"There may be another Smythe, but that will take some looking, maybe like a needle in the proverbial haystack."

"God, Mike, I will hate to see you go. Before you decide how you plan to proceed, let us talk and talk. I will do all I can to help you make a decision if that is what your desire."

Mike said, "I will set up a conversation with Mr. J. I will also plan to talk with John. I always have his ear. If I still feel uneasy, I will ask John to set up a conversation with Mr. Smythe."

"They, along with you and Bob, have given me the opportunity of a life time. I would not even think of leaving without full conversations with each of you."

Paul asked, "What next?"

"Let's wait to see what happens when John talks with his dad. He will let you know, I presume."

“Oh, yes but it may take time.

Mike said “I find that patience is a great characteristic and serves us well but waiting for others to decide the direction of one’s life can be folly. I have started some letters which I plan to finish tonight.”

“They are inquiries about possibilities up the west coast. One person, with whom I have a great relationship, told me that if I ever considered coming to the Bay Area, I should call him. I once had an offer from a wealthy dowager to join one of her companies.”

“I will be sending off a letter to him tonight just to open up some options.”

“That is probably wise, Mike. How does Helen feel about moving?”

“She and I talk quite often about our life and my work. She believes that her happiness is tied to my total enjoyment in some given vocation. She loves the Bay Area.”

“Just remember that I want to be available to you as you decide, Mike.”

That evening, Helen met him at the door. “Your wine is on the table. You are going to tell me the whole thing, whatever it is.”

“I let you off the hook last night but not tonight. When the story is fully out in the open, we will find the right prescription for whatever ails you”

Mike gave her the whole story, the facts, the feelings and the speculations. She listened without ever interrupting.

She saw the pain in his eyes, the tears that did not fall but hung on his eyelids. She felt her own tears flowing onto her cheeks. She got up and poured a little more wine for Mike.

“Mike, I see and feel your pain. You have been so happy and fulfilled since the day you started working there. You survived all the speed bumps and came out better after each adverse experience.”

“You have developed deep relationships that will have to be ruptured. That is always painful.”

“We always knew that someday you would want to be on your own. This may be your opportunity. I know it’s risky but it does have a positive side.”

“Honey, I have no idea what that might be, even if I can find the funding.”

Helen laughed “So what? You will figure that out. You might even take a temporary job until you decide. I’ll bet you have a dozen offers as soon as it is known that you are on the market.”

Mike laughed “Baby, you are a wonder. I guess I can go anywhere, rich or poor, and there you will be, urging me to go for the gusto because you think I can do anything.”

“Well it is true. You can do anything you put your mind to. Sailor, God gave you an exceptional mind and spirit, honey. You rise to the top just like cream in a quart of raw milk:

“It might not work out on the first attempt, but your patience and persistence will enable your achievement. I have told you on more than one occasion that you are my hero.”

She continued. “Tell me. What is your gut telling you at the moment?”

“My gut tells me that my days with the agency are definitely numbered. I will keep my promise to talk with Paul and seek his help as I try to come to some decision.”

“In the midst of my yoga this morning, it became clear to me. Mr. J will not be comfortable with me around and, of course, the same can be said for me.”

Helen said, “Let’s table your worries for the evening. We can join the gang at our favorite eatery and follow that with a night of making love.”

Paul stopped by early the next morning. They were the only two in the office at this hour

Paul asked, "Ready? Our speculation was pretty much on the button. Smythe Ford will put strong emphasis on top down decision making. That is Mr. J's decision."

"John is not going to oppose it, even if he is not sure that is the right decision. He is influenced by your thinking and prefers your style."

"I can't tell you more. John wants to see you himself before you talk to anyone else."

"I got the impression that Mr. J was ready to sit down with you but held off at John's request."

Mike was perplexed. He thanked Paul who left.

John called Mike later and asked him to lunch.

At the club, they were led to a private table away from others. After a drink and bowl of snapper soup, John said, "Dad and I want to have you to dinner, the sooner the better. When I told him about the recent events and decisions, the first thing he asked about was your reactions. I told him I didn't know but I felt you would be disappointed."

"He reminded me there were two ways to find out. One, ask Paul and two ask you. I chose Paul who shared your confidential conversation He didn't like it but he leveled."

