

# Replacement Parts

## CHAPTER 1

The parents of Nicholas Vaughn and Timothy Lawrence were neighbors long before the boys were born. They lived in an impressive neighborhood, their huge backyards separated by a greenway. When the boys became old enough to venture beyond the confines of their homes, they found each other. For awhile, they stood in their own yard staring across the greenway at one another, not daring to leave their yard as their parents had instructed. That lasted only a few hours as they tentatively ventured further into the greenway. Soon, they were playing as only small children can, oblivious to everything and exploring every inch of their new world.

In an upstairs room, in the house next door to Timothy Lawrence, a young girl was busy playing with her dolls. She happened to glance out the window, watched for awhile and then hurried downstairs, found her mother and begged to be allowed to go outdoors. Only if she stayed near the back door, her mother warned. Deborah Warren was out the door and ran all the way to the greenway before she slowed to a walk and approached the boys. In a few minutes, the three of them were playing and continued to explore the greenway. The children were not yet of school age but a bond had just been formed.

The boys walked side by side. The girl followed closely behind. They had a few hours head start and considered themselves knowledgeable explorers of the greenway. It was still new to Deborah and she was studying every inch.

"She's still a girl," Timothy said. "Girls are tattletales."

"We haven't done anything yet," Nicholas countered.

"When we do, she'll tattletale."

"Hey!" Deborah called out. They didn't stop nor answer. "My mother told me to stay by the back door. You won't tell on me, will you?" The boys looked at each other and grinned. They had just learned a valuable lesson.

Later, Timothy found a rock and after taking careful aim, flung it at a tree trunk. He missed. Nicholas took up the unspoken challenge and flung a rock at the same tree. He missed. Soon, a barrage of rock throwing was underway. Occasionally, one of the throws came close. Mostly, they were watching to see that the other did not gain an advantage by moving one step closer. They had thrown so many, the rocks were becoming scarce. It was taking longer to find one. While they searched in a widening circle, their eyes were glued to the ground, Deborah stepped up, took careful aim and trying her best to mimic a baseball pitcher, made a direct hit on the tree trunk. She was as surprised as the boys. She looked at them, waiting for the accolades she was sure would come.

"She had a perfect rock for throwing," Timothy said scornfully. "If I had that rock, I would have hit it, too."

Nicholas and Deborah looked at the tree. For an instant, they considered trying to find the rock but not aware of what the other was thinking, they said nothing.

They wandered further into the greenway, found a log and the boys sat on it, taking up just the right amount of space so no room was left for Deborah. She found a bare spot on the ground and sat, eyeing them suspiciously.

Timothy spoke, "We could sure use a drink."

"Yeah," Nicholas added.

Deborah looked from one to the other. They looked at her. She sighed dejectedly and stood. "I'll get something." She walked away in the direction of her house.

They watched until she was out of ear shot. "Let's hide from her," Timothy said.

"What if she brings something to drink?" Nicholas asked.

"I guess we'll have to wait and see."

Deborah slipped into the kitchen, took three large can drinks from the refrigerator, paused to hear her mother talking on the phone and hurried out the door. She approached the place where the boys were waiting and was surprised to find them there. She walked up and held out the drinks. They took one and made room for her on the log.

The hours of that first day passed. Deborah was the first to go home. She seemed to sense when her mother's phone conversation would end and she would be missed. Sure enough, the back door opened and her mother peered out.

"Now that's a good girl. You stayed by the porch," her mother said. Deborah had been sitting on the porch about thirty seconds.

The boys watched her walk away. When she was out of sight, they started toward their own houses.

"What do you think?" Nicholas asked.

"I say, no girls."

"But she did get those drinks. What if we try for cookies and drinks?" Nicholas smiled broadly.

Timothy kicked at sticks and rocks and finally said, "Okay, for drinks and cookies, she can stay."

Nicholas' mother greeted him when he went inside. "Did you have fun, Dear?"

"Yes".

"What did you do?"

"Nothing".

She sat a plate of food for him at the table. "The sitter will be here shortly. Your father and I are going to a party." She tousled his hair and hurried from the room.

Timothy walked in as his mother appeared in the doorway. "Timothy, the sitter will feed you. We're late. We have tickets for

the theater." She jabbed at her ear with a ring. "Did you have fun playing?"

"Yeah".

She looked at him for a moment and hurried out of the room.

"Deborah! Come in!" her mother called. "The sitter is here. Your father's company is having a dinner. We have to attend." Deborah came inside. "Be sure to get your bath," her mother called back over her shoulder as she hurried to the door.

Late that night, the children were all in their beds, presumably asleep. Their sitters were downstairs in darkened rooms having been joined by their boyfriends as soon as the children were hustled off to bed. The boys had sat at the top of the stairs and listened to the strange sounds emitted by their sitters and their boyfriends. They did not have the nerve to venture down the stairs for a closer look. They knew they would be exposed by a creaking step on the stairs.

Deborah was not so inhibited. She had learned how to maneuver silently down the stairs and did so until she had a good view of her sitter and boyfriend in various stages of ecstasy on the couch. They were illuminated by a street light shining through a huge bay window. She watched a few minutes and climbed silently back up the stairs.

The children lay in their beds, thinking of the day's adventure. They decided they would go back tomorrow.

It was a nice spring afternoon. Nicholas sat on his back porch waiting for Timothy to come out. He did, they spotted each other and met in the greenway. Deborah was watching from her bedroom window. As soon as she saw them, she hurried out. They joined up and began another meandering stroll through the greenway.

"Do you have a sitter?" Deborah asked.

Reluctantly, they admitted they did. They said no more, not anxious to have a discussion about being watched over by a baby-sitter. Deborah thought about asking if their baby-sitters engaged in the same

behavior as hers but not knowing exactly how to ask, said no more about it.

The greenway was proving not to be all that entertaining. A few hours of aimless wandering and they had covered every inch. The boys had sprung the drinks and cookies trap on Deborah and she had immediately produced. Nicholas had lobbied to inform her she was not a permanent member of the group. Timothy had disagreed, arguing that to do so would make her think she didn't have to supply drinks and cookies. Nicholas wasn't too sure but was hesitant to do anything to spoil the fringe benefits.

The boys were sitting on a log. Deborah was trying without success to duplicate her rock throwing feat. The boys were whispering, giggling and acting all around goofy. Deborah was sure they were mocking her and was trying to ignore them. She was casting glances at them between throwing rocks at the tree.

Timothy had a pained look on his face and said, "We need to pee."

"So, pee," she said.

"You'll look."

"Will not."

"Okay, then. We're going behind that tree. You better not look."

"You better not look at me either," she called out. Deborah had needed to pee for an hour but couldn't get up the nerve to say so.

A few minutes later, Nicholas and Timothy were stumbling along a path. Their eyes were as big as silver dollars. Timothy spoke first. "Did you see.....Did you know.....Girls.....Are like that!"

"No," was all Nicholas could say.

Deborah followed several yards behind. "You looked! Both of you looked! I'll never come back!" She sounded on the verge of tears.

The boys tried every persuasion they could think of. Deborah sat, her bottom lip extended, an occasional tear trickling down her cheek and she rejected every offer they made. Finally, they had stumbled upon the right one. Nicholas would bring candy, chocolate

candy. Timothy would bring the drinks. She no longer had to furnish cookies nor drinks. And one last thing.....the boys had to pee while she watched.

The spring turned to summer and almost without fail, they met every day in the greenway. Spring rains created a few water holes. These had spawned frogs, minnows and turtles and they had gleefully examined every one, usually to the detriment of Deborah. They stuffed a frog in her pants. They tried to get her to stick her finger in the turtle's mouth. They dared her to swallow a minnow. She was so glad when the summer heat evaporated the pools and all the creatures disappeared.

She sat on the bare dirt under the huge tree waiting for them. It was the designated waiting place, at least, for her. The boys went where ever they wanted and she had to find them or she had to wait for them. To her horror she had learned they would not look for her, instead going in the opposite direction. She had wandered throughout the greenway all afternoon, calling to them. Only when she burst into tears did they come out from hiding. Then she learned, they had been in a tree, barely able to stifle giggles as she passed under their hiding place, again and again.

She saw them. What were they carrying? "Oh, no!" she thought. It had happened sooner than she expected. A ball and bat. She covered her eyes.

Timothy swung the bat at an imaginary ball. Nicholas held the ball and motioned for Deborah to move to her right. Then he motioned for her to stop. He turned and pitched the ball toward Timothy who swatted the ball into the area she had just vacated. She watched the ball roll seemingly forever, dropped her head and trudged after it.

"Hurry! Hurry! Run! Run!" the boys yelled at her. She walked slower.

Finally, she retrieved the ball and it was back in Nicholas' hand. He had waved her into another position and satisfied it was just right, he pitched the ball. Timothy hit it in the opposite direction. Nicholas and Deborah watched as the ball rolled out of sight.

Either she got to bat or she was playing no more, she had announced to them. That had backfired when they told her they didn't care. She was never in the right place to stop the ball. Her argument that they were the ones that positioned her had fallen on deaf ears. She cried for a minute. They ignored her.

Then, she resorted to feminine wiles. With a crayon, she had drawn a tattoo on the right cheek of her butt. Let her bat and she would show them. The bat was thrust into her hand and Nicholas was ready to pitch before she could even move. Thirty minutes later, she had taken dozens of mighty swings and had yet to hit the ball. This was no fun at all but it was better than chasing the ball. Timothy was so confident she would never hit the ball, he was throwing rocks at some invisible target. Finally, he strode up to Nicholas and they conferred, alternately casting glances at her. Then, they both approached her. "Show us the tattoo, now," they had said.

She went behind a tree, stood there for a minute, came out and announced her clothing must have worn off the tattoo. It was gone.

The boys had stared at her. They could not believe this was happening. How could they be denied?

Desperately, Nicholas said, "Show us where the tattoo was."

"That was not the agreement," she said defiantly.

They took the bat and ball and walked away dejectedly. She watched them go. She would pay for this. Instinctively, she knew she would.

She lay in bed that night, trying to think of some way to make amends. She sighed. There was only one way. She turned on the lamp, crawled out of bed and found a crayon. She pulled down her pajamas, backed up to a mirror and wondered how she would ever draw a tattoo

upside down and backwards. Her dilemma was solved when she drew a lopsided star. Then she remembered what Nicholas had said. It didn't matter if there was a tattoo. It just mattered where the tattoo would have been.

The days of that first summer quickly passed and they were about to enter school. They were excited and even more so when they learned they would be going to the same school, all the same classes, everything. Nicholas would walk across the greenway and join them at the front of their houses where they would catch the bus together.

During the first days of school, the teachers would learn they were an extremely gifted and intelligent trio. Their IQ's were off the scale and academics were so easy they did not seem to be paying attention. Accelerated classes were hardly a challenge. Occasionally, one would hit a snag but they retired to the solitude of the greenway and tutored each other.

So far, the weather was not too inclement. It had not occurred to them that a raging winter would end the greenway meetings. A blustery fall day brought home the message. They sat, shivering on a log. Their voices raised so they were heard above the wind. What could they do? Timothy was the first to have an idea. His father had build a work shop at the end of the garage. It had never been used, at least, not as a work shop. It was empty except for a few items that should have been thrown away. Would their parents allow them to convene in the work shop? Deborah was shivering even harder. She could stand it no longer. "Let's go. Everyone ask tonight. We'll talk in the morning," she said and was up and leaving. Timothy and Nicholas lingered a moment but knowing there was no other choice, they were soon on their way home.

Timothy approached his father. He was engrossed in a newspaper and dressed in a suit, obviously waiting on Timothy's mother. They were going out. This was a good sign. He seldom paid any attention to Timothy at these times.

Timothy leaned on the chair arm and asked, "Dad, could I use the work shop for sort of a clubhouse this winter. My friends and I have no place to play since it's getting cold."

His father dropped his paper into his lap and looked at the boy. "Friends? I didn't know you were having friends over."

"We play out.....," he waved his arm in the direction of the greenway.

"Who are your friends?" Someone from school?"

"No. Well, yes. Both. They live here." Again he pointed in two directions to indicate the location of their houses. "We're in the same grade. We ride the bus together, also."

"Well, that's great. In the neighborhood, I mean. Your friends live in the neighborhood."

That seemed to have been the magic word. Timothy smiled. "Of course. We've been playing in the greenway. Just out there," he said and pointed.

"We'll just have to do something about that. Of course, you need a place to meet your friends. That work shop has a stove. Just the place on a winter's day. You don't have to worry about soiling the carpet and furniture either." He patted Timothy on the head.

Timothy went to the window and looked out. Nicholas was already in the house. He went to a room facing Deborah's house. Her curtains were drawn. He waited, looking at her room. Finally, the lights came on but the curtains remained drawn. He heard his parents preparing to leave and giving last minute instructions to the sitter. When the door closed, he went to the telephone. He would call Nicholas. The sitter was already on the phone. Timothy said he wanted to use the phone.

"Get the hell out of here and shut up, Butthead!" the sitter admonished him.

Timothy checked again but her curtains were still drawn. He went to his room. The news would have to wait until the morning.

Deborah almost waited too long. Her parents were at the front door. She approached, holding a text book in her hands, her finger obviously marking a place. "My friend has a place to play.....in the garage. It's too cold for outdoors. May I go there after school?"

"Your friend.....where.....?" her mother looked at her reflection in the mirror as she made a last second check on her makeup.

"Next door," Deborah replied. "We're in the same class and ride the bus together," she said happily.

"Same class.....that's nice.....our neighborhood....of course, Dear. They should be nice people.....our neighborhood, perhaps I will meet them soon." Deborah's father opened the door. Her mother bent over and squeezed Deborah's shoulders. "See you in the morning," and they hurried out. Their car was barely out of the driveway when the sitter's boyfriend drove in. The sitter watched through the window and met him at the door before he had time to knock. Deborah went up the stairs then came back down in the darkness. The sitter and her boyfriend had wasted no time. She watched for awhile before going silently to her room. She flopped on the bed and thought about tomorrow. She hoped Timothy had obtained permission to use the room. Without it, it would be a long winter.

Nicholas' family was having their evening meal. He waited for an opening and after his parents had reviewed their itinerary for the week he spoke, "My friend.....across the greenway.....we played all summer but now it's too cold. May I go to his house, he has a playroom, sort of." Nicholas' parents were looking at him. This was something new. He didn't know what to say.

"A friend. That's nice, Nicholas. Where does he live?" his mother asked.

"Across the greenway. He's in my class. We ride the bus everyday."

"A neighborhood friend?" Nicholas' father asked.

"He lives right over there," Nicholas pointed in the direction.

"Of course, you can play with your friends, Nicholas. Remember you mustn't soil his mother's carpet."

"The playroom is in the garage," Nicholas said.

"What a good idea," his father chimed in. "We must meet your new friend, soon," he added.

Nicholas resumed eating. Now, if only Timothy had been so lucky.

The next morning, they waited for the bus, bubbling with excitement. Nicholas and Deborah could tell by the look on Timothy's face that he had succeeded. Their broad smiles told Timothy all he needed to know. As they rode to school, they made plans for the evening. Already, the room had become their clubhouse.

They piled off the bus and rushed across Timothy's yard. The stiff north wind reminded them of the importance of their accomplishment. Inside the room, they surveyed it. It looked exactly like what it was. A little used storeroom. Timothy lit the stove and they huddled around it.

Finally, they were warm. Deborah spoke first, "If this is to be our place for the winter, let's clean it up." Nicholas and Timothy were satisfied with it, as is. Deborah fell to the cleaning task alone and soon they reluctantly joined in.

There was not that much they could do. They found chairs and a rickety table among the stored items. The rest, they stacked in a corner. They sweep the floor clean and in no time were sitting in the chairs next to the stove and surveying their new kingdom.

Over the years, the decor of the room would change to reflect their maturity or lack of it. On the last day of their senior year, something remained of each of their school years. A scribble on the wall, a banner or some other memento. The walls were covered in graffiti, some of it a mystery known only to one but most was a shared experience.

In the summer between their third and fourth years of school, Nicholas' inventive abilities first surfaced. They were playing in the

greenway. It was a searing day, one of the hottest of the year. Timothy had pulled a garden hose to the maximum extent of it's length and was using the spray of water to keep Nicholas and Deborah at bay. Deborah, in particular, had not fared well. Her hair was plastered to her head and her shorts were dripping. She had attempted to divert Timothy's attention while Nicholas flanked him. Timothy had stuck the hose in her pants and then sprayed her down while she fled. She never learned that Nicholas had conspired with him and they had set her up for the trap.

But Timothy became power mad and hosed Nicholas as well. The next day, the battle continued but unknown to them, Nicholas had found some odd parts in his father's garage. Some pipe and old pieces of a lawn sprinkler system. He studied the pieces and it became apparent to him. By carefully assembling them in a certain order, the water flow was narrowed resulting in a more forceful blast. When attached to a hose in Nicholas' yard he was able to direct a spray much further than Timothy. As a result, he hosed Timothy from the safety of his yard. Deborah quickly affiliated with him but he hosed her as well. In the water spraying department there were no alliances.

In their seventeenth year and in a moment of boredom, they resurrected the water hose fight. Nicholas' valve contraption was still in the clubhouse and it still worked. As so many years ago, Deborah lost again. This time a wet T-shirt caused the boys to try to schedule a daily water hose fight. Deborah agreed to getting hosed now and then but certainly not every day. The boys also had to agree that she could hose them. As Timothy so aptly put it, "She could stick it up my nose if I get to see her in a wet T-shirt."

Each year their reputations for academic achievement grew. Their grades were so nearly the same that they were spoken of as one person. Early in their schooling, Nicholas gained a slight edge, measured in decimal points. Deborah was second and Timothy third. The difference

was infinitesimal but it was a difference that did not change throughout their schooling. If it ever mattered to Deborah and Timothy that they could not overtake Nicholas, they never mentioned it nor showed any jealousy.

Their academic standings tended to further isolate them from their classmates. Their residences were not near another classmate and as the years passed they depended on one another for support and friendship. Oddly enough, they were all popular with their classmates but relationships did not extend beyond the classroom. By the time they were old enough to drive and could go anywhere, anytime, they had established such a pattern of togetherness, they did not try to change it.

Nicholas and Timothy had participated briefly in sports but that changed nothing when Deborah tried for and became a cheerleader. They were still together.

The first serious threat to their relationship came when Deborah blossomed into a beauty. She was always a beautiful child but as a teenager all the parts developed just right. She got more than her share of attention but she never broke away from the boys.

The same thing happened to the boys. They were handsome young men, from well to do families and intelligent. Girls were available but they had a shy streak and it was a non threatening world in the clubhouse with each other.

They were in the fourth grade when Deborah's future talents first manifested themselves. She was waiting in the clubhouse. The boys came in. One had made a detour to his house and grabbed a bag of cookies. Deborah pointed to a pallet of blankets she had carefully spread on the floor.

"Lay down," she instructed.

The boys looked at the blanket, at her, and finally, at each other. Timothy's cheeks bulged with cookies so Nicholas shrugged and did as he was told. Deborah knelt beside him and opened a plastic case

she held. She took out a toy stethoscope, placed it in her ears and said, "Take off your clothes."

"What!.....Why?" Nicholas asked.

"We're playing doctor," Deborah said, "And I'm the doctor."

Nicholas looked at Timothy. Timothy spoke through the mouthful of cookies. "Do it! Then, we'll get to be the doctor!" Nicholas peeled off his clothes.

Deborah had not considered that she might have to become the patient but once Nicholas complied, she had no choice. Timothy was so anxious for his turn, he took off his clothes before she had completed her examination of Nicholas. As it turned out, he was trying to hurry it along so they would have their turn at being the doctor. It was an experience they would never forget.

It also had more long lasting effects than they would ever have imagined. Deborah would eventually go to medical school. It came as no surprise to the boys.

"Hell," Timothy would say, "You knew more about anatomy when you were ten years old than doctors know when they finish medical school."

"You sure had a lot of fun while I was learning," she countered.

"Yeah," the boys replied blissfully.

Nicholas' insight and mastery of intricate valves continued throughout their childhood. In the confines of the clubhouse, he would build one valve after another. Timothy and Deborah could hardly wait to learn what the next one would do. As they neared graduation and careers were being chosen, Nicholas would surprise them by choosing an MBA. He reasoned, "I know how to engineer things, design and build them. I already have some patents. What I need to know is how to run a business and more importantly, how to keep all the money I'm going to make."

It was a prophecy that he would accomplish beyond their, and his, wildest expectations.

Then his life would take the most unusual of turns when boredom, dissatisfaction and restlessness overcame him.

Timothy's choice was unexpected. "It looks like you two will always need a lawyer. I think I'll be one."

A few years out of law school and Timothy was the head of a prestigious law firm. Brilliant and ambitious young lawyers waited in line for the opportunity to join his firm. Timothy sat in his opulent office, only taking the highest profile cases. His mere presence in a court room was enough to cause his opponent to quake in fear, certain that defeat was eminent. He grew wealthy.

Deborah became a surgeon, specializing in organ transplants. She was the foremost authority in the field, her expertise was sought throughout the world. Fortune and fame followed her.

Nicholas founded his company and the valves he invented were a mainstay of the oil industry. He became a multi-millionaire, by far the richest of the three. He could never escape unhappiness. No matter how successful, he never achieved satisfaction. His life became the oddest of all.

Though, they were neighbors and their children were inseparable playmates, the parents never became more than acquaintances. Their lives and life styles had been set years before and they were not the type to change. Although, far from rich, their parents were financially secure and successful in their work. The exclusive neighborhood and its trappings took all of their resources. Their fathers worked long and hard to maintain their lifestyles and there was never time for neighborhood chats. Content that their children were happy and safe in the company of the others, the parents were most willing to leave well enough alone.

In the safe confines of the clubhouse, Timothy was the first to bring in cigarettes for their experimentation.

"Where did he get them?" they had asked.

"Some kid at school heisted them from his parents," he answered as he laid out the dozen cigarettes and a book of matches. Timothy lit one, puffed vigorously on it and passed it around. They didn't seem to be doing much except creating lots of smoke and were on the eighth cigarette when Nicholas inadvertently inhaled some smoke. After the coughing fit subsided, they all tried inhaling and with the same results. The next day, Timothy replenished the supply and with some instructions, they tried again. They coughed until they gagged. Years later, when tempted with marijuana, Deborah recalled the incident.

"It would have to make me feel awfully damn good to make up for coughing and gagging." The boys agreed and they never experimented with drugs. Their baby-sitters were never without it and after smoking with their boyfriends, they put on some uninhibited performances on the couch.

Each could hardly wait to get to the clubhouse and share what they had seen! Deborah's sitter was the most experienced and the boys sat wide-eyed and spellbound as Deborah recounted the sitter's exploits of the night before. Playing doctor was becoming more and more meaningful.

Timothy was also the first to pilfer some liquor from his parent's supply. They tried that and with more disastrous results than with the cigarettes. Deborah got drunk. The boys were aghast. First, she was going to take off all her clothes and they would have a water hose fight. It did not matter that it was twenty degrees and the north wind was howling. The boys barred the door while trying to figure out how to coax her into taking off her clothes but without the water hose fight. She would not relent. It was both or none. They considered it at length, before reluctantly declining.

But Deborah was not done. She put on a seductive dance that the boys would recall for years. "Where did you learn that?" they asked in awe.

"The sitter," she replied and never missed a beat.

"Who is your sitter?" they asked in unison.

She would never tell but for another drink she would make a deal. Both of them held a bottle out to her. The very next time she would slip them into her house and they could see for themselves. Although she had been too drunk to remember her promise, she believed them when they reminded her and plans were made.

A few days later, the sitter was there. Deborah signaled to them by opening and closing the blinds in her room. The boys slipped out of their houses and rendezvoused at Deborah's door. She let them in and they took their places, hiding in the dark until the sitter and her boyfriend came in to the now familiar couch.

For years, the boys would remember it in wondrous awe.

But back to the night of their introduction to over drinking. They had been too agreeable. Anything Deborah wanted, she got, which for this night was too much to drink. After the dance and the promise, they kept on giving her drinks, hoping that delights they could only imagine were in store. Deborah got sick. She puked all over them, herself and the clubhouse.

It took all the wiles their young minds could muster to slip her into her house, to her room, into her bed, hide her clothes and slip into their own houses in their liquor and puke drenched clothes without being caught. They did it but it was an ordeal they never again attempted. Afterwards, the only drinking they did was a few beers that Nicholas slipped from his father's supply. He was careful not to take so much his father would miss it and that was the limiting factor in their drinking.

One morning, Deborah and Nicholas were waiting for the school bus. Timothy rushed up breathlessly. He was so excited he could not wait for them to meet in the clubhouse. They must hear about his adventure. Last night, his parents had gone to the theater. His sitter was on the phone to her boyfriend for so long the phone may as well have been growing out of her ear. Bored and restless, he made his way to the garage where he eyed his father's car. Getting in, he found the keys in the ignition so he listened to the radio. Turning it louder and louder and pretending he was racing down the highway, Deborah.....er.....a girl at his side. He had cast a look at them but neither seemed to have noticed he had called her name. They were spellbound by his story. In an unprecedented moment, he had pushed the garage door opener and as the radio blared and the door opened, he turned the key and the engine started. He sat there unsure of what to do next. The open door beckoned so he pulled the gear shift and the car eased out of the garage. The car idled down the driveway and he was in the street before he mashed the accelerator and the car surged forward. He drove it completely around the block and back into the garage. He had never been so exhilarated. He put down the garage door and slipped back into the house, checking to verify that the sitter was still on the phone. She was. He was so excited he could not fall asleep for hours. Deborah and Nicholas were envious. When could they do it? They must be allowed to share his exuberance. Timothy was taken aback. He assumed this was a once in a lifetime event. It had not occurred to him that he would have to do it again. But he knew he would. They could not be denied. Plans were set in motion.

Actually, all they had to do was wait. The first time all sets of parents were gone at the same time would do it. The house could burn down and the sitters wouldn't know it until the phone melted out of their hand or the couch burned out from under them. So, they waited a few days and everything fell into place.

Nicholas and Deborah simply walked out and waited at the garage door. Soon, the door opened and Timothy was already in the driver's seat. They walked inside and Nicholas opened and held the back door for Deborah. Then for reasons that he would never know, he slid in beside her. Timothy was so engrossed he did not seem to notice that neither had taken the front seat. He started the engine and let the car idle out of the garage. Nicholas and Deborah smiled at each other and Nicholas reached over and took her hand.

Timothy pressed the accelerator and they drove down the street. He was careful to duplicate every maneuver of his first trip. Already, he knew not to mess with success.

Nicholas and Deborah were a bit apprehensive but as the minutes passed and everything was going well, they relaxed. So far, no one had said a word. They passed under a street light and Nicholas saw she was looking at him. He felt a slight pressure on his hand as she gently squeezed it. He leaned across the seat. She duplicated his action. Their faces were inches apart. She closed her eyes. Nicholas took one last look so he would not miss, closed his eyes and kissed her.

The car bumped. They jerked their lips apart and looked out. They were back in the driveway and Timothy had tapped the brake. They looked straight ahead as they entered the garage. Inside, the garage door down and all secure, Timothy looked back at them. He smiled, proud and relieved that they were back. "What did you think?" he asked with an air of boastfulness in his voice. Nicholas and Deborah were still holding hands.

"It was the greatest time of my entire life," Nicholas said.

"Mine too," Deborah added.

Timothy looked at them but could not make out their expressions in the semi-darkness. He could not see they were holding hands. It was one heck of a time but the greatest of all time....he wasn't so sure of that.

They made their way back toward their houses. Nicholas was frantically trying to think of a way to initiate another kiss. They stood in the darkness at the edge of the greenway.

"Well, I better go," Deborah finally said.

"Okay," he said.

They walked toward their houses. Late that night, they lay awake far into the night, basking in the memory of their first kiss.

## CHAPTER 2

Months would pass before Nicholas could muster the nerve to try again. Finally, they were alone for a few minutes in the clubhouse. He made a tentative attempt, almost paralyzed in fear that she would resist or even worse, scream or possibly hit him. To his everlasting surprise and gratitude, she eagerly responded. It was even better than the first time and they broke apart only when they heard Timothy returning. He came inside and immediately eyed their suspicious behavior. He was certain they had been up to something.

A few more months passed before Deborah suggested that Timothy should be let in on their secret. Nicholas failed to see how sharing with Timothy would be of any benefit to him. Deborah was quick to point out, they would be able to kiss much more if they didn't have to wait to be alone. There were several more reasons but Nicholas was no longer listening. The first one sounded like it would work for him. He agreed but how would they do it so Timothy wouldn't know he was already several months behind? Leave that to Deborah, she advised him.

One evening they were sitting around the clubhouse when Deborah suddenly announced she wanted to kiss and she leaned over and planted a big one on Nicholas' lips. He smiled broadly, mostly from surprise. He had not been able to decide how Timothy would be included. Then she leaned across and did the same to Timothy. They all expressed delight at their new adventure and traded kisses for awhile. While Timothy waited his turn he had visions of their odd behavior over the last few months. Before he could reach a conclusion, it was his turn again. Soon, he stopped thinking about it. He was having too much fun.

The following school year, the boys discovered little league baseball. Although, they were far from outstanding players, they were good enough to play regularly. Neither was all consumed with the sport, it was just something to do for awhile. Deborah went to every game but she certainly was having no fun. Then one day she overheard a conversation. There was a little league for girls. She joined the next day. First, the boys were astonished, then pleased. Maybe she would be more agreeable to shagging balls in the greenway. Again, they were astonished and surprised when she demonstrated an ability to hit the ball. Timothy had responded by teaching her the brush back pitch. The first one hit her in the side of the head. For a terrifying second, he thought he had killed her. She struggled to her feet and with grim determination, dug in for the next pitch. She lined it far into the greenway, over Nicholas' head and watched as he ran it down.

Their workouts proved to be far more beneficial to her than to the boys. In short order, she was the star player on her team. Soon, she was the star of the entire girl's league. Not long afterwards, the boys were in the stands, cheering her on.

The first serious threat to their camaraderie came in their last pre-teen year. During their little league days, they had met and interacted with their contemporaries out of the school environment. It had been enlightening. There were possibilities to explore.

Deborah learned that her little league teammates had found other interests, namely makeup and boys.

Timothy's and Nicholas' friends only interest were girls. Although, Deborah's 'doctor' examinations had already taught them a lot, they learned there was still a lot to learn. Deborah was a knock-out and the athletic boys were showing much interest. Deborah liked that but she was not quite sure how to handle the attention. The girl's were showing a great deal of interest in the boys. There were plenty of girls more than anxious to share their often incorrect and usually confusing adolescent information. Often as not the boys had to seek verification or clarification from Deborah. It seemed she never failed to have the answer.

As for Deborah, she was the center of attraction. Most boys were intimidated by her athletic prowess but not the boys that excelled in sports. They were drawn to her like a magnet. She was a beauty and athletic as well. They couldn't ask for more. A knock out beauty that could talk sports. She was always in the middle of everything except when it came time to pair up. The only pairing she did was with Nicholas and Timothy and that was as they were leaving. Safely in the clubhouse, they could share the day's activities without problems or unwanted attachments.

Finally, another summer arrived. They were free of school and free of sports. For awhile, they reverted to childhood, romping and playing in the greenway. They climbed trees, tossed stones and strolled aimlessly in the greenway. They seemed to sense that the totally carefree days would not last forever. Something would be lost when they made the transition to teenagers.

The first change was Deborah's sudden interest in fashion. She just couldn't get enough clothes. Some of the motivation came from her friends. Deborah watched in amazement as they became consumed with the purchase of new clothes. She approached her mother and was again surprised when she was as interested in clothes as Deborah's friends. Deborah also soon learned her mother was reliving her childhood, playing dress up except Deborah was the model. Her mother never tired of seeing Deborah try on clothes. She had to admit it was fun and her mother would buy anything. She was even more surprised when the boys showed an interest in her attire. Soon, she realized their only interest was in miniskirts and halter tops. They would watch her model for hours and insisted that she continue. She was having as much fun as they.

Slowly but surely, she lost interest. She was always fastidious about her appearance and was not shy about doing what was necessary to insure she would draw lots of looks and leers but clothes were no longer a driving force. She fell back into the camaraderie with the boys.

The next school year passed uneventfully. At every opportunity, Timothy would commandeer his father's car and they would go for a drive. He became more brazen and the trips became longer. Nicholas and Deborah did not mind. They were in the back seat kissing. Timothy was not too happy about missing out on the kissing but he didn't know what to do about it. He wasn't about to let Nicholas drive. He was having way too much fun driving himself. But the kissing. It just

didn't seem fair. He complained constantly and finally Deborah agreed to give him a few kisses after the ride. Unknown to Timothy, she wasn't trying too hard and it wasn't all that exciting for him. He was going to get his share of kissing nevertheless but he was more interested in driving the car.

The next fall began their first year in high school. They had to make some decisions and choices. In high school, everyone had to be a part of something. Their reputation for academic achievement preceded them and they were automatically categorized with the scholastic achievers. Sometimes, some of the elite got to join more than one group. The star athletics, for example. They could be a part of as many groups as they wanted, even the warring factions. They often did that, trying to cause even more trouble which it often did. The scholastic stars were afforded that privilege as were the most beautiful. Deborah came in with two advantages. She was heavily recruited. Those with a propensity of promiscuity wanted her, hoping her beauty and talent would lend some credibility to their choices. A small but vocal group of lesbians wanted her, not so much for credibility but to prove they could successfully recruit. It would be a crowning achievement if they could turn her. The self-righteous pseudo-intellectuals wanted her. It would help if they actually had an intellectual amongst them.

Deborah had a few plans of her own. She intended to be a part of everything and a part of nothing. She knew it could be done. She had watched and learned from her classmates. There were a few that could do it and she had picked up on their techniques. In the final reckoning, it only meant that she had many friends but no close friends. Once again she had stayed ahead of the pack. She had the boys.

Timothy was a bit more adventurous. He was willing to be a part of just about anything but he really took to the car groups. Even though he was still too young for license he had logged many miles in

his father's car. He also quickly learned he could move in and out of groups. He was a likable boy with the personality to get along at all levels. One minute he could be chatting with the richest kids in school and being offered a ride in their expensive sports cars. A few minutes later he would be with the group that would steal the hubcaps off them.

His athletic abilities never improved much from the little league days but he was a student of sports and the stars liked for him to be around to regale them with stories and information that they couldn't remember. Later, he could be found cavorting with the band as they practiced their drill routines. He would duck into the restroom for a forbidden cigarette with the smokers while on his way to clown with the speech club. He actually took speech but never joined the speech club. They either never realized it or didn't care. It was never mentioned. Without ever drawing attention to it, he always ended up with the intellectuals. It was the place he truly belonged.

Nicholas was ever bit as versatile as Timothy but he didn't have the bravado. He was always a bit worried that if he hung out with the hubcap thieves, he would be guilty by association. Timothy could be seen with them and no one ever thought he would actually participate. Nicholas was not sure he had that kind of immunity. He managed not to offend the renegade groups but never felt comfortable in their company. Timothy seemed to bridge the gap for him. If Nicholas hung out with Timothy, he must be okay. It was mob mentality at it's best but Nicholas made the most of it. He soon learned his greatest interest was in shop. The valve contraption he made a few years earlier grew into an elaborate device. It would serve him well in a few years. He was, by far, the most popular. Often, with nothing more than a glance, he could solve the most difficult problem that any student had with their project. He was always willing to help. Without realizing it, he was getting lots of ideas. A few years later, they would manifest themselves as patents.

The teachers loved to have him in their classes. It was obvious he was incredibly smart but didn't mind getting his hands dirty. He was also teaching the other students far more than they could. He was making their lives easy.

Nicholas was even accepted in the athletic group. He was anything but a talented player but what he lacked in ability he made up in determination. He was a gutsy player and it was noticed. Oddly enough he had no real desire to play and did not after his first year. But his willingness to give it up for the team was not forgotten and he remained a favorite of the athletes. It didn't hurt that he was available for tutoring and most athletes were also in shop where they remained in contact with Nicholas. Like Timothy and Deborah, he was enjoying the best of all worlds. They went their separate ways at school but almost without fail, met every evening to share their experiences of the day.

Inevitably, they began to have another problem. Boys were noticing Deborah. It had to happen, she was stunning. The boys were not neglected. Girls shamelessly flirted. So far, the pressure was still manageable. They still were not old enough to drive, legally at least, and the dating game was limited to school events. This was usually nothing more than sitting together. Often, the three of them would arrive together, split up for the duration of the event and leave together. The boys that courted Deborah's favor were not at all happy with this arrangement. Even at heavily attended and chaperoned events, there was opportunity for making out and groping. Deborah was deftly avoiding such encounters but it was becoming more and more difficult. She was doing plenty of making out with the boys in the clubhouse. So far, it had not advanced beyond that but she knew it would and she was getting as anxious as the boys. She had much more misgivings about other boys. They were much more bolder and inconsiderate.

The girls were making obvious attempts for Nicholas' and Timothy's attention and they reacted differently when the boys always

left with Deborah. They wanted to pull out her hair. Of course, they were sure that Deborah was doing much more to control their affections. Some of them were more than willing to duplicate any feat and they were not hesitant to let that be known to the boys. It did cause them more than a few sleepless nights. For now, they were satisfied that things would stay as they were. For how much longer, they were not at all sure. They were even less sure of what they would do about it. That in large part was why they did not press the issue now.

They were at an awkward age. They and their classmates were old enough to want to exert their independence but not old enough to have the means to do anything about it. They looked with envy at their older classmates and the freedom they enjoyed, compliments of the automobile.

It had not escaped their notice that in one more year, while they would still be shy of legal driving age, they would have access to auto freedom, vie their classmates who were one year older. All three had numerous friends in the upper class and it would be easy to go along for the ride, especially for Deborah. Any number of boys had designs on her and they would be ready, willing and able to accommodate her. Exactly how the boys were going to fit into this equation was not yet clear. It seemed the boys would have to rely on their male counterparts to supply them with automobile freedom.

It was during the last half of their freshman year that they entered into the 'rebel against all school authority' phase. Brought on partly because they had reached an age when they thought they should rebel against something and partly from peer pressure. There was an awfully lot of rebellion going on and they felt compelled to get in on some of it. Driving a few teachers nuts seemed as good of avenue as any. With careful planning, there was hardly any chance of getting caught. The key was to make it as bad as possible but not bad enough to involve the cops. In other words, stop short of destroying the taxpayer's property in sums that could be treated as a felony.

Almost daily, Deborah and her friends set fire to a bucket of something guaranteed to put out the most foul smelling odor. Even if it wasn't entirely successful, it would set off the smoke alarms.

The felons-in-the-making were not content with anything so tame. They torched a police car parked at an all night diner.

When it became too risky for the fire-in-the-bucket, Deborah and her friends resorted to holding a match under the fire alarm. The felons-in-the-making found a way to set off the civil defense alarm. Every emergency response vehicle responded but only raced wildly around the town looking frantically for the emergency to which they were to respond.

They had a scare when the cops showed up at the school, certain that the mild pranks had graduated into the more serious ones. It was hard to remain unafraid while they watched the grim faced authorities march from one office to the next trying to get a lead on the perpetrators. One exasperated teacher was heard to exclaim, "If I knew who the little sonofabitch's were, I'd have already kicked their asses out of school." "Yeah," one of the cops retorted, "And they would probably burn your goddamn house down."

Nothing could ever top the great teacher-cop scandal as it came to be called. It was a not-so-secret secret that the soccer coach and gym teacher were having an affair. The students had watched and followed and learned that they met in a nearby hotel for their trysts. But what to do with this choice bit of information? It was during the police investigation into the arsons that they learned the soccer coach was married to the police dispatcher and the gym teacher was married to a patrolman. Once this connection was made, it was shortly thereafter while on a stakeout of the hotel that they learned the dispatcher and patrolman were having an affair and meeting at the same hotel, no less. Now, this had real possibilities. If it could be arranged so that all of them met at the hotel at the same time.....well, that would go down in school annals as the all time best.

Then, as if it were preordained, it began to come together. The dispatcher and the patrolman were seen driving to the hotel. They were followed and seen to go into a room. Deborah used the school's computer lab to hack into the hotel system and quickly learned the coach had reserved a room for this very afternoon. She changed the room reservation to the one across the hall from the dispatcher and cop. It was set. It was going down but how would they know what happened? They were nearly resigned to accept that the greatest sting in history would go unobserved. Then Timothy happened by. "Not to worry," he proclaimed. While stalking the coach and the teacher, he had noticed a camera mounted in the hall of the hotel. He snooped around the front desk and saw a bank of monitors which the desk clerk could watch but never did. But most important of all, he noticed a recorder. Everything in every hall was being taped. "But how could they ever get the tape?" the girls had lamented. "Not to worry," he proclaimed again. He would think of something. The girls rushed off to see that everyone, in fact, had gone to the hotel. Timothy rushed off to find Nicholas who, he hoped, would figure a way to abscond with the tape.

The next day it was noticed that the soccer coach had a fat lip. The gym teacher's face was scratched. At the police station, it was observed that the patrolman had a black eye and the dispatcher also had a scratched face.

They must get that tape at all costs. Nicholas had come through with a plan. They arrived at the hotel. Deborah would go in first, dressed in the shortest short set in existence. She had to get the desk clerk's undivided attention. This was done as she approached the desk, dropped her pencil, turned, bent over and picked it up. From then on, the building could have burned and the desk clerk would not have noticed. Deborah was there to do research on some school paper. It didn't matter what she said, the guy wasn't listening. She coaxed him from behind the desk to answer some questions about the lobby and

whatever she could think of but mostly she dropped things and bent over to pick them up. Timothy slipped to the desk, vaulted over, ejected the tape and in seconds they were out. They waited an hour before Deborah could extract herself from the desk clerk. She managed that only after someone came in to register and the clerk had to leave her. She raced out to the waiting car and they sped away.

It was truly a moment for the annals of history. Deborah and the boys had stopped and made emergency phone calls to both rooms. They all came out at the same time and stood face to face. Then fists and fingernails started flying. Nicholas had made dozens of copies and they were all over town.

The entire student body had a copy and every time one of them walked near the coach or the gym teacher, they made a siren noise. At the police station, they yelled, 'Score!' It was an imitation of the announcer at the soccer games. If the participants continued their affairs, no one ever knew about it or, for that matter, cared. The incident would be recalled for decades to come. It was the stunt against which all others would be measured.

Timothy achieved a certain amount of notoriety when he masterminded smuggling a goat into a classroom on a Friday afternoon. When the building was opened Monday morning, goat shit was smelt a block away. It was easy for the hub cap thieves to expand their scope to include a goat. They even had enough foresight to steal some food as well. A well fed goat was a happy goat and a happy goat was a.....well, the desired results were achieved. The police were dispatched to investigate the scene but they hastily retreated after getting a whiff of the room. "No chance of any evidence being recovered in there," they had reported. Timothy had hoped school would be closed for a day while the building was fumigated. Instead, they closed off the room and everyone had to suffer though the foul smell that permeated the whole building. Timothy's popularity fell. However, he would not be deterred.

He found a way to cut the power to the entire building but, in seconds, the emergency generator came on and there was hardly a flicker. That one had been so ill-fated he did not even bother to claim credit for it.