"As it turned out, that information only confirmed what my dad was thinking. Would you consider it and when can you have dinner with us?"

Mike thought that the next evening would be fine if it met their timetable. So it was set up. Mike would meet them at the country club at 6:30.

When he returned to the office, Maria took one look at him and asked if there was anything she could do. She had a coke in her hand for him when she asked. He smiled and said the coke would do.

Susan came in, having been called by Maria. She wasn't as easily put off.

Mike said, "Nothing you can do, Susan, except what you already do well. I am in the midst of negotiations with the powers that be about some major plans."

She said simply, "If you are planning on leaving, please don't make that decision without talking to me first. I think you owe me that much."

Mike acknowledged her request and said "I do owe you. I promise."

Mr. Smythe and John were at the table when Mike arrived. Both stood to shake his hand.

Mr. Smythe opened the conversation over the pre-dinner drink. "Mike, I have had a fairly good briefing of your conversation with Paul, which information came as no surprise to me."

"Let me say something about the agency that you would have no way of knowing. Mr. J is a significant minority stock holder by an agreement we worked out when he joined us. He also has a contract that gives him significant authority in managing the agency. You may have guessed one or both of these items."

Mike said "Only the second."

Mr. Smythe went on "As you are aware, the Smythe Holding Company has five other corporate holdings that you have known about and two others never talked about."

"At the Ford agency Mr. J wants to manage in the way he is most comfortable. He has this need to be in absolute control, delegating only when he must. It is hard to oppose success."

"Of course, he has incorporated ideas you brought to us."

“I would not fight the union because it is the future. They will win this time or the next. They will persist. You do know a bit of why Mr. J is doing this and that does not bind any other Smyth holdings.”

“It is our intent not to resist the union plans at the Mercury-Lincoln agency. It is the smaller of the two enterprises.”

“Anyhow, I am a more practical owner, especially if I can see some writing on the wall. Does that give you some picture of how I operate?”

“Yes, it does. Does this have some implications for my future related to your family holdings? I’m guessing that it does.”

Mr. Smythe smiled. “You’re right. Knowing what we do about you, we figured it would be difficult to make a longer term decision about staying with us at the agency, given Mr. J’s plans.”

“Besides, back some time ago, you are on record as saying that we ought to be practical and not fight the union. We think it would be hard for you to be your best inside an organization that is running contrary to what you believe is wise. Am I right?”

“Mr. Smythe, you are right on. That is like reading my soul. It has been hard for me these last few days, trying to find a place in the sun that is not related in some way to the Smythes.

John piped up. “Mike, I told dad I hoped we would find something that kept you near. You are, next to my dad and Paul, in terms of helping my learning and my thinking. Mostly I admire the way you react to meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing world.”

Mike nodded, and then said, “Well, now that I have some clearer picture, what do you or we do next?”

“I was not looking forward to talks with Mr. J, Paul, Bob and all the others about separating. Is there any chance at all that Mr. J might reverse himself?”

Mr. Smythe replied “There is an outside chance with him. He is careful and analytical I know he appreciates so much of what you have done. He is mindful of the cultural changes that you have introduced and the way you help keep the spirit of family intact.”

“Yet, he has his success to date without those changes. That weighs heavily in his decision. I would give it only an outside chance. So, we ought to plan on his mind not changing.”

“Mike, there are a number of possibilities, Let me just name three There is the Mercury Agency. The manager is leaving. We are moving up the Assistant Manager, leaving that position to be replaced.”

“We are also considering opening up a leasing company .One or two top spots will have to be fulfilled.”

“We need to do more research before that is decided.”

“We have needed for an executive in the holding company .It is my opinion that despite your age you have the maturity to be a full participant at that level. We think you can fill almost any of those spots. The real question lies inside you.”

“I have an urgent need to have John develop into a leadership role. I am putting him on a fast track to learn and I am offering you a chance to broaden your talent while you and to continue to make contributions to our family holdings.”

Mike turned to both of them “Thank you for this wonderful and insightful meeting. I am delighted to say I look forward to a continued personal relationship with you and your holdings in whatever capacity we finally decide. The question is what the immediate next steps are?”