Lesser pranks had also come to an unfavorable end, like sabotaging the heating system. He couldn't take credit for that when the student body vowed revenge on whoever forced them to have to sit in a freezing building. Smoke bombs were unpopular after the first one. They weren't allowed to evacuate and had to smell the horrible odor.

It was Nicholas' honor to take second place in the all time prank hall of fame. Between classes he had gone to the men's room and watched as a boy raced from one fixture to the next, flushing them and trying to have them all flushing at once. He never did get it done but it did get Nicholas to thinking about the plumbing system. He could visualize in his mind how it worked. One day in an exceptionally boring class, he was doodling and a vision came to mind. It would be amusing if a urinal was flushed and instead of emptying, it shot water out. He was still thinking. Even better if it were a commode. Then he thought of the valve contraption he had built. A couple of modifications and the valve would cause that to happen. He began to design it in his mind. Not that difficult to do and with an electrical switch he could activate it at a time of his choosing. Afterwards, he could simply deactivate the valve and no one would ever suspect sabotage. After things calmed down, he would remove the valve. At the clubhouse, he told Deborah and Timothy. They were ecstatic. It was truly a classic. They put the plan in motion. Nicholas began incorporating the electrical switch into the device. Deborah and Timothy worked out a plan to install it.

The teacher's lounge was isolated from normal building traffic. That made their project easier. There was no doubt about which plumbing to attach the valve. Nicholas installed it after school and when the coast was clear, Timothy signaled for him to come out of

hiding. They simply walked out of the building and no one ever saw them. The biggest problem was how would they see the results. This was in the teacher's lounge and in the restrooms for that lounge as well. It may as well have been Fort Knox. Then Deborah came to the rescue. She would forge a message, actually two messages that had to be delivered immediately. One for a female teacher which she would deliver and one for a male teacher that Timothy would deliver. This would put them inside the lounge at the instant Nicholas threw the switch. They would each carry their father's expensive motor driven cameras. When the button was held down, the camera took frame after frame. It could eat up a roll of film in a few seconds. They were jubilant. It would work.

It was time. Deborah walked into the ladies lounge. They were in groups of two and threes, chatting and smoking and drinking coffee. A few looked at Deborah when she entered. She waved the paper and mumbled the name of a fictitious teacher. She glanced around as if looking for her and went immediately to the restroom area. She held the camera at her side and pushed open the door. She was still mumbling the name but garbling it so no one could understand. Rows of commodes were occupied.

In the men's lounge, Timothy was doing exactly the same thing. He pushed open the door to the restroom area and in this case, they were lined up at the urinals. He waited an excruciatingly long few seconds before someone flushed. In the women's lounge someone did the same. A jet stream backwash erupted from all the urinals. A dozen male faculty members walked bent over for several days, until the soreness subsided. One was heard to moan, "I didn't know you could be castrated by a jet of water." The women didn't fare much better. Said one, "Now I know what it would feel like in a car wash."

They managed to take dozens of photos. One of Deborah's was a classic. Several victims staring at the commode in disbelief and all with their pants around their ankles. The looks on their faces were

worth a million dollars. Just having had your ass blown off by a jet of water would give that effect. Copies were circulated by the hundreds. Even the teachers who were not victimized thought it was hilarious.

Nicholas reversed the switch and repeated attempts to get the errant plumbing to duplicate the malfunction were not successful. A few days later he removed the valve. From that day, no teacher ever flushed anything while they were standing before it or sitting on it.

It was the greatest prank in school history but it's fame was fleeting. It wasn't long before Deborah's sting achieved immortality as the all time best.

The next year was momentous for the kids as well as their classmates. They became old enough to drive. There was a head long rush to take driver's education so the day of their birthday they could apply for their license. As each classmate's birthday arrived, there was sort of a rite of passage. Usually getting their parent's car, cramming as many people into the car as possible and driving endlessly up and down the street. They never tired of the ritual.

The truly fortunate got an added pleasure. They were presented with a car on their birthday. Timothy's birthday came first and he was not surprised when he was given the keys to his car. His father was pleasantly surprised at Timothy's expertise in driver's education. In fact, Timothy almost overplayed his hand. The instructor raised an eyebrow or two at Timothy's expert handling of the car. He realized he mustn't appear too experienced. The instructor was a real dork and would not be above making his suspicions known to Timothy's father.

He was the most powerful teacher in the school system and the most feared and the most hated. He held the power of 'drive' or 'not drive' and was not hesitant to exercise it. The girls quickly learned that a short skirt was a guaranteed passing grade. They could almost rear end a parked car and with the proper leg action on the brake and

accelerator, still pass. One of the most notorious short skirts did just that.

The boys learned not to pack up. A car load of boys put him in a bad mood and someone was always singled out for failure. Ideally, there would be equal boys and girls in each driving test. He would pass them all.

Deborah's birthday was next. She was not all that interested in having her own car. She realized long ago it would not be all that necessary. Nevertheless, her mother thought it was the modern thing to do and her father bought one. For the remainder of her high school years, she seldom drove it. For reasons that she never understood, the boys would argue incessantly about going in their car. They both wanted to drive. They could drive for hours, going nowhere. They never tired of it. She would smooch with the non-driver, hoping to improve his foul mood. It always helped but she could usually catch him casting an envious eye at the driver, even during a kiss.

A few weeks later it was Nicholas' birthday. For a while, a serious rift developed. The boys argued nonstop about the virtues of their car to the detriment of the other's car. They were constantly bragging and criticizing. One night she crawled into the back seat so they wouldn't be arguing across her and they didn't seem to notice. She rolled down the window and talked to whoever happened to be driving beside them. They still didn't notice. It grew worse and worse. Each was loudly proclaiming that their car had the best of everything.

Finally, she threatened to withhold kissing until they stopped. That worked, but barely. They quietly seethed while she was in the car. The minute she was taken home, they erupted. Of course, this didn't last long. It took only a minute to get to the other's house.

She was not anxious to stop kissing and was determined to find a way for them to coexist. She learned that by taking the initiative and bragging equally on their cars, they finally dropped the constant arguing. At last, things returned to normal.

Later in the year another fad developed. Everyone that had a car gathered in a parking lot. They parked at the curb so their cars lined the street. They sat on, or leaned on, the fenders and watched whoever was not parked, drive by. It was some kind of a display ritual. Only the newest or best cars parked. All others continued to drive back and forth. Deborah was pleased to learn that the boys were not the only ones to engage in arguing the finer points of their car. It was nonstop in the parking lot.

This was one of the few times she made use of her car. She piled in a load of girls and drove back and forth by the parking lot. The boys were sorely undecided. It was a hard decision but slowly the girls won out. Besides, the boys learned there were ways to have the best of both worlds. They could always sit in the parking lot for an hour or so before the girls grew restless.

They were also learning many things in that parking lot. A great deal more than kissing was going on. The kids were openly discussing what they were learning. Nicholas and Timothy were looking to Deborah for more information. She might not be all that knowledgeable but she certainly held the key to happiness. It was a confusing time. Nicholas and Timothy looked longingly at the cars parked in the shadows. They had been invited on more than one occasion but had reluctantly declined. Deborah had stood back and waited, hoping they would decline but not really expecting that they would. It was a confusing time for her as well. She was not prepared to make a counter offer to the boys. For the first time, she expected they would all go their separate ways. Instead, everything stayed as it was.

They were the object of some taunting remarks, particularly Deborah. It was assumed they were in a three way tryst or, perhaps, it was hoped that's what they were in. The athletes were more than graphic in their insults and insinuations about her. 'The nymphomaniac' was as nice as it got. But as cruel as teenagers could be, their attention span was short and soon they had moved on to

another target. Curiosity remained about the strange relationship but there was always something of equal or greater curiosity.

The girls did not exactly give up on pursuing Nicholas and Timothy. There were always a few that were intent on breaking up the threesome. 'Shoot old Deb out of the saddle' became a rally cry. They did make things difficult for the boys. The best looking and most eligible boys made a run for Deborah but she instinctively recognized their motives. The trio remained intact.

By this time, their academic prowess was legendary. They had some notoriety as the three smartest students ever to attend the school. It gained them a level of acceptance and also helped explain their odd relationship. One particularly crude athlete commented, "I bet they have to use a pocket calculator to figure out how to do it." It turned out that, perhaps, he should have done a bit more figuring himself. His girlfriend was one of the first in their class to get pregnant.

Changes were on the horizon but none of the three were exactly sure what those changes would be. They finished that year without any of those changes taking place. Summer came and they tried to find something to entertain themselves. The swimming pool opened and they flocked to it along with the majority of their classmates. The girls had learned how to let their mothers buy the most conservative swimsuit in the store for them. Later, they would go back and buy the most daring bikini which they would change into after they left their houses. A contest quickly developed as to who would be seen in the most revealing bikini. The swimming pool was packed.

There were also many more social activities. The junior year was always the training ground for the proms and events that would conclude their senior year. There was always a dance. There was a dance for everything. Just about everybody hated the dances. It was a lasting memory, a lifetime stigma to work up the nerve to ask a girl to dance, to walk across the room in full view of everyone there, to be refused

and have walk back, knowing every kid in school had just seen you get rejected. For the victims, it was the only thing about the dances they ever remembered.

Nicholas and Timothy particularly disliked the dances. Only one could be dancing with Deborah and the other had to sit, looking like a stooge. If they all sit out the dance, invariably someone would ask Deborah, leaving them both to look like stooges. The more forward girls would use that opportunity to ask the boys to dance. They usually did so, hoping to make Deborah jealous and they usually did. This really confused the boys.

"Why?" they asked, "Are you mad because we danced with someone while you were doing the same only the guy was trying to feel you up as well." They never did get a satisfactory answer and Deborah never did stop getting jealous. She really got confrontational when they told her how they felt about the guys letting their hands slip down on her butt.

"Wasn't my fault," she retorted.

"Well, if it's okay, maybe we would do that, also," the boys threatened. Timothy was the first to get up the nerve and to his everlasting surprise and delight, she did not stop him. Nicholas could not wait for the next dance. He cut in. Only then did they learn why there were so many dances. They became much more anxious to attend.

During the first semester of their junior year, they faced a momentous decision. A big event approached. A banquet, followed by yet another dance. But the banquet.....how would they go. This called for a date. A couple.....a boy, a girl. There was no other way. It was impossible to accommodate a threesome. They knew it was coming and, in fact, had been arguing about it for some time. Neither Nicholas or Timothy would volunteer to stay behind and be remembered for all time as the one who was left out. Deborah didn't want it to happen to either of them but she also knew she was going to attend. With this in mind, she made a revolutionary suggestion. The boys were

stunned. They sat in silence for a long time, considering the suggestion. They didn't like it but it was better than risking being the one left out. The suggestion...they would all go with someone else. How bad could it be? One banquet, one dance, one night, it would all be over. The boys had to agree. They would do it. They drove up in front of Deborah's house and she got out. She leaned back in the window.

"I better not catch either of you feeling someone's butt."

"You better not let anyone feel yours," they answered simultaneously but she was already walking away.

The announcement that they would have dates caused quite a stir at school. Deborah was a worthy prize. They were lining up to make a headlong rush to ask her but also were hesitating to see who the star quarterback would ask. To no one's surprise, he asked Deborah. He was not her first choice but she accepted, mostly to end the ordeal. The boys were not happy. They considered him a formidable threat. In retaliation, they asked the two most promiscuous girls in the school. Deborah was not happy.

The night came. They were dressed in their finest. Deborah's dress looked like the dome on a capitol building. The boys were in tuxes. Everyone looked basically identical, except the girl's dresses were in many colors. The star quarterback had a flask, filled with some awful smelling whiskey and was, not too subtlety, drinking it. He was becoming more and more obnoxious and constantly draped his arm around Deborah's shoulders so his hand was strategically placed on her chest. The low cut prom dress was making it easy for him. Timothy and Nicholas' dates were ready for the whole event to end. They would judge the success of the prom by what happened in the back seat of a car. During the banquet they had made their intentions known to the boys. They were certainly not adverse to this new experience and watching the star quarterback stick his hand down Deborah's dress did not help their mood. Even so, they could see she was having a struggle

fending off his groping. Perhaps, when the dance started, they could whisk her away. It was not lost on the boy's dates that they were spending more time watching Deborah's plight than they were watching them.

Finally, the banquet ended and the dance began. Everything got worse. The star quarterback was practically wrestling Deborah to the floor. The girls had all but given up on Timothy and Nicholas and were trawling for replacements. They were having plenty of success.

The star quarterback had maneuvered Deborah outside, ostensibly, for a breath of fresh air. Deborah had agreed, hoping it would sober up the obnoxious oaf. Instead, he had strong armed her into the back seat of a nearby car.

Timothy and Nicholas' dates had found two eager replacements and were already in the back seat. Their sounds waffled across the school parking lot.

Timothy and Nicholas waited anxiously for Deborah to return and without speaking a word began to walk across the dance floor when they thought she should have been back. They were instantly confronted with the sight they expected to see. Together they had reached in and pulled the quarterback off of Deborah. They were only going to throw him aside but Deborah sprang from the car and slugged him in the face. He was too drunk to feel much pain but blood poured from his nose and down the front of his shirt. He turned and staggered back inside, oblivious to his appearance.

They stood in the parking lot, deciding what they wanted to do. No one wanted to go back inside. No one wanted anything more to do with this prom. Deborah reached out and hugged them both.

"Thanks for rescuing me," she said in a faltering voice. At that moment the air was pierced by squeals of delight from the boy's ex-dates. They turned and looked in the direction of the cars from which the sound had come.

"Aren't you going to thank me for rescuing you," she asked and they all broke out laughing.

Timothy reached out to close the door to the car from which they had rescued Deborah. Some beer was iced down in a container in the floor board. He lifted it out and reached back in for a paper sack. He didn't bother to look inside. Holding everything in his arms, he said, "Let's get out of here." Soon, they were at the edge of town, headed for an isolated place. They pulled up in front of the abandoned, dilapidated house and parked. They had explored the place numerous times and were familiar with every inch of it. The night was brightened by a big full moon. You could almost read by it. Deborah climbed two steps and sat on the porch. She braced her feet on the top step and rested her elbows on her knees. She leaned forward and her hands and arms dangled between her legs. It was the classic hillbilly on the front porch pose except her prom dress was bellowed out and in the full moon light, the boys were getting a lesson in prom undergarments. Timothy reached into the container, took out a beer, popped the top and took a sip. Nicholas continued to stare at Deborah. She returned his gaze. He asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, okay," she said disgustedly. "I'm mad at myself. I should have known better."

Timothy walked to them. "May as well have some beer, make the best of the situation."

Neither responded to his offer. He said no more but continued to look at Deborah's flared up dress.

She asked, "What was in that sack?"

Timothy walked to the car, pickup it up, came back, held it out to her and said, "Cigarettes."

She took the sack, took out a package and in a moment was holding the lit cigarette. It added to her pose as she alternatively rested her elbows on her knees and puffed on the cigarette. Nicholas got a

beer, swigged it and held out the can to her. She took it, sipped and didn't return the can. He went for another.

They sipped beer, Deborah smoked and they were strangely quiet. After awhile she said, "I think it's time." The boys stood side by side, not saying a word, but waiting. "Anybody got any ideas?" she asked. The boys looked at each other. They were so excited they were afraid to move.

Timothy stammered, "Ah.....toss a coin?" Nicholas said nothing. Deborah held out her hand. Timothy dug furiously in his pocket, found a coin and held it out to her.

"Heads, Nicholas. Tails, Timothy," she said and tossed the coin. It flashed in the bright moon light. She caught it and slapped it onto the back of her hand. She glanced at the boys and uncovered the coin. It was tails. She took the coin off the back of her hand and trying not to hesitate, held it out to Timothy and said, "It was heads." She looked at Nicholas. He thought he was going to faint. He was so excited he could not speak.

Timothy gulped from the can of beer. He wasn't sure if he was disappointed or not. Deborah took Nicholas' hand and led him to the open door of the car. She ducked inside. Nicholas looked back at Timothy and followed her. He pulled the door closed. Timothy watched for another second, turned and strolled away.

In what seemed like forever, Timothy was suddenly aware that Nicholas was hurrying toward him. His features were plainly visible in the bright moon light. Timothy had never seen him look so happy.

"She's waiting in the car," he said. Timothy held out a can of beer and a cigarette. Nicholas took them both and Timothy practically ran to the car. Nicholas had kept his distance from the car. Then he heard Timothy calling. He hurried back to find them standing beside the car, their arms around each other. Deborah held out her other arm, he stepped beside her and put his arm around her also. They stood that

way a long time. They didn't speak. Finally, Deborah said, "How about another beer and cigarette?"

They drank enough to get giddy and soon were laughing about the prom disaster. However, the boys were much more interested in the new found delight. Before the night was over, they had insisted on another coin toss. Deborah didn't look closely enough to see who really won. She just called out, "Heads, you win again, Nicholas."

### CHAPTER 3

Deborah had been as anxious as the boys to make that transition. She also knew it would not be a one time thing and she did not intend for it to be. She did not know that a teenage boy was insatiable. For awhile, they had insisted on every night. Finally, she had to insist that they alternate nights. Reluctantly, they agreed. Most of the time, they followed this pattern. Some times, she agreed that both could have the same night. It turned into many, many nights.

Although, they never spoke of it to each other, both boys were sure they truly loved Deborah. Deborah was equally sure that she loved them both. She had made the choice to have them both so she must love them both, or so she had reasoned. She would remember the night she tossed the coin and how she had, in fact, chosen the winner. "Nicholas," she had said while she stared at the coin which indicated Timothy had won. Had she really wanted only Nicholas. She didn't think so. She believed she loved them both. How would that ever be resolved? She couldn't be with both of them for the rest of her life. It was a year before they got out of high school and then four years of college. It seemed like a lifetime. It would be a long time before she had to make a decision. For now, she would love them both.

The boys also wondered how this would be resolved. Each of their egos would not let him believe that he wasn't really the best. Maybe, not by much. After all, this was their best friend but each thought they were really the best. Sometimes they were thinking this at the same time. Sometimes, Deborah was sitting between them while they were thinking this. Neither ever came close to asking her who was the best. They were both afraid of what the answer might be.

Someday, probably when they finished college, it would be decided. Deborah would have to break the news. "Poor Timothy," Nicholas would think. "Poor Nicholas," Timothy would think. The loser would have to go away. "How sad," they both thought. But it was Darwin's theory at it's finest. The fittest must prevail no matter by how small of margin. But for now, their friendship would survive.

Only Timothy had some misgivings about the future. When it wasn't his night, he would think of some time in the future. He and Deborah would be married. He would think of the past....of one of these nights....when it wasn't his turn. Sometimes, it took forever for him to fall asleep.

One thing was certain. At any future banquets, dances or proms, they would go together. If anyone didn't like it, they wouldn't go. As it turned out no one paid much attention. They were firmly entrenched as the three smartest students and as such, were afforded the luxury of a bit of eccentricity. They would dance with others but they came together and left together and no one was ever the wiser as to what else they did together.

The remainder of the year passed uneventfully. They were busy with school work, determined to maintain their superb academic record but knowing that the order of finish was already set. Occasionally, one or the other would make a run at the top spot but, instinctively, Nicholas sensed he was being challenged and reacted accordingly. He didn't mind. It only served to send his grade point average into more rarefied air. He had already surpassed everything that had come before him and he was only adding to his lead. By the time they graduated all three had broken the all time previous high.

They began their senior year. They didn't expect it to be much different from the previous year. At least, they were hoping it would not be. There was a senior activity every week and that took a lot of their time. Any spare time was spent studying. They were being heavily recruited by many prestigious universities and it was imperative to keep up their standards. They managed to set aside some quiet time when they would go to the clubhouse and look through the recruiting brochures.

None of them had ever spoken much about their most likely choice. In the back of their minds, it had been assumed they would go to the

same place, although if they had stopped to consider the diversity of their interests, that would hardly be likely.

Without realizing it, each was making a stack of the brochures that most interested them. Deborah noticed that there were no duplications. She wondered what would happen if she and Nicholas went to the same school and Timothy chose another. She wondered what would happen if it were the reverse.

"Deborah."

Her daydream was interrupted. She looked up. Timothy was standing over her, extending his hand to pull her up.

"Come on, before your parents come home."

She held out her hand and he pulled her to her feet. They went out the door leaving Nicholas to look at brochures. She resisted the urge to look back.

The year was passing in a blur. It was spring. The major sports were over and anyone who had a chance at an athletic scholarship already had signed. The seniors were losing interest in the spring sports and in school, generally. The end was in sight. Those that had no interest in or chance at higher education were being distanced from the more fortunate. They faced uncertainty that only now were they beginning to realize. They had prayed for this day to arrive and now that it was so near, all the doubts, fears and uncertainties that they had ever had, loomed so very large. Even those whose future was secure began to have fears of failure. What if they didn't measure up? What if the big cruel world ate them up? Perhaps, it was not so easy out there. "What is going to happen to me?" was on everyone's mind.

Apprehensive of the future and bored with the present caused a renewed round of practical jokes, mostly directed at the school and teachers. It was nothing new to the teachers. It happened every year. They were not entirely defenseless. If an underclassman was caught, they would face retaliation next year. It was a delightful time for a

teacher. They were not bashful in describing the punishment they would administer the following year. It gave the apprehended student something to think about and worry about all summer. Some of the more feint of heart actually broke down and begged forgiveness. Any teacher who could accomplish this was held in high esteem by their peers. They were also not willing to be totally at the mercy of the graduating seniors and came up with a ax to hold over their heads. Mess with me, and your diploma will gather dust in some long forgotten storage bin. No diploma....no college....no job, no nothing. It was a mighty ax to wield.

Then they tried it on some lawyer's kid. He sued the hell out of the school district and that ax was gone forever. It opened the flood gates. The seniors were out of control. The teachers were at their mercy. All they could do was retaliate in kind. It made for some interesting encounters. Sometimes, the teachers were as innovative as the students.

One of their favorites was to choose one of the best looking young teachers and write a mildly encrypted note in her behalf to one of the star athletes. They already had an ego the size of Jupiter and for them to imagine that a gorgeous teacher had the hots for them was certainly within the realm of possibility. The gorgeous young teacher was suggesting a rendezvous. All he had to do was be at a motel room at the appointed time and be ready. Then the conspiring teachers would hire a two hundred pound hooker who would gleefully accept twenty dollars to do just about anything. In a darkened room with their mind running a hundred miles an hour, it was always too late before they realized they had been scammed. With flash bulbs popping, the teachers recorded the event and the next day, stealthily dropped a couple of photos on the desk of the latest victim. He would become a model student. Some of the more enterprising teachers learned that students could be coerced into using their influence to control other students. It was a happy time for the teachers. Another favorite and particularly

effective one was the diversionary tactic. A few not so subtly mentioned remarks that so-in-so's girlfriend was seen in the company of so-in-so. Meanwhile another teacher was hinting that the girlfriend/boyfriend of the other couple was seen together as well. The crisscross as it was called except it was totally fabricated. Usually, the wronged boyfriends ran together like rams. By the time, the whole thing was sorted out, school would be over and the entire student body had been engrossed in the ongoing conflict. Nobody believed anybody. It was the death of many a budding romance but the teachers considered it self-defense.

There were numerous other tactics not as spectacular nor as effective but taken all together they did neutralize some of the student's antics. The most remarkable thing was, year end and year out, they were always basically the same and they always basically worked.

And so it was as their senior year drew to a close. It was Timothy who first brought up the fact that they were not deciding on a university or perhaps as he added, not the same university. They gathered at the clubhouse. Neither boy seemed to be decided. Indifference, maybe. As long as it was prestigious and a leading university in their field. Deborah flipped a few brochures and one that met hers and Timothy's qualifications was on top. Timothy only glanced before nodding his approval. They both looked at Nicholas. He was staring at the brochure. He was thinking. He had a lot of ideas in his head and with or without college those ideas were going to flourish and he was going to be rich. He didn't need college to design valves. He needed college to gain recognition. The staff would marvel at his talents and inventions and shortly afterwards the whole world would be clamoring for his valves. Free advertising, that's what college would be. But he needed a world renown engineering college for his base. It would lend instant credibility to his inventions and his talents. He thumbed through the brochure. It was not the best known

engineering university but it was certainly in the top ten. It would serve his needs and he sure didn't want to lose his time with Deborah. Especially his time with Deborah. He continued to flip the pages of the brochure. Their medical school was world class. Their law school was in the top one percent. They had decided. He thought of Deborah and Timothy, together. He was far away, at another university. He groaned silently, the sound almost escaped through his lips. He looked up. They were looking at him. "I'll go here," he said and tapped the brochure. Deborah leaned over and hugged him. Timothy clapped him on the back. They were smiling. It was Deborah who suggested they celebrate, in the usual manner. Timothy got up and went outside to wait. They had dispensed with the coin toss. Timothy always lost anyway.

They had little to do in the remaining days. The graduation ceremonies, of course, but those did not take much time. They were making college plans. Once they had decided on a college, Nicholas' father who was ever the opportunist, made a proposal that they could not believe. He had found a duplex near the campus. He would buy it and they could live there. If Deborah and Timothy's parents would pay the utilities, he would furnish the house and they could live in a nice place, free to concentrate on their studies. Deborah could occupy the smaller side, the boys would share the other half. It was an agreement made in heaven, at least, as far as the kids were concerned. As soon as they were out of hearing range, Deborah whispered, "Beats the hell out of a back seat." Each boy put an arm around her shoulder. They were giddy with excitement.

The weekend following their graduation they drove to the university to become familiar with the place and to look over their new quarters. In the boy's side there was a short hall which led to the back door. In that hallway was a door to Deborah's side. It was boarded up and locked so each side was insured it's privacy. The first

thing they did was tear off the boards and break the lock. "Easy access," the boys said. "No need to go outside to get inside," Deborah added. They spent the summer taking their belongings to the new house and furnishing it with furniture that none of the three families used anymore. There was more than enough. Especially for the boys. Decorating was not high on their agenda. Deborah's side of the house looked like a model home. It caused them to think about it for a minute. They decided it wasn't worth the trouble. If they wanted to see her side it was a very short walk down the hall. For the next four years, the hall was busier than an interstate highway.

Finally, the summer was over. They loaded the last of their clothes and were preparing to leave their homes. Deborah's father watched as she loaded her car. He turned to the boys and said, "Take care of my little girl." The boys answered in unison, "You can count on us to take care of her."

They said good-bye to their parents and with Timothy in the lead, they drove away. They arrived a few hours later and were emerged in unloading and putting away their belongings. Timothy and Nicholas were instantly in an argument. What ever one wanted, the other had automatically assumed that would be his. Top drawers versus bottom drawers of the chest. The boy's side of the duplex had two small bedrooms and they argued for an hour over who got which room. Deborah finally intervened. They were nose to nose, arguing vehemently when they noticed her standing in the doorway, idly flipping a coin. They instantly stopped and stared at her. At this point, they weren't sure what she was tossing for. She pitched the coin at them and as she walked away, called back, "Toss for it, boys. It works wonders for other things."

That settled the choice of rooms but before long they were at it again. Deborah shut her door but soon could hear them through the walls. She turned on a radio but soon they were heard above that. She rummaged through her purse for a coin and marched down the hall. It

took awhile but she finally negotiated their way through all the conflicts. She quickly learned that sometimes they really didn't care but argued only for the sake of not giving up something. It was her first experience with turf war. She was bemused for awhile and was actually enjoying their skirmish. Then in a deadlock over closet space, Timothy suggested they be allowed the use of one of her closets. She could not possibly use all of it, he had reasoned. She was immediately nose to nose with them in a three way argument. It took a bit of her feminine wiles to redirect their argument back to each other. She stepped aside and let them go at it for awhile. Hopefully, long enough for them to forget all about her closet. Satisfied that they had long since forgot about it and were now shouting at the top of their lungs about placement of chairs in their tiny living room, she slipped back to her side and continued to unpack. They argued about the chairs for another hour. Deborah wondered why they did not notice that the room was so small there was only one possible way to place the furniture.

Later in the evening, they had achieved some semblance of peaceful coexistence. She suspected they had either run out of things to argue about or had simply tired themselves out from all that shouting. She began to notice it had been quiet for some time. Perhaps, they had killed each other. She crept down the hall until she could hear them talking amicably and apparently in a good mood. She was puzzled how that could happen but was more than willing to accept it. She went back, gathered her purse and went to pick up something for their evening meal. Awhile later she walked in, carrying two sacks of carryout. They ate, relived the day's trials and tribulations and to Deborah's surprise, did not get into another argument about it. They had another day before classes started so they were in no hurry to break up their talk session. It became late and finally their conversation was punctuated with yawns.

It was Nicholas who first made the suggestion. "We're going to be here for four years. Don't you think we should christen the place?" He held out his hand. Deborah took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. Their arms around each other, they walked down the hall. Timothy tapped the arm of the chair with his fingers. He didn't even mention tossing a coin.

The next day they fine tuned arranging their meager decorations which in Nicholas and Timothy's case meant hanging the dart board. Then they spent several hours throwing darts.

Deborah decided to stay away while they exhausted their competitive urges. She could tell by the sound of the errant throws thudding into the wall that they were not yet finished competing. When the throws became less forceful she wandered into their side of the house. A glance at the wall caused her to wince. She made no comment. She didn't want to get into an argument on the last day before classes started. Instead, she suggested they go to a fine restaurant and give themselves a big sendoff. The boys readily agreed.

It turned into a bigger night than they planned. They were drinking wine and started making toasts and before the night was over, they were well oiled. Timothy drove home and was practically hanging on the steering wheel. Deborah passed out in the back seat before they were out of the restaurant parking lot. Nicholas managed to last a bit longer but was also passed out by the time they arrived home. Timothy didn't know how he would get them inside but did manage to do so. They didn't end up in their own beds but they never knew the difference, until the next morning. Well hung over and in foul moods they dressed for the first day of classes. They were pleased when they observed that most of the student body looked worse than themselves. Apparently, it was a widespread ritual.

Sensing the futility of lecturing on anything meaningful, the instructors spent their time in introductions and playful banter. They

also warned that everyone should be well rested and clear minded for the next class.

So, it began. Their academic superiority was not to be denied. A bit of maturity plus the challenge from equally gifted students caused their grades to go off the charts. By the end of the first test period, they were already recognized as the most intelligent on campus. Remarkably, their high school ranking was maintained throughout college as well. By the time they were seniors, they were respected and recognized as having no peers. As graduation approached, Nicholas began to worry. He had always known this was going to present a problem but he put it aside until he had no choice. One night, he and Deborah lay quietly in bed when he first brought up his dilemma.

"I'm finishing my engineering degree in four years. You and Timothy are only beginning. I don't want to leave you.....er.....I mean both of you." His slip of the tongue did not go unnoticed by Deborah. "I've been thinking about it, although I'm not so sure that Timothy has." She nestled against him. "He probably wouldn't mind getting rid of the competition."

"I didn't know we were competing. I thought we were sharing."

"Sharing, then. Maybe he wouldn't mind getting rid of sharing." They were quiet for awhile. Deborah had no idea how this would end. It seemed to be out of her control. She was going to med school. This had been her plan for years. Timothy was going to law school. This, too, had been his plan for years. Nothing was going to change those plans. Finally, Nicholas spoke. "My inventions are patented. I don't have to leave school right now. I could get a masters and a Ph.D. That would take about the same amount of time as yours and Timothy's. We could still be together."

She held him close. She was thinking. "If this decision had been hers, would she have made that same choice?" She didn't think so.

"Would Timothy have made that choice?" Again, she didn't think so. "Let's go tell Timothy," she said.

Timothy was surprised. He was sure some changes were coming. Nothing would have surprised him but this did. He didn't know if he was disappointed or not. He had to admit he had thought of a couple of years of just he and Deborah. He was also glad that Nicholas was not leaving. It was a strange moment for all of them but they were careful not to let the others know what they really felt. After breaking the news to Timothy, Deborah and Nicholas returned to her room to celebrate. Timothy watched them go, stared down the hallway for a few minutes and, finally, reached for a text book and began to read.

So, their education continued and they lived the same as when it began. They were held in reverence at the university because of their outstanding grades. Their lifestyle was largely ignored. Very few were even aware of their living arrangement and most of those were in relationships even more peculiar. At this level of academia, oddity was accepted as normal.

Deborah was setting the medical world abuzz. Her abilities were instinctive and doctors with decades of experience were amazed at her natural abilities. She would surpass everything they had accomplished. That would not be totally unwelcome. A new superstar would draw the attention of the ambulance chasing lawyers. They would follow her career closely. As the money grew, so would the malpractice suits. The veteran doctors were well aware. They were anxious to return to the background. There, they were more likely to keep their money. But for now, she had their admiration. It was a joy to see her incredible talent growing daily. Soon, it would burst out and they would be there to see it.

Deborah was also amazed but for different reasons. She was only vaguely aware of the impending riches although she knew there were no poor doctors and she certainly had no knowledge of the legal minefields that loomed. She was mildly surprised to learn there was a course

about malpractice suits. It was a lesson in CYA and when that failed, have the best lawyers.

But for now, Deborah was amazed at how easy it was. The text books, the lectures....she was like a sponge. She felt like she could do an open heart surgery right now and most of the instructors agreed. Attending medical school was holding her back.

Timothy was compiling a similar record in law school. He was not as gracious as Deborah. Hardly a day passed that Timothy did not present an argument on a study case as to how he could have won the case. Begrudging, the instructors had to admit he was right. His insight and ability to make imaginative decisions at the most crucial moment were becoming legendary. The instructors began amusing themselves by dredging up long forgotten cases with irrefutable evidence and let Timothy try to change the decision. More often than not, he made a compelling argument. One professor was heard to lament, "I'm glad Hitler didn't go to trial."

No law professor was anxious for a hotshot student to take over his class but most would secretly admit they enjoyed watching him perform. They knew someday he would be famous and their only chance at a bit of fame would be the fifteen second interview on television. "I'm not surprised. He just absorbed my lectures. I knew he would be very special," they would say. Hopefully, this would be interpreted to mean the professor was, at least, in part responsible for his stardom.

While Deborah and Timothy were getting all the attention, Nicholas was quietly toiling in the background. He still maintained his lead in grade average but no one was noticing. The engineering department knew a virtual genius was in their midst but they also knew he would forever languish in the shadow of the doctor and the lawyer. Perhaps, someday, he would create a truly revolutionary device that would capture the public's imagination but most likely it would be

something that, while it was truly revolutionary, would stay in the background. Such was usually the fate of an engineer. Unless, of course, a bridge they built, collapsed.

Nicholas was happy for them. He loved it when they got awards. Whatever the occasion, they always included him at the ceremony. He was seen at their table and if anyone didn't already know who he was, they soon did.

As Nicholas' list of inventions grew so did his list of patents. The engineering department decided it should get it's share of award banquets. Soon, they were having one for Nicholas every week. Deborah and Timothy were always at his table. It added to Nicholas' glory. If the future stars of medicine and law were there, then Nicholas' accomplishment must really be important. The engineering department was going along with the free publicity ride.

Then it happened. Their education was finished. They were always so busy it was upon them and over before they realized it. There was little time for fanfare. Deborah was a doctor. She would walk into a world renown hospital and begin her residency as a surgeon. Her reputation proceeded her. Few did not expect that it would be the shortest residency on record.

Timothy was taking an even shorter cut. He wasn't bothering with the apprenticeship at a law firm. He was opening his own firm the next day after graduation. He already had a waiting list of clients. He had been making preparations for several months. He even had a receptionist and a clerk at his office. When he walked into his office, his first client would be waiting. Nicholas had been financing his setup expense. Timothy vowed to repay him in two weeks. Nicholas had assured him he could take all the time he needed. Timothy was to feel no pressure to repay the loan in record time. Nicholas had done a quick mental calculation and was appalled at the hours Timothy would have to work to repay the loan in his self-imposed time frame. Timothy

had been perplexed for a moment before he leaned over and checked Nicholas' figures.

Oh," he said nonchalantly, "My fee will be double that."

Nicholas' pangs of sympathy quickly disappeared. He said, "Too bad one of us is not an undertaker. Your first client is going to fall over dead when he sees his bill."

"You must have absorbed too much heavy metal, Nicholas. Your clients never die when you know the best surgeon on earth." He held out his arm as if he were introducing Deborah.

Deborah joined in. "Where is your mind? Timothy sends them into cardiac arrest so I can charge a nice open heart surgery fee." Nicholas had an anguished look on his face. "Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, you should invent a mechanical heart or something," she added.

"I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. I was feeling sorry for mankind."

"You should feel sorry for me," Deborah added. "Timothy is thinking about going into a new kind of law. He's going to represent the client who sues for malpractice and the doctor being sued."

She waited for Nicholas' reaction. He tried hard not to have one. "I guess it would be easier to reach a settlement," he finally said.

"You missed the whole point," Timothy chimed in. "I'll get both fees." He and Deborah laughed. Nicholas stared at them for a moment. For the first time he could not tell if they were joking. He watched them as they laughed at another scenario they concocted. He had a sinking feeling that he no longer belonged. They were no longer a trio. Deborah noticed the odd look on his face, stepped to his side and put her arm around his waist. Later that night, she made him feel like he belonged but the feeling that a change had occurred, persisted.

His feelings were fortified when he noticed they were always talking nonstop about the jobs that awaited them. Timothy's office was

staffed and waiting. Deborah would walk into the hospital, a ready made star. They had not asked Nicholas what he intended to do.

They were packing and preparing to leave before Timothy asked. Deborah stopped what she was doing and waited for his answer. "I'm going to start my own company. My valve is really coming into mass usage. I thought I would make all the profits instead of subcontracting."

"That's great," Timothy said and clapped him on the back. He went back to packing.

"Where are you going to do this?" Deborah asked. She had assumed he would return to their hometown.

"I'm following you two.....New York City!"

There was much cheering, hand slapping and such but Nicholas had the nagging feeling that Timothy was not all that glad about his decision. They decided their living arrangement would end. They didn't work close to one another and none were interested in a long commute. They certainly were not breaking up. They would just no longer live together.

Nicholas was sure they would quickly lose contact and finally no longer hear from each other at all. He was pleasantly surprised when that did not turn out to be the case.

They went to great lengths to see one another. They were widely separated in the city and would rush to a central location where they would dine in a hotel restaurant and then check into a room. Later, they would rush back to work. Sometimes, they got lucky and met in the evenings. On those occasions, they got their moneys worth in the hotel room. This arrangement worked marvelously for several years until they began to have problems with their own fame.

It started when a pro basketball star snorted a bit too much cocaine and went into cardiac arrest. He was rushed to the hospital where it fell to Deborah to try to save his life. She discovered a small deformity which would never have manifested itself had the man

not indulged in drugs. It took a Herculean effort to keep him alive long enough to repair the deformity. But she did it and her star was launched. What better way than to put the main cog back on the basketball court. She was a household name throughout the city. She was also instantly recognizable. They were stunned when a waiter addressed her by name. They were even more stunned when the desk clerk did the same. Nicholas looked back to see the clerk grinning knowingly at them as they went to the elevator. "We must figure out another way," he said as the elevator doors closed. They tried going off in different directions and meeting back at the room. It was not working. Deborah was recognized everywhere. "I don't think it's a good idea for the hospital's best known surgeon to be seen running in and out of hotel rooms." Nicholas and Timothy were desperate. This called for drastic measures. They continued to meet for lunches and dinners but there it ended. Then their difficult situation turned into impossible. Timothy became a star.

A local construction contractor's daughter was walking the wild side. There wasn't a party, cocaine line or bed that she would refuse. The contractor was basically ignoring her lifestyle in hopes that it would run its course and she would tire of it before it killed her. The young girl's talents were becoming well known throughout the cities partying scene. What was not well known was the girl was sixteen years old. The son of a Vietnamese diplomat became aware of the girl's bedroom prowess and being one of the cities foremost party goers decided he must find out for himself. The young girl was certainly more than willing but the diplomat's son had more in mind than she expected. High on cocaine and only vaguely aware of the situation, she suddenly became all too aware when all the friends of the diplomat's son got in on the party. By the time someone realized the extent of the damage, the girl was nearly dead. When the girl's father realized that the son was protected from prosecution because of diplomatic immunity, he became uncontrollably enraged. His construction business

had brought him in contact with most of the cities organized crime members and while he was not directly involved, he had done business with them. Most of his involvement had been payoffs which allowed him to do business. He accepted this as part of doing business, added the expense to his cost of doing business and caused no problems for anyone. The crime syndicate appreciated this and when they learned what had happened to his daughter, they were more than willing to help a friend in need. They also viewed a Vietnamese intrusion as a threat to their business. It had already happened on the west coast. The Vietnamese mobs were becoming firmly in control. They were determined it would not happen on the east coast.

The diplomat's son exceeded the boundaries of his safety zone and went to another party. The embassy was being watched by mob henchmen. The American government was working through diplomatic channels, hoping the public outcry would quickly dissipate and the diplomat's son could be quietly slipped out of the country. It would surely have happened if he had not gone to one more party. The diplomat had about as much control over his son as the construction contractor had over his daughter. The mob henchmen quietly infiltrated the party and then literally lifted the boy off of a girl in a bedroom. They were both so high, they probably would not remember the incident anyway. They took the boy to a freight elevator and in a few minutes he was being taken to a mob warehouse where his worse nightmare would begin.

When advised of the situation, the construction contractor simply wanted to kill the boy and be done with it. The crime bosses wanted to get as much mileage as possible from the incident. Any bad publicity resulting in a public outrage could do nothing but help curtail the Vietnamese incursion into their business. A deal was struck and a clever plan was put in motion. They needed a savvy lawyer who could handle negotiations, the media and was not afraid to challenge the State Department and the local police. A young lawyer's name quickly came to mind. The contractor had met this lawyer not as a friend but

as a foe. He had represented the contractor's opponent and the contractor had been badly beaten in court and had lost costly settlements. "Now is the time to have the little sonofabitch on my side," he growled to the mob spokesman. Timothy was contracted and accepted the job. The contractor was going to extract a settlement that could buy the embassy building if he was so inclined. Vietnamese were going to get plenty of unfavorable publicity and there was no way the television media would be able to cover for them. Timothy thought he was on the leading edge of this plan. In fact, it was already scripted and perfectly planned. Timothy would simply follow the instructions. The crime boss held a glass of scotch, slowly swirling it as he watched the six o'clock anchor with the perpetually goofy-assed smile frozen on his face. "Our friend, the lawyer is reading a script much as you are," he said to the television set.

The plan went into action. Timothy was the representative for the contractor. After all, the man was under such stress and duress. His daughter had been gang-raped, and nearly died of a cocaine overdose. And she was only sixteen. "What manner of person was the diplomat's son?" Timothy had said before the TV camera. "An American would be locked up. A foreigner was going home to a life of luxury." Public outrage reached a crescendo.

The diplomat implored the State Department to control its own citizens and gain the release of his son. "No one is safe in this country," he sneered into the TV camera. The television media quickly recognized the errors of its way. The order went down. "We can no longer portray the Vietnamese as hardworking perfect little angels. I thought we were going to lose a whole crew plus equipment on that diplomat's interview."

The State Department was equally perplexed. How could they get this idiot out of the country without appearing to be turning it back on its own citizens. The Secretary was heard to lament, "Hell, we're always porking our own citizens, they just don't know it. Now, it's

all over the media. I thought those TV types were always sucking up to some Vietnamese."

"They do, Sir. But now, they are in the same predicament as us. Everybody is watching."

The TV media and the State Department did not have the vaguest idea how much control they were about to lose.