Mr. Smythe asked “Mike, if you had your druthers what would be your dream and still be affiliated with us?”

“I haven’t given that any thought recently but I have always had a vision of being the head of a firm, corporate, partnership or owner of a small business of my own”

Mr. Smythe said, “I would be happy to see what might develop. If you can see your way to stay with us for a while, I promise to do some real research.”

“I am in no great hurry and would love it if we can work together. What next?”

John said, “First, we prefer you to withhold any conversations except with Helen and with Paul. We want to work out a complete arrangement with you before any word is leaked.”

“I will arrange for us to review each of the positions that dad discussed and a few other options. When we have come to a full and agreeable arrangement, we can plan a strategy that suits you, the agency and those with whom you serve at the present time. How does that sound?”

Mike smiled and nodded his approval.

“In the meantime, Mr. J will know that you will be leaving but he has been asked to say nothing. He agrees, but he plans on some in depth conversation with you before you are separated. .”

“First rate, John. I can hardly wait to talk with Helen. She was so sure that something would work out for us to stay, because she felt I had been so happy working with you.”

They ordered dinner and enjoyed the repast. As they said good-by, Mr. Smythe said. ”Remember, Mike, Whichever you decide, be certain it leaves time for a little golf.”

He laughed and took his leave. John said “Let me buy you another drink to celebrate a new and continuing relationship between the two of us.”

Chapter 13.

As Mike drove up, Helen opened the door.

Mike walked up with his hands behind him. She read his face. "I'll bet you have a bottle of champagne behind your back."

Mike laughed "You're no fun at all, Can't a guy surprise you?"

She giggled "Only if he had a box of chocolates in the other hand."

Mike roared. He handed both to her after she hugged him and said.

"Off to bed for you, sailor. You've had too much to drink. I will undress you and put you to bed. You can tell me all about it in the morning. I can wait for the details."

Mike left a message with Maria that he would be late this morning. Helen had arranged for the morning off.

She sat down to breakfast, cooked by Mike.

As they ate, Mike gave her the full run down of the good news of the dinner meeting with both Smythes.

He then told her of having a couple of drinks with John during which John was making a strong pitch to have Mike take the position that was to be offered at the holding company.

"That was John's next move and he desperately wants me to be there for and with him."

"What did I tell you, sailor boy? You are too hot a property for anyone to let you go. In fact, if the Smythes knew you like I know you, they'd make you president right now."

She looked at her watch. "I have to dash. My sub has extended her shift for four hours and needs to get home."

Mike headed for the office. Paul saw him come in. Mike called to Paul.

"Lunch?"

Paul responded "Can't wait but I will."

At the morning meeting with his three associates, they all commented that he looked more relaxed than he had in days. He agreed and changed the subject. He wanted to hear more about the new sales staff that had come aboard during the past ten days.

"So far, so good", said Susan. Ron agreed.

After the meeting, Mike took a few minutes to drop in on Mrs. Foster, who had the good problem of having to find additional staff. She asked Mike if he could sit with her later to interview two of her prospects. He agreed and then set out for lunch with Paul.

"All right, big Mike, give me the scoop."

Mike gave him the full blow by blow ending with "You and Helen are the only ones to know until the new deal is set and signed."

Paul just beamed. "I know everyone will be surprised when the news is out, except for Mr. J. I have the feeling he will be ready for you."

“It would be just the way Mr. Smythe would handle it. He would prefer to give out the news directly. I am sure that, at some point, he told himself that losing you was risk he had to take.”

“Come by my office at closing time. I want to buy you a drink to celebrate, just the two of us.”

Mike said he would be there.

He met with Mrs. Foster and the two finalists for the interviews. Both were strong applicants for the jobs that she had advertised.

Mike gave her a silent nod She told then to report to personnel after they set starting dates.

Once they were gone, she turned to Mike. “”That was just an excuse to get you alone, Mike. I am worried that we are going to lose you. Am I right?”

Mike asked, “Why do think that?”

“First, tell me if I am right. Then, I will tell you how I know.”

Mike nodded “Just between us, Only Paul knows this. Now tell me how you knew.”

“There are enough rumors going around about Mr. J. suddenly becoming more authoritative. The rumor also says he is going to fight the union. We all know that is foolish. Even if he wins the first round, their persistence will eventually win the right to reorganize. I just figured that both things would work against what I have seen you trying to instill in our management.

That is how I deduced that you’re leaving. Any ideas, yet?”

“No, Mrs. F. It looks like I will still be connected to the Smythes although not here in this agency. I cannot say more .Please don’t press me.”

“I would never press you, Michael, especially when you make a point of it. I am going to miss you whenever that happens.”

“It is my opinion that Mr. J is a jackass whatever his short term plans, his long term plan meant letting you go and that is not smart. It is so obvious to everybody that you have touched, including many of my boys and girls who have been here for a while.”

“Come give me a hug so I can give you a kiss It won’t be the last but it will be my private way of saying I love you and will miss you.”

Mike entered his office while his phone was ringing. It was Susan.

“When you have a few minutes I would like to see you.”

Mike said that a half hour later would do... He went through his mail and returned a couple of phone calls.

Right on the button, Susan knocked and entered. Mike waved her to a seat. Without any hesitation she just plunged in.

“Mike, are you leaving Smythe?”

Mike took a second.

“What makes you even think that?”

Susan retorted “Please don’t play games with me. We are too close for that. Please answer me.”

“Susan, I will tell you if you can tell me how you came to ask me that question.”

She said, “You know me. I try to watch for any signs that may give us, a clue so that if necessary we can be one up on our competition.”

“I have been reading your body language as you taught me to do. I also have been hearing conversations about the change of management style which could not possibly please

you. You have been a little absent minded or maybe mentally occupied during our recent meetings. Something is going on. I have so much invested in our relationship that I have needed to know.”

“Susa, if I have never said it before, you are to go to the head of the class. Your keen mind is putting me right on the spot. The answer without any equivocation is yes. I cannot share any detail because there is none to share.”

“I am being made an offer to remain with the Smythe family businesses but definitely not at this agency. When I have in hand the actual proposals, I will be asking you for an opinion so that I have your point of view as well to give you an opportunity to consider coming with me.”

“You do plan to do that with and for me?”

Mike said, “Never a doubt. You are the only management person I have brought in from the outside. All the others were or had been already a part of Smythe when I interacted with or for them.”

Mike grinned. “I wouldn’t want this to go to your head but you are one of the greatest of my investments.”

With tears flowing, Susan walked over, hugged him tightly and kissed him full on the lips.

When she finally got her voice under control, “God, Mike, I was getting up tight. I should have known that your loyalty is absolute. I am looking forward to hearing more when more is available. You can bet that if there is room wherever you go, I want to have the option of joining you.”

Mike said “You will have that option. That is my promise.”

Just prior to his leaving for the day, a large envelope was delivered to him by messenger.

He slipped it into his briefcase and headed home He stopped to tell Maria that he would probably be late in the morning, but it was okay to forward any important phone calls to him at home.

Helen listened with rapt attention as Mike started reading the contents of the envelope. The opening was a letter of explanation. This was the first of three proposals from Smythe corporations one of which it was hoped would meet with his satisfaction.

The offer was to have Mike serving as assistant manager for the Mercury-Lincoln agency in the city of San Diego

. After reading it through, Helen asked “Can you boil it down to the essential parts, Mike?”

“The essence is that the current manager has a contract for two years. Serving as his assistant should give me the experience to succeed him at the end of his contract. There is no guarantee but in the event that I failed to live up to their needs, I would receive a severance pay of six months’ salary plus a share of the bonuses being paid in that period.”

“If I live up to expectations, I will have stock options purchasable at three quarters of the share value at the end of each month during my entire employment. The corporations agree to purchase the options or stock at full value within 60 days of the end of the contract.”

“In the letter of explanation they would expect that changes in management style would be one of major emphases in addition to the normal duties of assistant manager which are

listed on the addendum I would be given a strong voice in the matter of management and cultural change inside the agency.”

“They will also underwrite any expenses for additional schooling at San Diego State School of Business, if it is my desire to pursue such studies.

The thrust of the total proposal is that the board is looking for changes that could be implemented during or after the first two years.”

Helen said, “It sounds like a real opportunity, Mike. It would give you the ability to do all the things that you hoped could have happened at the Ford agency.”