Timothy scheduled a press conference. "We can't do a press conference that fast," the TV media moaned.

"Very well," Timothy said. "You'll miss it." He hung up on them. Their equipment was in place when Timothy came through the door.

"As I have explained, my client has no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the person that assaulted his daughter. He has retained me to handle this matter because he must remain at the bedside of his daughter. Her condition is still serious, very serious." He frowned to add emphasis. "A most heinous crime," he added and stared into the camera.

Deborah and Nicholas lay in the bed, watching. They had met for lunch and when the restaurant crowd gathered around a TV set to watch, they slipped away to a room. The desk clerk had handed Nicholas a key without taking his eyes from the TV set behind the desk.

"Timothy is doing a job, isn't he?" she said.

"Certainly is," Nicholas said. "He will be as big a celebrity as you." Deborah did not comment but continued to watch the TV.

Timothy continued, "We have received a message from the person or persons who are holding the perpetrator of this crime. While my client does not condone taking the law in your own hands, there is nothing he can do about the situation. He had not encouraged these people nor communicated with them. The matter is out of his hands much the same as the vicious assault on his daughter was beyond his control." Timothy was masterfully walking a tightrope. He was not advocating vigilantism nor enlisting sympathy for the criminal. "The message was simple. The perpetrator would be punished for his crime. That is all

I know for now. What this punishment would be was not disclosed." There was some commotion behind Timothy and someone held a piece of paper over his shoulder. The camera remained fixed on his face while he read it. He turned back to the camera. "We have received another message," he waved the paper. "A sum of ten million dollars is to be delivered to the victim. The person or persons holding the perpetrator do not believe he will ever be held accountable for his crime so he is to be punished financially. He will, at least, PAY for his crimes." Timothy emphasized 'PAY' the same as it was written on the note.

The Vietnamese embassy went ballistic. They would hold their own press conference. The American government would be held responsible for the outrage. The president of the television network wished he had never taken the job. He was heard screaming in his office, "Goddamn those gooks! We've kissed their ass for years and now they are going to make it look like we're turning on our own people!" It was silent for a few minutes. There was an enormous infiltration of Vietnamese into the television industry. If the president had looked out his office door, he would have seen more Vietnamese than anything else.

"Make it look like we're having transmission difficulties! Sound but no picture! Maybe that will keep down the complaints!" The next sound was the phone being slammed into it's cradle.

The crime boss swirled his glass and listened to the diplomat's interview. He was not displeased because there was no picture. "I didn't want to look at the sonofabitch anyway," he grumbled to the empty room. When the interview was finished he was displeased. He punched a button on the phone. A number was dialed and the speaker phone activated.

"Yes Sir," said a voice.

"Cut off a finger and UPS it to the embassy. Get a message to the lawyer. He can make the announcement."

"Which finger?"

"Surprise me." He punched the button and disconnected the call.

A few hours later, Timothy was queasy as he stood behind the podium. "This is a dreadful turn of events," he managed to say. "My client most assuredly had no knowledge of this....." He couldn't think of what to call it.

Deborah and Nicholas stopped and looked at the TV. "What is he talking about?" Nicholas said.

"I haven't been listening," she said.

They both stared at the TV.

In the hospital, the contractor watched. The phone buzzed and he lifted it, glanced at his daughter who had not so much as twitched at the sound and spoke softly into the mouthpiece. He listened and slowly a smile spread across his face. When he hung up, he was struggling to not laugh aloud. He patted his daughter's sleeping form and said, "They'll get the sonofabitch back....one piece at a time."

Timothy was regaining control, barely. This was far more than he had ever imagined. Who had kidnapped the diplomat's son? God, how he wished the State Department would take over. They tried to take over everything. Where were they when you needed them?

At the State Department, a meeting was hastily called. "They cut off his finger, for godsakes!"

A man at the head of the table held up his hand. Everyone became silent. "We will give the appearance of negotiating. Keep up a steady flow of communiqués to the embassy. Keep them neutral. We'll let the goddamn lawyer take all the heat. He wants his moment in the sun, maybe it will burn his ears off. Whatever happens, we will appear to have handled our end through the most proper of diplomatic channels. At the same time, that goofy-assed six o'clock anchor won't be able to blame us for anything." The meeting was adjourned.

Nicholas looked closer. "Poor Timothy looks like he is getting rather warm."

"So am I," Deborah said and pulled him back onto her.

Timothy dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief. "I'm afraid.....er....not afraid.....but." He straightened up and looked in the camera. This was not his fault. He spoke authoritatively, "I have to announce that the price for the safe return of the perpetrator has been increased to fifteen million." He looked intently at the piece of paper. "If payment is not agreed to, another body part will be delivered to the embassy." Timothy had to stifle a gag.

The diplomat was enraged. He was out of control and not thinking rationally. He waited too long to respond and received another finger.

Once again, Timothy stood before the cameras. "I'm afraid the time for negotiations has expired." He waved the paper so there would be no doubt where the information was coming from. "The price has been increased to twenty million....." There was a murmur from the media crowd. "And the penalty for failing to comply has been.....er.....is going to be the amputation of....er....his....er....penis." The media crowd erupted in a frenzy. This was news. This was what they lived for. They could not lose no matter what happened, no matter who did what. Back in the news room, stories were being written with every conceivable ending. The more enterprising were covering all bets. Would they or would they not, cut it off. The diplomat's son would not have been happy if he had known which way the wagering was going. Even those who bet that they would not were secretly hoping that they would.

Even Nicholas was forced to stop. "Geez, that will take all the steam out of your engine." Deborah was in no frame of mind for delays.

"Turn off the television. You're going to finish what you started."

Timothy was spellbound. The media group was turning cannibalistic. No one was paying the slightest attention to him. Everyone was talking into a cell phone and holding their finger in their other ear. Timothy could hear bits and pieces of various conversations. He looked at the piece of paper he was holding and tapped on the microphone to get their attention. No one even looked in

his direction. He looked at the camera and the cameraman was leaned over, in rapt conversation with someone. He thought for a moment and deciding there was nothing he could say anyway, turned and stepped down from the podium. He rummaged in his pockets and found his own cell phone. He began dialing a number, having decided it was time to talk to his client but mostly because he didn't want to be the only one standing around doing nothing.

The contractor picked up the phone. He could barely speak. He had never been sure of what would happen and had basically been going along for the ride. If his daughter had not been caught in this escapade, she would have been caught in the next one or the one after that. She was leading a dangerous lifestyle. But.....twenty million dollars. That had registered on him. Why fifteen million had not so affected him, he did not know. He had a keen insight into human nature and maybe he instinctively knew he was about to get the key to the city. What father could not pay any amount to keep his son from losing his..... "Hello," he said into the phone. He glanced at his daughter. She did not appear to have heard the phone. Twenty million.....and he must figure a way so she didn't get a penny of it. He listened and then he stopped listening. It was his lawyer. Surely, his lawyer knew a way to keep the money out of his daughter's hands. She would squander every penny on the next party or whatever. For twenty million dollars, she would not be at a loss for opportunities to squander it. He held the phone close to his mouth and talked to Timothy. "Yeah, she's okay but I need you to work on this." And with that he spelled out his problem. Timothy was surprised that the man had gone from concerned parent to financier although he was not surprised that twenty million dollars would have that effect.

When Timothy was able to get a word in, he said, "I can't see where that will be a problem and particularly since the money will be deposited in an off shore account."

"You're a good lawyer," the man said and hung up.

Timothy glanced around the room. The frenzy had not subsided so he held the phone to his ear and listened intently to the disconnected tone.

Two aides were holding the diplomat while he vomited into a commode. Hearing that your son was about to have his penis cut off had that effect. Between gagging and gasping for breath, he managed to instruct the men to get the money and prepare to hand it over to the kidnappers. At least, they could use the incident to throw at the American government every time lawlessness was brought up. Perhaps, the Americans would not be so quick to point at the Vietnamese drug trafficking. But he did not think they would get twenty million dollars worth of finger pointing.

The crime boss swirled his glass of scotch. He was watching as another message was handed to Timothy. The camera seemed to be unmanned but it so happened to be focused on Timothy. He punched off his cell phone which the crime boss had no way of knowing it was connected to no one and read the note. Even though Timothy's expression did not change, the crime boss did detect a wave of elation as it swept over Timothy's face. The crime boss shrugged. A third of twenty million dollars will do that to you. He reached for his phone. He was tired of the whole affair and anxious to get on to more pressing matters. He made arrangements to release the diplomat's son as soon as confirmation of the money transfer was received. He lifted his phone and began calling newspaper editors and TV anchors. He had plenty of markers out there and he was about to call them in. He did not want the Vietnamese criminal activities to soon be forgotten. In fact, he wanted that to be in the news for weeks to come. And it was.

Timothy reread the note. He was rich. He could think of nothing else. He would have been rich one day but now he was instantly rich and he had not even had to go to trial. Now, he was smiling. He looked at the media crowd. He put on his somber face and stepped to the podium. In a loud and commanding voice he spoke into the

microphone. The crowd fell silent and the cameraman focused on Timothy. They could sense a story.

#### CHAPTER 4

A week passed before they could meet for dinner. They sat at the table talking to each other but every eye in the place was on them. Every eye was on them no matter where they went. Even Nicholas was recognized everywhere if for no other reason but his association with them.

Deborah spoke quietly, "I guess the good times are over for sure. What with Timothy's fame added to my own, there is no way to sneak into a hotel room in the entire city. Everybody knows you just because you're sitting at this table, Nicholas." She thought she saw a hurt expression flutter across his face. He did not answer. She continued, "It was getting to be a problem, anyway. I was recognized everywhere. This just hurried it along."

Timothy pretended to be engrossed with his food. He didn't think he was going to miss it very much. He was getting offers from all over

the city, in all walks of life and he was already making a list in preferred order.

Nicholas fidgeted with his napkin. "I'm sure going to miss.....," he did not finish the sentence as yet another autograph seeker thrust a pen and paper in Timothy's face. He signed his name with a flourish. Deborah was looking at Nicholas' face but he kept his eyes on his plate and didn't look up. When they finished, they went their way in separate cabs. Photographers followed them. Nicholas looked out the window as cabs swerved in and out of traffic to keep up. Deborah had been right. He leaned his head back against the seat. He knew it had to end some day but he never expected it to be so abruptly. He felt very sad.

There was certainly no problem with the trio meeting for dinner engagements and they continued to do so. The media was eating it up. They were usually waiting for them to arrive. It was always good for a filler story and for right now, Deborah and Timothy were everybody's darlings. Nicholas lamented, "Don't you wish you were like me? Don't know who you are and don't care."

Deborah added, "I can't believe JFK slipped a stream of movie stars into the White House and nobody knew it and we can't slip off to a hotel without everybody knowing it."

Timothy added, "It would make a difference if the Secret Service was pimping for us and the media would do anything to cover up for us like they did for JFK."

"That would help," Nicholas said thoughtfully. Then he continued, "I still think we could split up and meet somewhere."

Deborah was shaking her head before he finished. "No way. That's the sort of thing that bell hops live for. They have deals with every photographer in the city. I guarantee the hall would be full of flashbulbs the minute we walked out." She looked around the room and many eyes were on them. "The little sneaks are like cockroaches, they're everywhere. Have you ever noticed how many cars follow you

every time we leave?" Timothy and Nicholas nodded and took a sip of their drinks, letting their eyes roam around the room. She followed their gaze and said, "It shouldn't be long until somebody does something to get their attention. Baseball players seldom go very long without a scandal and any day now a football player is sure to fail a drug test. In due time, we will be forgotten."

She could not have been more wrong. Deborah reeled off a long succession of successful surgeries. It seemed that every politician and billionaire in the country had a heart attack at the same time. At the brink of death and only by the skilled hands of Deborah did they survive. But survive they did and her fame soared. Soon, they were coming in from foreign countries. Her success was known internationally. If they had the money, a continuing life was assured. Just when it seemed she could be no more famous, she was. Transplants...no self respecting billionaire would die just because ordinary heart surgery was not adequate to save their lives. A few well placed donations was sufficient to secure a top spot on the recipient list. Politicians made the list with a few thinly disguised threats. "Find a matching donor or there will be a Medicare audit." That was enough to cause the hospital administration to need a transplant of their own.

Deborah had no use for nor interest in the administration. She was a surgeon and from the looks of things, she was going to be the greatest surgeon of all time. She had little concern who the latest recipient was. There was always a little operating room humor. "Can't let this one die, he's too rich. He put a codicil in his will that if we don't save him, we will all be assassinated." Deborah always laughed but eventually she noticed that others on the surgery team did not. They all laughed about the threat of the Medicare audit but Deborah noticed the CEO of the hospital was always hovering just outside the operating room doors. The CEO never left until Deborah had assured them the recipient was going to live. Still, she had no

concern for such matters. She was a world renown surgeon and, besides, there was always a king, or dictator or some foreign something just at the brink of death and with a donor already lined up. They must do things differently in other countries, she mused.

Soon, she, Timothy and Nicholas were going weeks without meeting for dinner. That turned into months. They would call and promise to meet very soon. Those months turned into years. They no longer heard from each other at all. Nicholas followed her career in the papers. He always looked carefully and scarcely a week passed that there was not an article about her latest success. He would place a call, several days later she would return his call, they would agree to meet for lunch very soon and they never did.

One day, Nicholas picked up the paper and he felt a big lump churn in his throat. Deborah was getting married. A senator, no less. He was older than Deborah but then senators were older than everybody except billionaires. Nicholas could not believe his eyes. He reached for the phone but never picked it up. Over the next few days, he reached for the phone many times but never picked it up. The day of the wedding passed and Nicholas had not picked up the phone. He never did.

Timothy's career was ever bit the match of Deborah's but his was also not as newsworthy. After his moment of fame, he never quite matched that again. His personal fortune grew to astounding heights but most of his legal expertise was exercised in back rooms and in limousines, far from prying eyes and ears. That was okay with Timothy. His moment in the public spotlight had taught him a lesson. It was a minefield and he could have just as easily been demolished. There were many pitfalls out there that day and had he fallen into one, he would still be falling. It was a risk he didn't want to take again. Too be sure, he was a well known personality. There was always a high profile case to be won and Timothy won more than his share. Even his losses

built his reputation. Any other attorney would have gone down in flaming defeat. Timothy always managed to salvage something. Usually, he took a hopeless case and won some major concessions. Whenever this involved the drug addicted son of a politician or some well known luminary, he had a brief moment in the spotlight. He tried to limit this to a brief statement on the courthouse steps or, at least, a controlled interview at a TV station. Never again would he be at the mercy of uncontrolled circumstances. He and Deborah continued to see each other at public occasions for the rich and famous. They did no more than acknowledge one another, speak briefly or usually a glance from across the room. They were nothing more than present at the same cocktail party or fund-raiser for the needy. It just wasn't the same anymore. Timothy had seen her wedding announcements at the same time as Nicholas. He thought about it and could not recall having seen her with an escort much less the senator. He mused, "She must have found some way to get in a hotel room unseen." Of course, it was not impossible. Timothy was a most eligible bachelor and there were many, many opportunities out there trying to snag him. He was certainly not above letting everyone have an equal chance. He mulled over the idea of calling Nicholas about Deborah's announcement. He didn't make the call but he wondered why Deborah had not called them. Then he wondered if he had been the first, would he have called them. After awhile he decided he would not have called them. It was probably best this way. In spite of their best intentions, they had drifted inexorably apart. From time to time, he wondered how it could have happened. He recalled those nights in the back seat of a car. It didn't seem like they would end and when they went off to college, it got even better. He smiled at the memory and idly spun a paperweight on his desk. "A senator," he thought. That would have been his last guess. If Deborah hadn't lost any of her drive, that senator was going to be in for a surprise. After a few weeks with Deborah he might have a problem making roll call. Timothy chuckled. Then he frowned. This just wasn't like her.

She wouldn't marry a senator for the sake of marrying one. In the first place she didn't need him. He would have been less surprised to learn she was marrying a stud muffin that she found on the beach. He gave the paperweight a final spin and turned to a pile of papers on his desk. He needed an elephant to carry his case load. But that was what he wanted. Billable hours. He was already rich but he wanted to be richer. It was the one true measure of a man. How much money he could accumulate. Timothy was well on his way to being a great man. He stood and walked to the window. He was considering his own marital status. He had met the daughter of one of his wealthiest clients. The man called himself an investment banker but Timothy was sure the man ran an international money laundering operation. He was vague and hesitant about giving Timothy any details about his business. Timothy had assured him anything he said was confidential and he only asked so he could give the man the best advice money could buy. They both had smiled at the remark. Timothy remarked that surprises were not conducive to the preparation of the best strategy. The man had nodded in agreement but still had not given much more information. Finally, Timothy had grown tired of the man and dismissed him. He would not be able to help. Timothy was surprised when the man showed up again a few days later. This time he was not so hesitant. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. His only objective was to arrange his affairs so his only child and sole heir would live out her life in the style to which she had become accustomed. Timothy had to work to suppress his surprise when he had opened the folder containing the man's balance sheet. He made Timothy look like a pauper. He had assured the man his daughter would have no trouble living in style even if she was a bit extravagant. Certainly she would not be extravagant the man had said but she would be alone in the world and she had no experience in worldly affairs. Timothy had barely listened. He was making notes to have the necessary papers drawn up for the man. It was quite simple. He would prepare a trust so the woman could live from the earnings but

never be able to touch the principle. No matter what she did, she would die richer than she would be at the moment of the man's death. Satisfied that he knew all he needed to know, he suggested the man return the next day with his daughter and Timothy would explain the terms of the trust. He needed to do something to justify what would be, a huge fee.

They were ushered into Timothy's office. Later, Timothy would wonder what he had expected and he wondered what the goofy expression on his face must have looked like when he saw her. She was nothing short of the most beautiful female Timothy had ever laid eyes on and Timothy had laid much more than his eyes on many, many beautiful females. He was speechless. Her eyes held him spellbound. The man made introductions but Timothy barely heard. He sensed that the woman had led a sheltered life. He could also tell she was no longer going to lead a sheltered life from the instant the man died. Timothy had never believed it when he heard women say they had been undressed by a man's eyes. Now, he did believe it. The woman had just done that to him. He stood and took her hand and held it. She did not resist. He regained his composure and barely able to tear his eyes from her, he looked at the man.

"I was up late thinking about this trust I have prepared for your daughter, Mr. Hargrove," he finally said. "I think it is not adequate," he said and tore the pages in half. "Something special must be prepared for a special person." Their eyes locked and for an instant Timothy thought she was coming over the desk. For an instant, he considered going over the desk for her. He hoped the man had not noticed. Finally, he was able to glance at him and he seemed to be totally preoccupied picking at his fingernails. Timothy began writing on a page. No way would he keep all that fortune from this woman. He was making plans to help her spend it. He stopped writing and gazed at her. "Erica," he said. "Such a pretty name." She returned his gaze and continued to watch him long after he had returned to writing on the

paper. He wrote a vaguely worded trust that gave Erica Hargrove total and immediate control of her father's estate. The man never seemed to realize what was happening or perhaps, Timothy thought, he did not care. He was at death's door and nothing he said, thought or did was going to change nor delay it.

While the papers were being prepared, Timothy treated them to a meal at a fine restaurant. He and Erica were rapidly becoming acquainted and generally ignored her father. He was totally preoccupied eating a bowl of soup and did not seem to notice. He certainly did not notice that Erica had her foot between Timothy's legs under the table. She was making it difficult for Timothy to eat or talk.

They barely made it back to Timothy's office. The papers were signed and the man arose to leave. Erica suggested he go on, she wanted to shop at a nearby department store. The man agreed and left, seemingly in a near unconscious daze. He was barely out of the room, when Timothy and Erica were already on the plush sofa. Timothy was never again able to look at that sofa without a moment of splendid reminiscing. The only thing that stopped them was the minute that it took Timothy to stagger to his desk, pick up the phone and instruct his secretary to hold all calls and cancel the rest of his appointments. Timothy had many professional victories and accomplishments take place in his office. None would ever remotely approach the afternoon he spent on that sofa with Erica. It was not enough for either of them. They spent the next several nights together, finally interrupted when Timothy was forced to meet some scheduled obligations. He probably would have skipped those if his secretary had not reminded him of the huge billable hours he was about to lose. Reluctantly, he told Erica he must tend to business. She was oddly indifferent, only asking how long he expected it would be before they could resume.

The next morning he staggered into his meeting, vowing he would do whatever was necessary to get out of the rest of his appointments.

However, his best intentions ran aground when pitted against his drive to remain atop the legal world. There was too much to do and he did not intend to lose his place even if it meant losing his place with Erica. He canceled dates with her night after night, explaining courts, judges and clients could not be delayed. She seemed to understand. After a week or so, he didn't bother to call. He figured she was already lost to a more available paramour. He was surprised when she called to tell him her father had passed away. He was even more surprised when she told him it was several days ago and the funeral was over and done. He wasn't sure what she wanted of him but he glanced at his calendar and saw that he could have a late dinner with her. He extended the invitation and she accepted. They met and had an enjoyable meal. He explained again and again about his schedule and how unforeseen circumstances had controlled his activities. Sometimes that happened. She did not mention her father's death and Timothy did not ask why she had not called him.

Later, he decided he had nothing to lose so he asked if she would like to go to his office. The sofa had missed them, he had joked. She insisted they go to her house. Arriving there, he was surprised to see a for sale sign in the yard. This was really her father's house she had explained. He controlled everything in it. She wanted her own place and, in fact, had already picked it out. She would buy it when this house sold. She wasted no time in taking Timothy to the bedroom. Not her bedroom but her father's bedroom. It was ever bit as memorable as Timothy's sofa. She waited until the next morning to tell him she was pregnant. Timothy's reaction surprised even himself. He suggested they get married. They celebrated and Timothy missed his appointments the next day.