“You’re right Helen. There is also a closing that is exciting. The Smythes would like me to delay making any decision until the other two proposals have been made so that all three would be on the table for discussion and agreement.”

The other proposals will take several weeks due to the heavy load in their attorney’s office at the moment. In the meantime, I am free to ask questions and get clarifications from John who will have the law firm at his beckoning.”

“Mike, this means considerable increase in our income and our assets. Although that is not the important thing, it is a factor. The most important factor is your sense of being able to make input at a significant level, especially as it relates to the balance of good management and care for all its employees. This has great potential, doesn’t it?”

At the office, when he finished handling his mail and dictating some responses, he turned to his phone messages. One was a call from John.

He dialed, getting John’s secretary. He announced his name, not that she hadn’t recognized his voice. ““Please hold, Mr. Walleck.”

“Hi Mike. I have those personnel records we discussed some weeks back. Do you have time to discuss the contents with me?”

Mike asked, “When?”

John said, “Any time will do.”

“I will be right there.”

John had two cups of coffee ready. He asked Mike to join him at a side table instead of across the desk.

“Thanks for suggesting that I review the personnel jackets of the top staff. I found something of interest in the records of our new manager. I would like your opinion.”

“I’ll do the best I can.”

“His review from the outgoing manager is less than spectacular. The notes would imply that Joe lacks the drive that is needed for managing a firm of this size.”

Mike took the time to read the entire review. . He also looked at the review of the previous year. The earlier review was very good. Almost all of the detail in the last review appeared to be more than satisfactory. It was the summary note from the reviewer that cast some doubt.

Mike said, “It is hard to fathom. All signs in the reviews say very positive things. It is only the one comment. It may be a way of sending a signal from one’s inner sense as opposed to limiting the evaluation to the surface facts.

“Mike, are you saying that a closer monitoring is called for?”

Mike nodded “I can’t see any other choice. If you don’t and things take a bad turn, the firm could find itself having to make a late and risky correction.”

“It might help if you could talk to his boss who wrote that review. He might be willing to help you understand”

“Thanks Mike. If you don’t mind, I will probably call on you to sit in on an occasional report day as you did last month. Maybe you can help when we perform the next review using the process agreed upon at the Ford meeting.”

“By the way, we will use that evaluation process at all our agencies in Florida. Dad and the board approved.

I am not sure how Mr. J will go in the future. He is committed to it for this year’s reviews.”

“By the way, have you had chance to study the first proposal.”

Mike said that he had. He expressed his appreciation for all the elements in the proposal and the consideration for coming up short after the two years.

John said “I believe you will more impress with the next two proposals.”

He stood up implying the meeting was over Mike walked back to his office.

In mid-April, Mike received the second proposal by messenger He did not open it until that evening at home. Helen saw him open his briefcase and pull out the envelope

Mike sipped his glass of wine as he started in on the proposal. The gist of the proposal as he explained to Helen later was to be executive vice president of a new leasing company.

He said “The company will probably launch later this year the corporate offices were already leased

If Mike was interested, it was suggested that he meet and talk management style with the new president, who was coming from Ford Motor Company.

Together they would hire on the entire management staff and arrange for employment of all service personnel.”

“The salary is a little larger than the agency proposal. The option offer is essentially the same except that the number of options is much greater. A bonus program, tied to performance, includes stock in lieu of cash at my option.”

“Wow, Mike, how can you decide between those two offers, assuming that is what it comes to?”

Mike said “I am not sure. How would you feel?”

Helen said “I’d bet you would choose this second proposal because it is riskier but offers more rewards for the risk. Am I right?”

Mike smiled “Once more you go to the head of the class. You are a smart one and you read me like you read a book. My question is how do you feel about that kind of decision?”

“Silly man, I am so sure my hero will make the right decision that includes two basic elements. The first is that he will find joy and fulfillment in going to work each day the second is that he will make sure that this family has a reasonable amount of security”

She came to his chair, sat in his lap. “Put your arms around me, you big hunk I love you. I want you to be happy when you walk in that front door I want you to have energy.

“Now back to the current topic. You still have at least one more proposal to consider. I’ll bet it is more attractive than either of these.”

“I know John wants you to consider that from his standpoint because he wants you at hand. He does admire you and respects you.”