She bought the house she wanted. Timothy let her do anything she chose. She had more money than he, anyway. They had a boy which eleven months later was joined by a daughter which eleven months later was joined by another boy. Erica immersed herself in her house and

children. She seldom left the house and had no interest in anything outside of it. Timothy worked long hours and his fame, fortune and prestige soared. He had a large staff and was able to spend his time doing nothing more than directing operations. He reveled in it.

Several years passed before he realized the mistake he had made in marrying Erica. He also saw little need to do anything about it. She was happy with the way things were and women came and went in Timothy's life in such numbers that he could scarcely remember the one from last week. He traveled as much as he wanted and only realized how much that was when, at one of the rare occasions when he joined them for dinner, one of his children asked who he was. It was not enough to cause him to change his schedule. When there was a big legal deal to close in Paris, Timothy would be there and accompanied by a beautiful companion.

Then, Timothy had an unexpected surprise. He fell in love. At one of the many charity balls he was exchanging pleasantries with Deborah when a gorgeous woman appeared. Timothy was instantly awe struck. She was ever bit as beautiful as Deborah which was saying alot. Deborah had not lost a thing. "Introduce your friend, Doctor," the woman said while ignoring the look-that-could-kill Deborah had bored into her.

With an icy voice, Deborah had made the introductions. The woman was Monica Simmons and she was the administrator of Memorial Hospital where Deborah practiced. They hardly ever saw each other and it was just as well. Although, they had never spoken more than two dozen words to each other, they were unable to conceal their dislike for each other. Monica seethed with resentment because Deborah was running her own hospital within the hospital. She got what she wanted and did what she wanted without so much as sending a memo across Monica's desk. Most of the staff cowered in fear of Monica, worried that if they crossed her, they would be the victim of her infamous 'rejected' rubber stamp. While a lowly doctor sat and begged for a few dollars to

complete a truly significant project, Monica stared at him, slowly toying with the 'rejected' stamp. Sometimes she slammed it on the proposal without so much as a word. Deborah got anything she wanted without making an appearance. The star didn't have to go to the coach if the star didn't want to go to the coach. Deborah never passed up the opportunity to tweak her nose.

Monica had observed Deborah and Timothy from across the room. While her sensitive perception had not detected anything going on, she did detect some underlying signals. She would not pass up any opportunity to do a public cut-in on the good doctor. After all, what could she do besides order a million dollars worth of equipment without a signed requisition. She would do that without any provocation anyway.

Monica and Timothy hit it off splendidly. They were inseparable during the rest of the party. No one, including Deborah noticed they left early and together.

It was the beginning of a long relationship. Timothy was as faithful to Monica Simmons as he should have been to his wife. Monica was not quite so enamoured with Timothy. She liked the relationship they shared. It was certainly without any complications. She also didn't like waiting for Timothy to clear his schedule of foreign trips and family obligations. She found many and varied ways to satisfy her many and varied desires.

While on one of her tours of Memorial, actually she was trying to learn where the million and a half that Deborah had just received was going to be spent, she had noticed a young intern with bulging biceps, golden hair and half a dozen nurses hanging on his every word. She had barged in, sending the nurses scurrying to their tasks. A few minutes of chat chit and the intern got the picture. A thinly veiled invitation to be in Monica's office after hours. They were certain not to be disturbed. He showed up exactly on time. Monica had been an executive too long to waste time. She began to unbutton her blouse. She noticed he carried a briefcase but it had no meaning to her. Who

didn't carry a briefcase. She was anticipating what golden boy was going to do for her so she paid no attention when he glanced quickly around her office, stepped over and placed the briefcase on a table. She also did not notice the small clear glass embedded in the end. Having noticed none of that, she never considered what might be inside the briefcase. A slight touch on an equally concealed switch activated the camera. Monica might be a star someday.

She would have been only slightly more surprised, when in the throes of ecstasy she opened her eyes to see a nurse standing a few feet from them and already partially disrobed. The nurse joined them on the floor and to Monica's everlasting surprise, she enjoyed that almost as much as the intern. Later, she would learn this was a husband and wife and rather than lose the girl he loved, he would indulge her bi-sexual trysts and, in fact, aid in finding suitable partners. For someone who had never before participated in bi-sexual activities, Monica was surprised that the man had accurately read her hidden feelings even better than herself. Every time Timothy begged off an engagement, she indulged herself with her new friends. She would never suspect anything about the ever present briefcase. After all, she too, always carried a briefcase.

As much as Timothy loved Monica, he could not break away from the business trips and frequent absences. On the many trips across the Atlantic, he often wondered which he loved the most, his law firm or Monica. He seldom gave so much as a fleeting thought to Erica.

Nicholas' life was no less spectacular than his friends only it was much quieter. Once their dinner dates and secret meetings had faded away and finally stopped, his only knowledge of his friends came through media publicity. He followed their careers and was always glad to hear about them but never attempted to contact them. From time to time he wondered if they ever thought of him.

While Deborah's and Timothy's careers were a public skyrocket, Nicholas' was a silent but no less meteoric rise to the top. His valves and other inventions were a one way trip to riches. By the time they finished college, Nicholas was wealthy from his patents and he quickly became even more so. After learning Deborah had married a senator, it was not long before Nicholas took the big step as well. He knew he should not have done so because in spite of everything he always secretly felt he and Deborah would end up together. Now obvious that would not be the case, he took the next best available candidate.

Apparent from the beginning that he had made a mistake but not willing to expend the energy to change it, the marriage dragged on for years. His suggestion that they have a child was met with disbelief. She was hardly willing to give up her lifestyle to raise a child. She liked cavorting with the rich and the spur of the moment trips to exotic places around the world. For awhile Nicholas would go but he finally tired of the phony scene and stayed behind, occupying himself at his company. His marvelous talents never diminished and a few hours work nearly always produced a grand new invention. More wealth quickly followed.

Reports began to drift back that Nicholas' wife was doing much more cavorting than would be prudent considering her marital status. She always returned with a renewed vigor to make their marriage a happy one. That only lasted until someone suggested another trip. Nicholas was finding that he was glad when she was gone again.

Nicholas had allowed himself to be talked into a fishing trip with some of his business associates. Soon after accepting the invitation he regretted it but reluctantly went on. Once there, he would get his line in the water without bait. Then he was able to think without the interruption of catching a fish. It was there he decided to make a change. Returning from the fishing trip, he checked on his wife's whereabouts and made a few phone calls. A man of his means knew people who could get results. Those results were there when

his wife returned. He wasted no time in telling her their marriage was over and she would leave the same way she came in.....penniless. She was still laughing hysterically when he tossed the envelope on the desk. It slid across and the 8X10 glossy colored photos came out in front of his wife. Her laughter quickly died but she did not bother to look past the top photo.

"Heck of a performance. I should have been in the movies," she said.

"Actually, you were. These were taken from freeze frames of a video."

"Are you going to give me enough money to start over?"

He reached into his pocket, took out a twenty dollar bill and tossed it across the desk. "That should be enough to call one of your European boyfriends. I hope you dallied with something besides beach boys. Surely, there must be one that can support you in the manner in which you've become accustomed." She stared at him and then reached slowly for the twenty dollar bill. He let his head fall against the chair back. "I take it there was nothing but beach boys." She did not answer. He took a checkbook from a desk drawer and wrote a check. Saying nothing, he handed it to her. He rose and started out of the room.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. I'll make it up to you if you'll let me."

He did not answer and the door closed behind him. He stood for a minute and considered her offer. He really wanted to do that. His hand rested on the door knob. Instead, he walked away.

She carefully folded the one million dollar check and put it in her purse. She signed the divorce papers before leaving on another European trip.

Nicholas became a virtual recluse. His talents never diminished and inventions and patents were coming in droves. He tried to drown his restlessness and unhappiness in still more work. It did nothing for his feelings but his wealth and prestige were becoming

astronomical. Just when he thought he could get no lower and his depth of despair were about to match his wealth, he met a woman.

Nicholas had heard of a new computer program which he felt could be used to enhance some of his valves. Desperate for something to pique his interest, he decided to investigate. The software had been written by a local college professor. Nicholas made an appointment to meet with her. The woman was immersed in academia and was skeptical of the motives of corporate America, the government and any other entity not of her academic world. Nicholas sensed that right away and did nothing to divulge his real reason for inquiring about the software. He made vague references to financing the project if it could be used to feed the homeless in some imaginary African country. The woman looked at him strangely but he seemed sincere and certainly harmless enough. He had a date with her before he left. It was the perfect example of a whirlwind romance. By avoiding his usual hangouts, Nicholas was able to prevent her from learning about his millionaire status. After a week of courtship, Nicholas asked her to spend the night at his house. She agreed and she was stunned when they arrived and more stunned when they went inside. While they toured his opulent mansion, he explained what he did and how he came to own such a place. She was silent for most of the tour and Nicholas was not able to read her feelings. They ended up near the front door and Nicholas still wasn't sure if she was going to just keep walking. She paused, took one more look at the huge room and smiling broadly, said, "Are you telling me I've fallen in love with a great guy who also loves me and is the richest man in town?"

"Not the richest but certainly in the top five."

She made a face of exaggerated disappointment. She cocked her head as though she were thinking intently. Finally she said, "I guess I'll settle for that."

He took her hand and leading the way said, "There is one more place to tour."

"Where's that?" she asked.

"My bed," he answered.

So Nicholas Vaughn and Amanda Russell were married. For months, Nicholas did nothing but entertain his new bride. She had never been anywhere and he took her to every exotic location around the world. The trips were boring him but she had the enthusiasm of a child and he was pleased to see her enjoying everything.

As soon as the trip ended and they were settled, she surprised him by announcing she wanted to continue to work, at least, on a part-time basis. Just to keep up with the latest changes in computer technology. Nicholas surprised her by agreeing and surprised her again by telling her to buy all the latest equipment and to make a room in the house her study. If she wanted to go to the university, she could. If not, she would certainly want for nothing. In a few days the large room he designated for her was brimming with every piece of equipment money could buy and a few pieces she did not know money could buy. She could hardly wait to invite her college friends over to see what she had. They came in droves and Nicholas was surprised when he discovered that some of them never seemed to leave. He never knew what odd assortment of characters he would encounter as he left every morning.

A year turned into two years and Nicholas was saddened to find that he was falling into the old feelings of dissatisfaction and unrest. He had no feelings of accomplishment and very little interest to do anything. He found himself avoiding Amanda and her menagerie of weird friends. At least, he perceived them as weird. He knew they considered him the same. One evening a particularly belligerent one told Nicholas he considered his wealth to be a sin and the government should see that no one be allowed to accumulate such exorbitant wealth. Nicholas got in the man's face and reminded him that wealth had bought all the 'toys' that the ungrateful slug was playing with and the food that he was eating for free. Nicholas did not see the man again. He intended to tell his wife about the man but by the time he was alone

with her he had forgotten about the incident. She acted strangely for several days but that, too, was soon forgotten. Nicholas was too absorbed with his own plight.

Late one night, he was idly flipping channels and scarcely watching as the screens changed again and again. He finally stopped on a program that was just beginning. From downstairs he heard a big roar of laughter. "My wife and her goofy friends must have successfully plugged in a computer," he thought disdainfully. Their voices penetrated the solitude of his bedroom again. He tapped the remote control, increasing the volume just a bit. He listened and satisfied that he could no longer hear them, turned his attention back to the TV.

Hours later he snapped off the set. He instantly heard voices. He glanced at a clock. He wondered, "Don't those dopey SOB's ever sleep?" He pointed the remote at another cabinet and pushed buttons until music began to play. He tapped the buttons again until he could no longer hear the voices. He leaned his head back and thought. He remembered the show he had just watched. He wondered why he had wasted his time watching something so mundane much less waste even more time thinking about it. It was a typical cop movie. This cop had more troubles than any one person should have. He had a murder he could not solve. He had a supervisor who was giving him all kinds of grief about the crime he could not solve. The police commissioner was corrupt. The detective's partner was incompetent and totally occupied with taking bribes. To top it off, the detective's wife was shacking up with various uniformed cops. The detective was the butt of many departmental jokes. All this and the guy doggedly pursued every dead-end lead. Just at his darkest moment and when all seemed to be lost, he broke the case, arrested the murderer, exposed the corrupt commissioner, and got rid of his unfaithful wife. It was a twisted plot that Nicholas had guessed in the first few minutes of the show. He walked to a window and was staring out into the darkness.

The bedroom door opened and gently closed. Amanda came up behind him, pressed against him, put her arms around him and said, "Everyone has either left or crashed." She squeezed tighter against him, waiting to see if he would respond. He did. Later, they lay in bed and he was staring in the darkness.

"I'm going to try something different," he said. She did not answer. He said it louder but still she did not answer. Realizing she was asleep, he went back to staring into the darkness and thinking.

Despite staying awake most of the night, Nicholas was up early. He had a mission. He did not bother with being quiet. His wife was not an early riser. She and her friends usually stayed up all night and slept all day. He learned long ago that nothing short of a small nuclear explosion would awake her. He hurried downstairs to find two of her friends copulating on a rug at the foot of the stairs. He stepped over them, stopped and went back. "Have you just started or have you been going all night?"

"I just started," the man gasped.

"All night for me," the woman gasped. She was looking up at Nicholas and saw the puzzled look on his face. "He's not the first," she said. Nicholas held up a single finger to indicate he understood. He started to turn away but frowned and looked back at the woman. She didn't have to hear the question and answered before Nicholas could ask. "Who's counting?" Nicholas nodded and went on to the kitchen. It took awhile to find the pot to the coffee maker, even longer to scrape the burnt black shit out of the bottom of it and even longer to find some coffee. By the time the coffee was made he had nearly lost interest in it. Then he couldn't find a clean cup. He carefully lifted one out of the sink with two fingers and held it while hot water ran over it. He had a vision of the couple on the rug and let the scalding water run over it a bit longer. Satisfied that all germs must be dead, he filled the cup and strolled out of the kitchen. The couple was still on the rug. He sipped and watched for a moment. He frowned

and looked closer. It was not the same man. He went to another room, sat down and began to make phone calls. It took longer than he expected and he had to call in some markers. He had some heavy markers out there. He was successful. He filled his cup and went upstairs.

She sat straight up, the sheet falling off of her and displaying her ample chest. Her eyes were wide and for an instant she was speechless. Finding her voice she exclaimed, "You're going to do what?"

"I don't know what difference it makes to you. You don't know what I do anyway, which you apparently have not noticed, is nothing."

She did not seem to have heard him. She flung the cover off of her legs and got out of bed. Now, she was displaying much more than her ample chest. Nicholas was staring.

"This can't be happening, Nicholas. How could you possibly think of such a thing?" She was pacing, turning every which way. Nicholas was really enjoying this.

"This show.....I saw on TV....."

"Show! You have got to be joking! Tell me you are joking!" She was staring at him and only then noticed he was staring back. She looked down at her naked body, looked around for a robe and not finding one, threw up her hands and continued pacing.

"I don't see what the problem is. It's not going to change your financial status."

"It's not that. My friends, Nicholas. What are they going to think?"

"Your friends.....now you have got to be kidding. Your friends are a bunch of dope smoking weirdo's who should have their collective asses locked up. Who gives a screaming shit what they think?"

"My friends are liberal, free thinkers who have little, if any, respect for a totalitarian government and it's Fascist enforcers."

"Their a bunch of goddamn freeloading deadbeats who are all to willing to put aside their beliefs as long as I am furnishing food, drink and computer equipment."

"This will never work," she said, still pacing and apparently paying no attention to what he was saying.

"I'm going to do this. You do what you want and so am I. If that bunch of dipshits don't like it they can try to find another millionaire to live off of." He paused and looked at her. She was a delight to behold. "Lots of luck," he added.

"A cop! You can't be a cop! I won't be married to a cop!"

Nicholas had to throw around his considerable influence to get a job with the police. It took that and sizable donations of money and equipment but he went straight to detective. He countered every protest with a simple declaration, "If you can't get around that small hurdle, I can certainly show you how to do it." In the end, it was a matter of filling out paperwork and pushing it through the system. Every roadblock was countered with a donation and soon Nicholas was a detective.

He was mildly surprised and disappointed when Amanda carried through with her threat. She would not be married to a cop. She moved out and, reluctantly, so did her friends. She told Nicholas to have the papers prepared, she would sign anything, she wanted nothing.

A few days later, Nicholas came down stairs to find the last of her friends gathering their meager belongings and preparing to leave. He recognized the girl on the rug. She looked really sad. She approached Nicholas. "I was wondering.....do you remember me.....on the rug?" she nodded in that direction.

Nicholas followed her gaze and stared at the rug. He must remember to have the rug cleaned or better yet, burned. He looked back at her.

"I was wondering.....if maybe.....you and I," she smiled. "I've never done it with a cop."

Nicholas walked over and rolled up the rug, went back and handed it to her. "I don't think so but you can say you did it on a rug in a cop's house." She took the rug and walked out.

## CHAPTER 5

Nicholas strode purposefully out of the station house. His seven hundred dollar suit fit impeccably and he cast an imposing image. He was met by two detectives on their way inside. "Hey Vaughn, are you slumming today?" one asked sarcastically.

Nicholas ignored the men and looked into the parking lot. The instant he came through the door, a sleek Mercedes eased from its parking space and idled slowly toward the spot where Calvin Cooper would arrive simultaneously with the Mercedes. As usual, the timing was perfect and Nicholas opened the back door and slid inside. He gave an address to the driver, who barely nodded an acknowledgment and once out of the parking lot began to weave effortlessly through the heavy traffic.

Nicholas took several folded pages from his inside coat pocket, unfolded them and began to read. His driver cast several glances into the rear view mirror. Nicholas finally looked up from the papers and caught his eye. They did not speak but Nicholas could see the inquiring look in the eyes reflected in the mirror. Nicholas became nervous. How could he keep his eyes off the traffic so long. "Calvin, please watch where you are going. You know how nervous it makes me. I paid top dollar for this car which would pale compared to the law suit that would result from your rear ending an illegal alien or a foreign diplomat." Calvin turned his eyes back to the street ahead.

To answer the unasked query, Nicholas said, "All I know is it's a homicide. No, correct that. A body. All we have is an unidentified Jane Doe, in a dumpster. Nothing on cause of death. May not be a homicide but I have a feeling and my feelings usually bear out." The driver nodded. That was usually the case. With nothing more to contemplate, Nicholas let his gaze wander out the window. He settled back in the luxurious car, closed his eyes and was instantly dozing. He had been able to do that since childhood. When they arrived at the crime scene he would instantly come awake, refreshed, his mind sharp, his superb instincts at the ready. He was able to work for days with only occasional cat naps. Many were the criminals who had, to their dismay, learned that Nicholas never slept while doggedly pursuing them. Nicholas had allowed the legend to grow. No one but Calvin knew his secret.

Calvin looked carefully in the mirror and satisfied that Nicholas was sleeping soundly, eased up on the accelerator. He would let his boss get a few extra minutes of sleep. The driver thought his boss looked unusually fatigued. Calvin looked up ahead and judged the flow of traffic. He would make no sudden stops and starts to disturb his boss. He owed alot to the man and while he could never repay him, he would take these small measures to make his turbulent life a little smoother.

Calvin Cooper had grown up the hard way. His parents struggled to pay the bills and Calvin stole everything he could, even as an adolescent. Most of the time he didn't need what he stole, he did what he did to gain the admiration and acceptance of his contemporaries. As a teenager he graduated to automobiles. He had quite a reputation as a car thief and was on the verge of becoming involved with a major car theft ring when fate intervened. Calvin was prowling around a loading dock looking for something to steal when suddenly he looked up and into the eyes of Nicholas Vaughn. Their eyes were locked as each ascertained the situation. Calvin was mesmerized by the cold, calculating gaze of the man.

Finally, Nicholas spoke. "You wouldn't be looking for a job?" Thinking this would be an easy way to escape from the awkward situation, Calvin answered that he was indeed doing just that. "Can you drive?" Nicholas asked.

"Anything on wheels," Calvin had replied. It was the truth. At one time or another he had stolen, at least, one of anything that had wheels.

Nicholas had waved him inside the warehouse and a minute later they stood before a fork lift. Calvin had stared in disbelief. It was the only thing on wheels he had never stolen. He was not sure how to drive the thing. Nicholas had waited until Calvin hesitantly climbed on and frantically tried to start the motor. Nicholas folded his arms

and watched contemptuously. Finally, he walked away muttering, "You call yourself a driver."

Soon, Calvin did master the machine and just kept coming back to work. He never stole anything again. Later, he learned that the man on the dock owned the company. He was an engineering genius who, years before, had invented a special valve that was used in oil refineries. That invention led to many more and soon Nicholas was a multi-millionaire. His valves were sold worldwide and it was then that Calvin appeared at the loading dock and was hired.

The years passed and Nicholas grew bored with his success. Abruptly, he turned the operation of the company over to trusted employees and he applied to and was hired by the police department. In record time, he became a detective and soon was the most successful. He did not make many friends when he came to work in designer suits and caused a bigger flap when he shunned department cars and was driven in his own chauffeured car. He had offered the job to Calvin and for awhile he had refused. Hanging around a police station was not his idea of a good job. He had been chased by most of those cops. Nicholas had increased the pay until he had no choice. Perhaps, none of the cops would recognize him after all these years. In fact, they had so resented Nicholas' display of wealth, they never went near the car or paid any attention to his driver.

The police commissioner finally had to make a ruling on this unusual situation and after days of legal research could find nothing to prevent Nicholas from using his own car. He had signed a waiver of liability and had agreed he would not be reimbursed for auto expenses. In a particularly rebellious mood, he had bought a Mercedes and at every opportunity was chauffeured to every police function and crime scene and always in a designer suit. Police officials looked the other way. Rank and file policemen hated him and never passed up the opportunity to chide him. Begrudging, they admired his abilities to ferret out clues when there were none and solve unsolvable crimes. But

he did it alone. No one would work with him. No one suspected that Nicholas had planned it that way. Early on in his new police career he had learned he could accomplish so much more if he were alone. By skipping over some of the more restrictive rules, he was able to solve many of the tougher cases. No one complained but the criminals and their lawyers who were living at the taxpayer's expense. Through his corporation, he was able to quietly bring enormous pressure to bear on the most troublesome lawyers. The word got around and very few perpetrators got off on mundane technicalities.

Still the jealousies of the department prevailed and Nicholas was always assigned the most difficult cases. He knew he was on his way to one of those. The file he had been handed was practically void of information. There was nothing but the location. It was then he decided to grab a nap.

They arrived at the scene. Calvin eased the car to the curb and stopped and that motion awoke Nicholas. He sat up and immediately surveilled the area. He silently moaned. A bad area and he knew no help was forthcoming. It was the classic monkey area.....see, hear, speak nothing...at least, not to the cops. He would not waste time having patrolmen conduct preliminary interviews. He walked to the scene and ducked under the crime scene tape. A patrolman was waiting. Nicholas walked by and the patrolman followed, talking rapidly and glancing at a notepad. Nicholas knew nothing was on it.

"There were no witnesses, the time the body was dumped is unknown, basically nothing....." The patrolman stopped and stared after Nicholas when he realized he wasn't listening. He flipped the blank notepad shut, muttered expletives under his breath, turned and walked back to the perimeter of the crime scene.

Nicholas walked up to the dumpster and peered in. He could see the head of what appeared to be a young female. She was wrapped in a odd looking blanket. Everything else in the dumpster appeared to be

ordinary trash. "Is the M.E. here?" he asked aloud but to no one in particular.

"Unloading his stuff over there," came the reply.

Nicholas continued to carefully scrutinize everything he could see inside the dumpster. He stepped back when the M.E. spoke to him. The M.E. was a legend in his own right. He was a master analyzer of a crime scene. Nicholas was glad he was here. Nicholas nodded to Jeremiah Egbert Baldwin. For obvious reasons, he had come to be known as Jeb. The M.E. did not object to the nickname.

Jeb gave a perfunctory glance in the dumpster and said, "We'll get her out if you're through."

"Try to take care, Jeremiah," Nicholas said.

Jeb looked at Nicholas as though he had lost his mind, smirked and nodded to two patrolmen who climbed in the dumpster. Nicholas was careful to avoid eye contact with Jeb who he was certain was staring furiously at him. Both from the use of his real name and the admonishment about being careful. The patrolmen lifted the body, still wrapped in a blanket and handed it to two other patrolmen who placed it on a stretcher. Jeb circled the stretcher, found an edge of the blanket and carefully lifted it.

"Lots of blood, he said and lowered the blanket. "Do what you want, Nicholas. Otherwise, I'm waiting to get back to the morgue."

Nicholas shook his head to indicate he was through. Another glance inside the dumpster and he walked back to his car. He stood with his hand on the door handle and looked around the area. Already, he knew the crime did not happen here. He opened the door and got in. They drove away.

He took the folder from his pocket, opened it and made his first notation. Victim's hair was professionally done. That he could see. Tiny ear rings and makeup meticulously applied. A bit ruffled from being dumped in a trash bin but still apparent that she was not a street hooker nor anyone of this neighborhood. She was killed

someplace else and dumped here. The blanket? He could not place the blanket. He circled the word and put a question mark after it. He held the pencil poised over the paper until he realized he had seen nothing more to log in the notebook. He looked up and Calvin was watching him in the mirror. "Let's get something to eat," he said. Calvin kept glancing in the mirror. "Your choice," Nicholas said.

They passed the time talking sports. No matter which team or player one of them liked, the other invariably liked another team, usually the most hated rival. They were never at a loss for conversation and usually ended up sulking and arguing with one another. This time was no exception. By the time they got back to the station, they were not speaking. Calvin stopped a bit too soon and Nicholas had to walk a few extra feet to the doors. It was the most aggravation he would cause. Any more and Calvin was not too sure of the outcome.

Nicholas made his way to his cubical and sat down. It was not that private but it was all he had so he tuned out the disturbing noises as he had trained himself to do and began to analyze the crime scene in his mind. This one could be anything and it was pointless to speculate at this point. He would have to wait for Jeb's report to give him some direction. Drug user, pregnant....he tried to dismiss the possibilities from his mind. It was hard to do. His subconscious always wanted to make a guess. It honed his intuition. When there were no clues, it was all he had to go on. He blinked his eyes. It helped pinpoint his concentration. He was seeing the crime scene again. There was nothing. By now, he was sure. It would have come to him. Of that, he was also sure.

Now, he turned his attention to what he did know. That odd blanket. He still could not place it's origin. It would be his only clue. He hoped it would be a good one. He glanced at his watch. It could be hours before Jeb called. He would go there. He could analyze the blanket while Jeb analyzed....he shuddered. The thought always made him queasy. How could anybody stand to do that job? He shuddered

again. He picked up his phone and punched a few buttons. His calls would now be forwarded to his car phone or was it his cell phone? He patted his pocket to verify he was carrying the cell phone. He paused. He couldn't remember which phone would receive the call. He remembered it wouldn't matter. He would answer the cell phone and Calvin would answer the car phone. Ah yes, the miracles of modern technology. If only it could keep people from being murdered and thrown into a dumpster. He hurried outside and down the steps. Without glancing up, he knew Calvin would have the car waiting at the curb. He did and Nicholas ducked inside. Calvin drove to the edge of the parking lot and waited for directions.

"M.E.'s office," Nicholas said.

Calvin gunned the engine, cut through traffic, careened in front of on-coming cars and accelerated away leaving behind a blare of horns and squealing tires. Nicholas opened his mouth to admonish him but Calvin spoke first. "Testing their reflexes." In no mood for another argument, Nicholas glared at him in silence. Unable to concentrate due to Calvin's reckless driving, Nicholas entertained himself by gazing out the window. He caught a glimpse of a spiral atop a university building. Amanda had resumed her teaching career. He smiled at the sight of the spiral. Their marriage was finished but not the desire for an intimate relationship. He had opened the door late one night to find her standing there. He instantly desired her and he instantly knew why she was there. He reached out, took her hand and she was in his arms. They stumbled inside and grappled with each other's clothes while trying to maintain a kiss. Nicholas opened one eye and saw the place where the rug once had been. He put his arm around her shoulder and guided her toward the stairs. "Let's go upstairs. I have bad memories of this spot." From that day forward he never knew when he would open the door to find her standing there. It could have made for some embarrassing moments except Nicholas never had any other women at his house. One night he asked her why he couldn't show up unexpected

at her door every now and then. She looked at him in disbelief. While he waited for her to answer, it occurred to him that she was here nearly every night. "Never mind," he finally said.

His attention returned to the present. ".....on the phone." Calvin was saying. Nicholas looked up and he was holding out the car phone.

"What?" Nicholas said perturbed that his memory had been interrupted.

"The M.E.'s on the phone," Calvin said and he was looking more in the mirror than at the road ahead.

"Tell him we are on the way and will be there in.....," Nicholas looked out the window trying to determine their location.

"Less than ten minutes," Calvin finished for him and stomped the accelerator to the floor. He spoke into the phone, slammed it into it's cradle and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. They careened through traffic much to Nicholas' chagrin.

Nicholas rocked forward and then thumped back against the seat as they slid to a stop in front of the M.E.'s building. Nicholas flung open the door and bound out, hurling expletives back at the car. Calvin looked at him but had already turned up the radio and could only see Nicholas' lips moving. Passerby's stopped and looked. Nicholas noticed, ducked his head and hurried away mumbling something about incompetent help was all you could get these days. Grateful that the incident didn't erupt into gunfire, the passerby's went on their way, not looking back for fear that whatever it was might yet turn violent. Calvin leaned his head back hoping he might catch a snooze. Nicholas took two deep breaths to steel himself, opened the door to the M.E.'s building and went inside.

"Nicholas, my boy. A phone call would have sufficed. You didn't have to make a trip. I've only just started."

"No problem, Jeremiah. I had to come anyway. I want to take a look at that blanket if it's okay."

Safe in the confines of his domain, Jeb did not mind that Nicholas used his real name. It was a liberty allowed only to Nicholas plus Nicholas was the only person he knew who could say 'Jeremiah' with the sound of respect. Most people who called his name, chuckled after doing so. "Be sure to wear gloves," he nodded toward a dispenser attached to the wall. "Don't take it out of it's bag but otherwise you can examine it."

"What did you have for me?" Nicholas asked when it became apparent Jeb was going on to do something else.

"Oh yes," he said and looked sheepishly at Nicholas. "The memory is the first to go and I don't remember what else.....," Jeb said as he walked toward his desk. "That joke's kind of old. I don't like it anymore," he continued as he sat heavily in his chair. He adjusted his glasses and looked at the considerable clutter on his desk. "Tidy mind, cluttered desk or is it the other way," he said mostly to himself. Nicholas wasn't listening but was looking frantically at the paper atop his desk hoping he would spot something familiar.

Jeb reached out, deftly plucked a scrap of paper from the mess and triumphantly exclaimed, "Ah ha!" Nicholas craned his neck trying to get a glimpse but Jeb leaned back, held the paper close to his trifocals and read. "You got lucky, Nicholas." He tilted his head until he was focusing through the correct lenses in his glasses. "And I don't mean with the women....not to say you aren't lucky with the women but I wouldn't know about that....."

"Goddamn, spare me! If you only knew what I went through just to get here!"

Jeb looked at him scornfully and then remembered. "Oh yes, that dreadful chauffeur. I'll never make the mistake of riding with you again....."

Nicholas screwed up his face, lolled out his tongue and let his head fall onto the desk, thumping his forehead a bit harder than he intended.

"Spare me the theatrics, Nicholas," Jeb said and gazed back at the piece of paper. "Now, where was I? Oh yes," he answered himself. "Lucky you, I was saying before I got sidetracked." Nicholas held his forefinger to his temple and drew back his thumb. "Suicide will not save you. I will follow you into the hereafter." Nicholas cut his eyes at Jeb and slowly brought his extended finger to bear at Jeb. A low growl emitted from Nicholas' throat. Jeb cleared his throat and looked again at the paper. "A sense of humor is a necessity in this profession."

"Not in mine," Nicholas instantly countered.

"I've IDed the body," Jeb said. "I have a dinky little computer program that is just a step above nothing but I always run it first just hoping that someday it will find a match. This time it did."

"What program?" Nicholas asked.

"A fingerprint matching thing but I have so few to match. My department doesn't have much of a budget for such and I have to take the leftovers and I have no staff so I have to enter data whenever I can....."

Nicholas held up his hand indicating for Jeb to stop. He wrote quickly on a pad and held out the paper for Jeb. "That's my second ex-wife's number. Tell her what you need and tell her I'll pay for it. She's a computer know-it-all. She will take care of it."

"Gee Nicholas, how can I ever repay you.....?"

Nicholas interrupted, "By telling me who she is."

"My database, I think that's what they call it, is so small and is limited to certain employees which I can obtain with no problem....." Nicholas slumped in the chair, resigned that nothing could hurry Jeb. He tried to tune out the long story, finally raising his head when he thought the end was near. "So, by a stoke of luck, your Jane Doe popped right up. I fingerprinted her and let the computer search. I hadn't even started the autopsy when I heard the beeping. That's what it does when it matches. For a moment, I didn't

know what it was. As I said, I don't get many matches with my dinky program." Nicholas fought the urge to scream at Jeb. He looked at his watch. He was surprised. He hadn't been here long at all, even though it seemed like several lifetimes. Jeb was moving the paper into the focus of the correct lens in his glasses. "Her name is Amy B. Higgins. She is.....was an employee of Memorial Hospital. I was allowed to enter hospital employees into my database, otherwise it would have been awhile before she was IDed." He smiled proudly.

Nicholas took out his pad, wrote the name and stared at it. Jeb was silent. He wondered why Nicholas was staring at the name. It was a long moment before Nicholas spoke. "Now I know where that blanket came from. It's a hospital blanket. I've seen them in patient's rooms. I couldn't place it until now."

"She worked at the hospital," Jeb said not sure if that was what he was trying to say.

"Did she have on any other clothes?" Nicholas asked.

"No," Jeb replied. "I put the blanket in the evidence bag. The body is....."

Nicholas shook his head. He did not intend to look at the body. He went on, thinking aloud, "A hospital employee, wrapped only in a blanket. Could she have been a patient? Employees do get sick. That would explain the blanket but no clothes. She should have had on one of those wraps that shows your ass. She looked beautiful. The doctors would have insisted on that." He fell silent. Thinking aloud was getting nowhere.

Jeb listened closely but said nothing. This was interesting stuff. He couldn't wait to see what Nicholas surmised out of basically nothing. Deciding that Nicholas was through, he said, "It's time for me to go to work. Perhaps, I can give you more to chew on." Nicholas grimaced at the innuendo. "Are you going to Memorial?" Jeb asked.

"Not yet," Nicholas sat up straight and then slouched. "I think I'll wait for the autopsy. I hate to go over there shooting blanks.

Maybe if I wait, I'll have cause of death and whatever else you find."  
He looked at Jeb.

"It would be easier to walk in with a couple of prime suspects, wouldn't it?" Jeb heaved out of his chair. "Seldom works that way, Nicholas my boy."

"What else does your program have?" Nicholas called after him.

"Everything on the employment application. Probably, next of kin. I'll get the printout for you." He came back and handed the paper to Nicholas. "I'll be in the next room if you want....."

"I'll wait out here," Nicholas cut him off.

"You can use my phone if you need.....want to notify anyone." Jeb waited. Nicholas stared at the phone. "I'll do it if you prefer....." Jeb walked away. He would find out later who would make the call.

Nicholas stared at the phone for awhile. Slowly, he turned to the printout and began to read. Later, he glanced at the closed door and tried not to think about what was happening on the other side. He took the printout to the copier, made several copies and placed the original in the center of Jeb's desk. He thought that was about as secure as throwing it in the trash can. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. He thought about what he knew. Several times he held up the printout and read it again. The victim was a nurse. Gone to college in Texas, became an RN, came to New York, went to work at Memorial, her first job. Been there nearly five years. Still single. Nicholas sighed. He had put off making the call to the next of kin. He would wait a bit longer. It would change nothing and help nothing. He just didn't want to make the call. Someone's life had been ruined forever. Their grief would know no bounds. They just didn't know it yet. He looked at her address. He recognized it. It was an apartment complex within walking distance of Memorial. It was full of Memorial employees.

The door to the autopsy room was jerked open. It startled Nicholas and he sat upright and looked. The sight of Jeb's gloved hands and apron made him gag. He looked away.

"She was not raped, Nicholas. I expected she was so I checked that first. That's all I know so far." He stepped back inside and slammed the door.

Nicholas looked at the door. That most assuredly meant no skin under her fingernails so he couldn't look for scratches on a suspect. It also meant no DNA to irrefutably nail a suspect. He slouched back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. To Nicholas' surprise, he became very drowsy. He was about to fall asleep. He did not fight it.

The door was pushed out with such force it slammed against the wall. Nicholas was jarred awake and lunged upright in the chair. He was greeted with the sight of Jeb coming through the door, very grim faced and obviously not happy. He walked fast, right up to Nicholas before abruptly stopping. Nicholas stared at his face.

"I played a hunch. This victim had just had surgery. It was obvious and I saw it at the scene. I let past experience get in the way. There was no harm done, it just took longer." He stalked behind his desk, sat down, stood up and stalked back in front of Nicholas. Nicholas waited. "Long ago, there was a psycho who worked in the hospital, not Memorial but another, smaller one. He assaulted female patients, unconscious, nearly unconscious or too weak to resist. When I saw she had recent surgery, the memory overwhelmed me. That's why I check for rape first. I was sure there was another one. You already know that was not the case." He began stalking again. "The surgery.....very good.....a real work of art.....done by the best....but ....., " he rubbed his chin. Nicholas noticed he still wore the rubber gloves. "Both of her kidneys have been removed." Nicholas felt a surge in his throat. He gulped rapidly. The sensation subsided. He wanted to ask a thousand questions but he was afraid to open his mouth. Instead, he swallowed a few more times. Jeb made his

way to his chair and gently lowered himself into it. He placed both hands on the chair arms and looked straight at Nicholas. "She was alive when they were removed."

Nicholas lunged out of the chair, bent over the trash can and threw up. A few minutes later he backed up until he contacted the chair and dropped into it. He opened his eyes and Jeb was holding a cup of water and a damp paper towel. Nicholas took both.

"Very good, Nicholas. You hit the trash can. Saved a big mess." Nicholas wiped his face with the wet towel. Jeb went on, "It gets worse. Not long after the kidneys were removed....she was gassed...my guess is with a mask," he held his hand over his face to show Nicholas what he meant, "With carbon monoxide. Somebody took her kidneys and then killed her."

Nicholas had no control. He threw up all over Jeb. "Geez Nicholas! I've just come out of an autopsy! You want to make me sick!"

A while later, Nicholas had settled enough to leave. He tried not to talk too much. He was afraid it would upset his stomach again. Jeb had no such restrictions. He changed clothes and was back in form, talking nonstop.

"This should make your life less complicated, Nicholas. How many surgeons can do this work and how many are at Memorial?"

"So it would seem," Nicholas answered but he did not feel that confident. Nobody was this stupid. Jeb was waiting for more comment from Nicholas but none was forthcoming. Nicholas' mind was churning, almost matching his stomach. He looked at Jeb. "I've got a bad job to do." Jeb did not answer. "Next of kin," Nicholas said.

"Want me to do it?" Jeb asked.

Nicholas only shook his head. He stood and walked unsteadily out of the room. He went to the waiting car and got in. Calvin looked him over in the mirror, frowned but said nothing.

"Let's go home. I've got a shit job to do." He leaned back and let the cool air from the air conditioning vent blow on his face. Calvin pulled into traffic and drove slowly and carefully. Calvin could tell his boss didn't look like he could take much jolting. He parked in front of the house and looked at Nicholas.

"Going out again?" Calvin asked.

Nicholas paused with his hand on the door handle. "I don't know yet. I may need some fresh air."

Nicholas took one of several different medicines, hoping one would settle his stomach. Just about the time something started working, he began to think about the phone call. He arranged the girl's employment application, his notepad and pencil carefully aligned on the table and reached for the phone. He dialed the numbers and it rang faster than he wanted. A man answered. Nicholas glanced at the name on the application. "Bartholomew Higgins." It was neither a question nor a statement, just a fact.

"Yes," the voice answered.

"Mr. Higgins, I'm Detective Nicholas Vaughn, New York City police. I'm afraid I have very bad news."

"Amy?" the voice said, anxiety already rising.

Nicholas had not done this very many times but enough to know that parents instinctively knew. He looked at the paper again.

"Amy B. Higgins, employed at Memorial here in New York is your daughter?" This time it was phrased as a question but Nicholas already knew the answer.

"Amy?" Was there an accident?" The voice fell silent.

Nicholas had hoped he would continue to guess, getting progressively worse until he said the most feared word. "I'm sorry to have to tell you....."

The man did not want to hear the word. "My Amy is....."

"Yes Sir, we found the body at....." Nicholas read the least upsetting details. Time and street address which would mean nothing to

the man. He was no longer listening anyway. Nicholas quickly concluded with his sympathy and offered to do anything to help. The man mumbled his appreciation. Then in a cracking voice he asked if he could hang up. He asked for Nicholas' number and said he would call back in a few minutes. He did not wait for further comment from Nicholas.

Nicholas glanced at the clock and waited. In twenty-three minutes the phone rang. Nicholas wondered what he could have done in twenty-three minutes.

"It took some time for me to recover from the shock, Detective Vaughn. My wife, Amy's mother passed away some years ago. I'm alone. I was not able to continue talking. Please tell me what happened."

"The investigation is in the very preliminary stages. I came from the ME's office only a short time ago. I can tell you that your daughter died under very mysterious circumstances and we are officially treating it as a homicide." Nicholas heard a mournful groan over the phone.

"I must come to New York, Detective. I'll be there tomorrow. May I see you then?"

"Of course." Nicholas took a few minutes to give Higgins phone numbers and addresses. He didn't mind. It kept him from having to talk about the man's daughter. He decided he would not give any more details. The man was alone, all the way across the country. He would not add to his helplessness. Nicholas glanced at the clock again. Tomorrow, Higgins had said. He would do some fast traveling to get here that quick. "Mr. Higgins?" Nicholas asked tentatively. The man had been quiet for a couple of minutes.

"I was thinking, Detective Vaughn. I must be getting ahead of myself. When can I expect to have my daughter brought home?"

"I see no reason for delay. The ME will release.....," Nicholas grimaced. This was gruesome. "I see no problem, Mr. Higgins. Everything should be finished when you get here."

They hung up. Nicholas rubbed his face. He looked at the employment application, his eyes burrowing in on a single line. "Sagebrush Flats, Texas. Good Lord, I can't believe there is really such a place." He fell back on the sofa and in a minute was dozing.

He was startled awake. He looked at the clock. He had only slept a few minutes. He hurried outside. Calvin was patiently waiting, leaning on the fender of the car. He and Nicholas reached for the door handles at the same time.

Head for Amanda's. I'll call but I'm going anyway. I can't be alone tonight."

He wanted to tell her about the dreadful situation but she did not want to hear it. "We're divorced because I don't want to be a cop's wife, remember? I want to be Nicholas' wife but that's all." She came close to making him forget but, not quite.

The next morning Nicholas was at the station very early. As soon as he was finished with Higgins he would be on his way to the hospital. He had to have a plan. All his instincts told him this was going to be bad, very bad. Nothing about this made sense. Somebody got their kidneys removed by a skilled surgery team in a major hospital, then killed and thrown in a dumpster. How could anyone expect to get away with it. There couldn't be that many doctors in the entire city that could do that surgery.