“I know that, honey. I have been more of hands on man during my navy years and during this short time in the civilian world. I am not as sure of my potential contributions in the field of policy and strategies. Well, we shall deal with that when we have to.”

The next evening, Mike brought his brief case to the table, inviting Helen to have a seat so that they could discuss the third proposal.

The proposal contained the same elements regarding options as did the first tow. The options in this case were options for stock in the holding company which was now trading OTC (Over the Counter).

This meant a liquid market for the stock. . The salary was 25 per cent more than the previous proposal. This agreement called for a three year contract with a three year renewal guaranteed at Mike's option. The duties included a position on the executive committee with full access to the board of directors, but not a seat on the board until the contract was extended beyond the first three years.

The position was that of deputy in charge of operations and special assistant to the president of the holding company corporation, John Smythe.

The effective date would be at the convenience of Mike's current employer, but no later than June first.

The following Wednesday was the scheduled date for the meeting between Mike and John. The first hour was to be just the two of them. The second hour would be open to whomever John wanted and needed for completing the negotiations.

Mike was ushered into the conference room at ten o'clock. John had a small table and two comfortable chairs set up at one end. They were on the sixth floor with a great view of the city.

A carafe of water and a carafe of coffee were on a small side table along with cups, saucers, spoons, cream and sugar. Mike was welcomed warmly by John.

"As I said earlier, John, I believe the work with you at the Smythe holding company seems most promising for using my skills and experience. That is if I am guessing what will be required of me. So, do tell, my friend."

"Well, I have some ideas but I am as new to this as you are. The only staff person coming forward is the personal secretary, whom I have vetted and will be pleased to retain for myself. Two other staffers, old veterans are available as our mentors and consultants. They will be members of the board.

You and I are to work out the rest of the staffing. We can talk about that later. Our major assignment as office of the president is to carry out the policies of the board. We are to review all current policies and strategies of the holding company and the individual corporations."

We may hire consulting firms and specialists of all sorts, including attorneys, who may help us understand issues and formulate recommendations."

"If we have recommendations for changes, we submit them to the board with opportunity to argue our case. We may also submit new policies or strategies if it is our view that one or more are needed."

"For instance, you might want to work on your concept of the evaluation system for executives which would be routed through the various sub corporations or our board."

"Thanks, John. That is helpful and more than I had speculated. What do you see in the budget as to staffing. I know you said we are responsible, but the question is how many will the budget allow?"

"My guess is that six or seven but dad says if we need more, the board will be open. The board sees a need to adjust to a rapidly changing economy and society. That is why they want a young staff, persons attuned to change and representatives of the future."

“While no one is sure what that means, the board does not want to be caught short. Thus the flexibility at this time but with experienced mentors.”

“By the way, we may widen our thinking beyond sales of vehicles. The only limitation is that the operation must be related directly to motor vehicles.

“All right, John. If you still feel I am the right person for this position, then I am fully committed to signing on. I see an opportunity to contribute but also to learn at the level of top executives.”

“By the way, Helen is with me all the way.”

“Mike, welcome aboard.”

He dialed the phone.

“Please ask the crew to come in”

Mr. Smythe, two lawyers and a secretary walked in. Mike was introduced to each. They took places at the large conference table.

“Mr. Walleck, there is a great detail of lawyer talk in these contracts. Don’t you want a legal representative to check these over?”

Mr. Smythe, if the minutes of this meeting attested by the secretary will reflect that the papers I am signing contain in essence the proposal I had previously received, then I am willing to proceed now. Do I have that assurance?”

Mr. Smythe said that was the case.

“Then, Mr. Smythe, there is no need for outside counsel. The position I am undertaking is putting a lot of trust in me and my acceptance is my pledge of trust in this organization.”

Mr. Smythe smiled and said “That is like the old proverbial hand shake. I like it.”

When the signing ceremony was complete and Mike and John were alone, John asked Mike to join him at the side table. He went to the cabinet returning with two glasses and a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. It was his favorite brand of scotch.

“Let’s drink to our joint venture, Mike.”

They toasted each other with big grins. John reached for the bottle but Mike said “Let’s do some noodling about staff first. What ideas have you had up to this point?”

“Not too much. I thought my new secretary. Whose name is Grace, might handle our dictation and the files. When she needs help, she can hire a young person to help her.

“I figured you might want to bring Susan, She could be our chief of staff or something like that. The rest is up to you and me.”

“I think that is good reasoning, John. Let’s start there. We can probably use a good marketing strategist who also knows advertising. Maybe we can use a public relations specialist to keep us in the public eye, especially if we are talking expansion.”

“I assume that our accounting staff is in place or is there need for a review of that staff?”

“Let’s put a note to review .We probably ought to review and evaluate each function. That will educate us and might uncover any existing weaknesses.”

Mike had been scribbling notes to remind them of these first agreements.

John went on. “When can you start and what is next for us?”

“I suggest we start officially on the first of June. That gives me about three weeks to work things out at the agency and a long weekend to rest up.”

“We can set up a meeting with Susan and finished up the staffing structure with her input if she agrees to join us. By the way, when will you tell Mr. J. that I am leaving, I assume you will do so.”

“Yes, you assume correctly. He knows that it is final as of now. I asked our attorney to call him just after we signed all the papers.”

He will know this evening of the expected date. If he feels he needs more time for the transition, I will ask you to accommodate him.”

“No problem there, John. I would never leave anyone with problems unresolved especially Mr. J. Even with our differences, he has been a great boss and a big help during my initial jaunt into the wilderness of the business world. I owe him big time m for all I learned .All right, I am ready for the final toast”

Mike and Helen had their very private celebration.

Susan was in the office when Mike arrived. She was fidgeting as she waited for Mike.

He went through the whole story with Susan.

“John already assumed that you might want to join us. He has an idea that you should serve as our chief of staff. I can’t pinpoint a salary, but I would estimate it to be 15 or 20 percent higher than your current monthly gross.

I don’t want your answer now. I need you to think about this and talk with Jerry.”

“I would guess you would be home sooner each evening than you do most days now.”

“Oh Mike, It is at a level I never believed attainable by me. I am glad you pushed me about those courses at State.”

“Since this is not a formal invitation, I will give you my definite interest and await your formal offer.”

“You really are my hero. There is no way that I could turn down a chance to continue working with you.”

Mr. J was standing when Mike knocked a walked in. He took Mike’s hand, shook it warmly and asked him to sit. He had his secretary bring in coffee for two.

“Congratulations Mike. You deserve everything that has happened to you. I have never seen or known a young man with your talent and insight who make such an impact so early in his career. You are a phenomenon.”

“Thank you Mr. J. I know I was a pain in your ass at times but you gritted your teeth and let me have the rope I needed. I am not sure I would have taken some of the risks that you took with me.”

Mr. J laughed. “Yes you would have and you will.”

“You do understand why I had to risk losing you??

He went on without waiting for an answer.

“I spent my life on a certain path with decent success using my style of management. I needed to prove that it will help us reach our near and long term goals. I had to do it my way because that it what brought me this far”

“It isn’t that one is right and one wrong. I just feel my way suits us at this agency. We will continue to incorporate some of the changes you brought and affected. No way are we throwing out the baby with the bath.”

“For that we will always be indebted to you.”

“I know it now, Mr. J, although I could not see the forest for the trees a few weeks back. Mr. Smythe gave me a pretty good understanding.”

“Thank you, Mike, for walking in our front door that December morning. Thank you for the courage to push even at the risk of losing your job. You made great contributions to our agency. You will be missed in more ways than one.”

“You can be certain of one thing. If I feel we are slipping, I personally will come to your office asking help from the office of the president.”

Mike choked, just nodding to Mt. J.

Mike walked into Paul’s office where Mrs. Foster was in talking with Paul and Bob.

“I hope you guys have a couple of minutes for an old buddy.”

Paul pointed to the empty chair and said, “Give, Man, give.”

Mike gave them the whole story. He kept fussing about all the time he was taking from them.

They hushed him.

“This is the stuff life is about. Go on.”

He told them of the three proposals. He gave them details of his meeting with John and the attorneys, especially how he turned down the need to be legally represented.

He outlined their joint responsibilities and temporary staffing plan

They finally let him go, knowing they had come to an end of a special chapter in their lives.

The end.