## CHAPTER 6

The hours passed uneventfully. Nicholas was engrossed in the paperwork. This one was going to generate a ton of paper so he was getting ready. Suddenly, he was aware of someone. He looked up. Without a word being spoken, he knew. He glanced at his watch. How could the man have possibly gotten here so quickly. He couldn't do it but he had done so. Nicholas rose and extended his hand, "My deepest sympathies, Mr. Higgins." Higgins shook his hand but only nodded. He was obviously still struggling with his emotions. Nicholas motioned for Higgins to sit down and waited while he fought to keep his composure. Nicholas looked him over. He was a bit over six feet tall, probably six, two. He was powerfully built and had only the beginning of a pouch. It would not have been noticeable if he had not been wearing the tight fitting western type pants. But, and Nicholas had looked twice, his most noticeable feature were his arms and hands. His forearms looked like the barrel of a baseball bat. His hands looked like hams stuck on the bat and his fingers looked like railroad spikes. He rested them on his thighs, like they were too heavy to hold up. "I didn't think you could get here this quick."

"I made connections." For a fleeting instant, Nicholas thought he almost said, "I have connections."

"You're from Sagebrush Flats, Texas? I didn't believe there was such.....," Nicholas wilted from the man's penetrating gaze. "How did the town get that unusual name?" He asked, trying to not sound so critical. He was thinking how close he had come to saying 'goofy-assed' instead of unusual.

"Sagebrush is about the only thing that grows there and the country is certainly flat. I guess it's not so unusual, considering that."

"Yes.....well.....perhaps not." Nicholas was certainly willing to drop the subject. He shuffled papers around on his desk, buying some time. "This is not easy.....," he looked at the notes he had made, "Bartholomew. I bet all your friends call you, Bart."

"Actually, they don't. My Mama named me Bartholomew, not Bart. She once said if she wanted me to be called Bart, she would have named me, Bart."

Nicholas was sent scrambling through papers again. He rose. "We can use that office. It's private. I think we should," he nodded toward the office, "Use it." Higgins rose and waited for Nicholas to lead the way.

It took two full hours for Nicholas to tell the man the whole story. He told him everything. He made no speculations, just the facts. Higgins rarely interrupted. Sometimes his eyes became glassy. Sometimes Nicholas could see his Adam's apple bobbing furiously as he fought to keep his composure. Nicholas tried to be clinical with his descriptions. It wasn't easy to discuss a woman's body parts with her father.

When he finished, Higgins said softly, "I appreciate how you've handled this, Detective Vaughn. A lesser man could not have handled it in your manner." Nicholas had never had that said to him and he had to think about it for a moment. He nodded in acknowledgment. Higgins flexed his massive fingers. That captured and held Nicholas' gaze. The man seemed to be a gentle soul. He was struggling mightily to not

lose his composure in the face of overwhelming grief. Nicholas was quite adept at detecting underlying emotions and he felt no rage nor anger. Just grief. The man was dying inside.

"First things first, Detective. I must take my Amy home. When she's been properly buried.....I'll be back." A rush of air came out of the man's nose. His eyes changed. They were clear and icy. It only lasted a second before grief returned. Nicholas wasn't sure he had seen it. A soft groan escaped from Higgins' lips. He stood. Nicholas joined him and they walked out of the office. Nicholas looked him over again. The man was built to uproot trees with his bare hands.

"Mr. Higgins, I will see to the arrangements. Everything will be handled." Higgins turned and looked at Nicholas. "Let me do that for you, Bartholomew. It's a big city out there. I'll try to help ease your way."

Higgins placed his hand on Nicholas' shoulder and squeezed. Nicholas was sure the blood flow had been cut off. Higgins' head was drooped. He mumbled a "Thank you", turned and walked out of the room. Nicholas watched and wondered where he had seen someone walk like that, without any excessive motion, the man moved swiftly. Nicholas shrugged and went back to his desk. He picked up the phone and dialed. They answered on the second ring. Nicholas identified himself and said, "I want to know everything about Bartholomew Herman Higgins, resident of Sagebrush Flats, Texas." He leaned his head away from the phone for a moment. "Don't laugh. They are both very real."

Bartholomew Higgins stood outside the building. He pressed against the wall to stay out of the way of the numerous pedestrians. He took a map from his jacket pocket and studied it intently. He looked up at the street sign, back at the map and then down the street. "Memorial Hospital," he said softly, "Is not very far." He folded the map, returned it to his pocket, pulled the jacket together to cut out the chilly air and walked briskly away, in the direction of Memorial Hospital. The sidewalk was crowded with the usual pedestrian traffic.

Higgins dodged in and around people but did so without disrupting anyone. He seemed to float like smoke. One minute he would be along side of someone, a few seconds later he would be way ahead. No one seemed to notice. He never touched anyone, a sure way to bring on snarling challenges by the sidewalk traffic. Higgins was like smoke drifting unnoticed through the crowd. He moved with an ease and fluidity that did not match his size nor appearance. He arrived at a corner. The hospital was across the street. It was huge, an impressive structure and what Higgins expected. His daughter had described it to him during one of their frequent phone conversations. He stared up at the imposing building. He blew through his nose, his rage flared and he fought for control. Had anyone looked carefully at him they would have sensed his fury. Even at the crowded corner they would have tried to step away from him. But no one noticed. It was not good policy to stare at someone on a New York City street corner. One never knew what lurked in the heart or mind of the most innocent appearing individual. Higgins' concentration momentarily left him and he stepped off the curb. A blaring horn jolted him out of the daze. He was thinking about what had happened to his daughter in that hospital. How could they do such a thing? He and the motorist exchanged a glaring look. He looked back at the hospital. Not so hard to understand, he supposed. He had seen much cruelty in his life. Too much for a farm boy from Sagebrush Flats, Texas. The light changed and he rushed across the street. He was up the long flight of stairs in a few seconds. He paused at the door but it wasn't necessary. He was not even breathing hard. He went inside.

Now, he controlled his movement even more closely. He would do nothing to draw attention to himself. He pretended to read a directory but was carefully surveilling the area. Public access was carefully controlled and their area was limited. There were cameras but so far Higgins had not stepped into an area covered by one. Someone in a lab coat rushed by him and through a door. The man had tapped on a keypad

and barely slowed up before going through the door. Higgins had not seen the door and had no time to react. He did have time to see a rack of lab coats hanging on the other side and he did estimate the seconds it took the door to close. He moved closer, looked all around the ceiling for cameras and waited, apparently studying the directory. No one noticed.

He did not have long to wait. Two females, talking animatedly passed on their way to the door. One punched the keypad, pulled open the door and they went in. In two big effortless strides, Higgins was at the door. He grasped the edge, holding the door a fraction of an inch from closing. He leaned his head to the crack and listened. The voices were already fading. He pulled the door open, peering inside and seeing no one, went through the door. He quickly took a lab coat and slipped it on. He went down the hall.

A few hours of reconnaissance revealed nothing he had not expected. He did not expect to find anything but he did learn he could move about the hospital if he acted like he knew what he was doing. Only the lost or unsure were ever noticed by the staff. Even that posed no problems. They only asked where you were going and directed you to your destination. He explored several floors of the huge building, found and noted the ingress and egress of the places he thought he might return. Not really looking for anything but trying to see as much as he could he took his time and carefully observed. His experience with hospitals was limited and observing one as big as a small city was particularly daunting. He was able to maintain his chameleon like act and blend in with the comings and goings. Higgins was beginning to think he could go in a surgery room and no one would pay any attention. Perhaps, someone would even hand a scalpel to him. He paused, looking thoughtfully at a clipboard he had found laying unattended. The key to remaining invisible was to carry a clipboard or a stethoscope. He couldn't find a stethoscope so he carried a clipboard. It worked splendidly for moments like this. He was

reviewing what had just passed through his mind. Surgery.....a surgery room.....he had just thought of that. Of course!! That's where he needed to look! What had happened to Amy had to have occurred in surgery. That was precisely where he needed to be looking. He looked up and down the hall, saw the directory and walked toward it. He didn't want anyone to see him looking at a directory. He should be familiar enough with the building without looking at a directory. He leaned against the wall and held the clipboard in front of his face. In a few seconds the hall would be empty. Two nurses passed by chatting nonstop. One did glance his way and gave him a big smile. He was surprised. It had been awhile since someone had flirted with him. She was gone before he could react. Checking again and seeing no one, he stepped in front of the directory and found the floor reserved for surgery. He stepped from the elevator and quickly looked both ways. One hall was empty. At the end of the other was a nurse's station. There was a buzz of activity but no one looked his way. Now he was uncertain. He had to do something fast. This was an area of elitists. Here he would be noticed and recognized as someone who did not belong. He strode purposely away from the nurse's station. He was beginning to wish he had not made this foray although he did not know how he could avoid it. He passed a door labeled 'Janitor', stopped, backed up and tried the door. It was unlocked. He stepped inside. Maybe this was a better approach. He took off the lab coat, pulled on a pair of coveralls which were woefully too small. He compensated by leaving it unzipped. He found some kind of universal polishing substance and a couple of rags. He peered into the hall. There was still no one except those at the station. Holding the can and a rag in plain view, he strolled down the hall, stopping often to spray and wipe on something. He hoped someone noticed. He didn't expect they would notice the rag was always between his hand and whatever he touched. He was leaving no fingerprints. He worked his way down the hall and around a corner. He was puzzled why there was no activity at this end

of the building. After checking in several rooms it became apparent. The section was new. It was not completely furnished. There was obviously no surgery being done in this area of the building. He was trying to decide if he dared risk going passed the nurse's station. They were sure to notice he wasn't one of the regular janitors. Before he could decide a door opened just as he reached for the door knob. Higgins and an unhappy looking man were standing eye to eye. The man made a quick glance at Higgins attire and as he did, Higgins glanced at his name tag. Samuel Franklin, Anesthesiologist. Their eyes met again.

"What are you doing?" the man asked angrily.

Higgins shrugged, held up the can and rag. He instantly decided the best way was totally non-confrontational. He said nothing but took on an air that surely anyone could see what he was doing. He also stepped aside in a submissive manner allowing the man to pass without further comment, if he would do so. The man stepped by but did not leave. He continued to look at Higgins. Higgins went further down the hall, wiping on things and not looking back.

Then he heard the man's soft footsteps on the carpeted hall. When he could hear them no longer, he glanced back. The man was nowhere in sight. Higgins quickly returned to the door, opened it and looked inside. It appeared to be a fully equipped surgery room. He took longer than he should to look around the room but still saw nothing unusual. At least, it did not look unusual to him. Deciding not to press his luck further, he retracted his path until he was again in sight of the nurse's station. He was polishing on a brass plate at the elevator doors, deciding whether to leave wearing the coveralls or go back for the lab coat.

Suddenly, Samuel Franklin appeared at the nurse's station. He simultaneously spotted Higgins and nodding in his direction, spoke animatedly to a nurse. Higgins calmly pressed the elevator button and continued to polish. He looked out of the corner of his eye. Two more

nurses had joined them and they were all looking at him. He grumbled under his breath but made no movement except for the steady polishing. He could hear the approaching elevator. He took another glance and Samuel Franklin was now coming toward him. The elevator door opened and Higgins stepped inside. As the doors closed he could hear Samuel Franklin calling for him to stop. He took off the coveralls and rolled them into a tight ball. When the door opened, he walked quickly out of the building, holding the rolled coveralls tightly under his arm and keeping his head down so the cameras could not plainly see his face. He left the building and quickly put some distance between it and himself. He was lost in thought and paying scarce attention to his route. That was a mistake. When he stopped to take his bearings he found he had walked two blocks in the wrong direction. He looked down a long dark alley. If he cut through he would be back on course. His mind turned back to his daughter. He would have to tend to her services. The hospital would have to wait. He stepped into the alley, threw the coveralls into a heap of trash, thrust his hands into his pockets and started walking. Half way through the alley, he became aware of footsteps behind him. Without so much as a hesitation in his step, he began to listen. A few steps later he knew there were two people behind him and within a foot or two of how far behind him. He had no thoughts of fleeing nor of being afraid. Long forgotten instincts were suddenly remembered. Surprise was his only ally. He would not lose it. He began to surveill what was ahead of him. Perhaps, there was something he could use to his advantage. Then someone stepped out of the darkness. He was trapped! He continued to walk as though he were unaware of the predicament he was in. He was a step or two from the man before he stopped and looked up and then pretended to be unconcerned as he stepped to the side to pass. His path was blocked. He stepped over and placed his back to the wall. For the first time he looked at the man behind him. Three Puerto Rican

youths, although Higgins did not know they were Puerto Ricans. The one that had blocked his path spoke.

"Your money and jewelry and you live." He smiled broadly as if that would indicate the alternative. Higgins did not speak or make a move. The muggers were taken aback. Usually, their victims cried for mercy or dumped their pockets hoping their total cooperation would be enough to spare their lives. Suddenly, the leader's eyes narrowed and he nodded. Higgins heard the snap of a switch blade knife. He looked at the man and the knife was extended toward Higgins. The man put on his most fierce looking face and took one step toward Higgins. Higgins grasped his wrist and with no more effort than if he were bending a twig, he snapped the man's wrist. The man dropped to his knees and gasped. The leader was surprised but only for an instant. He lunged for Higgins but was stopped dead in his tracks as Higgins' giant fingers closed on his throat. There was a moment of hesitation as his massive fingers shut off the man's air and then he released his grip. Before the man could react Higgins struck again. His fingers dug into the man's throat and he ripped out his trachea. Higgins turned toward the third man who had been frozen in place. In a split second he was running. Higgins had never seen anyone run so fast. The man with the broken wrist was cradling his wrist and rocking on his knees. Higgins stepped behind him and with no more effort than if the man were a sparrow he took his head in both hands and snapped his neck. Higgins looked up and down the alley and satisfied no other attacker lurked in the shadows, he knelt down and rummaged through their pockets. They had had a fairly profitable night. He stuffed all the money in his pockets, tossed the watches and jewelry into the mounds of trash and walked quickly down the alley.

Back at the hotel, he gathered his clothes, called for a cab to take him to the airport and went downstairs to wait. Higgins' mind shifted to the task ahead. He had to bury his only child, his Amy. His eyes became glassy. He fought for control. He did not know how

long he waited. He became aware when a bellhop touched his shoulder. "Sir, your cab is here." He nodded, picked up his bag and walked out.

A few days later, Higgins sat before a trunk which also served as a coffee table in his den. He opened the trunk and looked at a huge collection of guns and knives. He picked one, looked at it before dropping it back into the trunk. He raised his massive hands in front of his face and slowly flexed his fingers. He threw his head back and screamed in a primordial roar of pain, agony, vengeance and fury. He slammed the lid, went to his bedroom and began to cram his clothes into a bag. He was going back to New York City.

The phone rang only once before Nicholas snatched it up and identified himself.

"It is I, Nicholas my boy. I don't know if I bear good news or bad."

"Tell me when you ever had good news."

"A good point but what is good news to me might not necessarily be the same to you or vice verse."

"True but no matter what, you could spare me the philosophy."

"I wish you didn't know enough on me to send me away for a few years. I'd never talk to you again."

"So many of my friends say that. Now what do you have for me?"

"Bartholomew Herman Higgins of Sagebrush Flats, Texas. An uneventful life for awhile. Farmed a little, mostly a rancher. About to marry but got drafted and sent to Vietnam. Did more than his time, a model soldier and made it home in one piece. The girl waited, they got married and lived happily ever after. Then she got sick and died. They had a daughter who came here and got killed. Higgins' whole life is in the shitter, I'd say."

"That's all?" Nicholas asked and did not try to hide his disappointment.

"I don't know," the man said sincerely. "I did a routine service check and got zero, zip, nada. His military record is inaccessible. Name, rank and serial number and that is all. I tried some slight of hand and I'm telling you Nicholas, this boy was so far underground, he was closer to China. He was doing top secret stuff in 'Nam. You would have many stars on your shoulder before you could read his file."

"Does that mean CIA?"

"Like what in the CIA? Assassins?"

"You mean we had guys that lurked in the jungle and iced the occasional VC?"

"Far from that. Oh, for sure, they lurked in the jungle but these boys wouldn't waste a bullet on your ever day VC. Nothing but Generals or whatever the VC army called their officers. They went right up to the Hanoi city limits if that's where the target was."

"I wonder how successful they were?"

"From the meager information I ever learned, very much so. But that wasn't what was going to win the war."

"How do you know all this if it was so secret?"

"I dated this girl whose brother was in the business. He told her and she didn't quite grasp the necessity for secrecy. Of course, that was not a problem in my case."

"Of course," Nicholas said scornfully. He knew the man would give up his mother for a few dollars. "But how do you know that's what our man was doing?"

"That was the only operation that is still secret to this day. For once our government did something right. These guys need to be anonymous. There is always a draft dodger who would sympathize with the enemy and want to pay a VC a few million because one of our guys snipped him. There are draft dodgers in high places, you know."

"That is a problem."

"I've always had this notion that one of these guys could really do the country a service and take out....."

"Don't even say it. Our phones may be tapped."

There was a long silence. Nicholas was beginning to think the man really believed him. Nicholas was using the opportunity to think and was in no hurry to continue the conversation. At that moment a clerk passed his desk and dropped a sheet of paper in the in-basket. Nicholas stared at it. He blinked, reached across his desk and snatched up the paper. He quickly read down the page. Two street hoodlums found viciously slain. Nicholas gulped as he read the condition of the bodies. He read further and his eyes froze on the location. It was between the station and Memorial Hospital. He flipped through his notes to see where he was on the day of the slayings. He was right here at his desk talking to Bartholomew Herman Higgins.

"Hey!" he flinched at the sound in his ear.

"I'm here. Look, I think you've done okay. You will keep trying." Nicholas hung up the phone without waiting for a reply. He dialed another number. "It's me, Amanda. I need a favor." He listened to the reply. "You know how I hate to eat that shit." He listened again. "That would make up for some of it." He listened again. "That would make up for the rest of it." They chuckled. "Here's what I need. Do your magic on a Bartholomew Herman Higgins from Sagebrush Flats, Texas and don't laugh. My first source laughed but not for long. I'll even give you a clue. I want his military record and don't even bother going through the regular channels." He listened to her reply. "Payment in advance! What kind of service are you running?" He paused, then continued, "Oh yes, now I remember. Okay then, what time shall I pick you up?" They agreed on a time and hung up.

Nicholas pulled his notebook in front of him, flipped to an empty page and began to make an outline. Higgins had respect for authority. Nicholas noticed that he showed that while they talked. It was rare in today's world and especially to a cop. He was disciplined. It showed

in the way he walked and the way he sat. It was like he was in a perpetual state of attention. Also, he was facing great adversity with a minimum display of emotion. The man's life was shattered. His personal grief and despair nearly overwhelming. Even so, it took a keen eye to detect how close he was to losing control.

Nicholas chewed on his lip. Did Higgins leave here and go to the hospital? Was he mugged and finally no longer able to control his pent-up emotions. Did he release his fury on his attackers? Nicholas read the bulletin again. Involuntarily, he covered his throat. He massaged his Adam's apple. "Holy shit!" he moaned. "Ripped it right out!"

Nicholas tapped on his desk with the end of a pencil. He didn't need this. A vigilante and a well trained professional at that. He had better solve this case quickly. Otherwise, a large measure of revenge could be expected.

He hurried out to get ready for his date. He wondered why it could not have been this way while they were married. Of course, they were free to do whatever they pleased but in Nicholas' case that was nothing. He did not know what she was doing nor did he intend to ask.

While Nicholas and Amanda were having a great time, her elaborate computer network was grinding inexorably through some of the most inaccessible information that was stored in government computers. But unknown to all but a few high ranking officers was a major roadblock for the lurking hacker. These were career soldiers who had paid their dues in Vietnam and had made their careers there, often on the shoulders and the graves of their fellow soldiers. They were fiercely loyal and had no intentions of giving up a comrade in arms to some bleeding heart liberal draft dodger. They had seen real bleeding hearts. So, decades ago, when the computer world was in it's infancy, the military men had conceived the idea, recruited the volunteers and implemented it. The soldiers had followed orders and done their duty. The officers would not betray them and they did not. Those service

records had never made their way into a computer database. They sat, unobtrusively, in a cardboard box on the back of a shelf in some long forgotten warehouse. The officer who had put them there had long since retired. He no longer even thought of the covert operation, who had participated in it nor where the records were stored.

Nicholas and Amanda finished their meal and drove slowly back to Nicholas' house. He had planned for them to do that. He was not anxious to learn who was crashed at Amanda's house.

The plane lifted off, gained altitude and began it's slow bank to the northeast. Bartholomew Higgins stared out the small window. He had left his sadness back there on a desolate prairie near Sagebrush Flats, Texas. By the time the plane touched down he would be focused and ready. This was a new experience for him. This hunt would be like none he had ever encountered. He had no idea how to go about it but he did know he would go about it and he knew he would succeed. Somethings never changed. Higgins thought back to the jungles so many years ago. This was different but in many ways it was the same. In Higgins' mind it didn't matter if he was in mud or on concrete.

Nicholas' date with Amanda had gone far beyond their expectations. She had turned the search over to her most competent associate and she and Nicholas had made up for lost time.

Now, Nicholas had to make up for lost time on the job. He had not interviewed anyone at the hospital and the trail definitely led to the hospital. He was at his desk making an outline. He had precious little information to go on. Amanda had called her associate and learned that absolutely nothing existed on Higgins in any database in the country except for the usual. Actually, there was plenty of data, just none about his military record, except for the usual..... Nicholas had wanted to throw the phone as he listened to the report. Finally, he had managed to break in and exasperatedly asked if there

was anything about what he actually did in the military. "Very much," was the reply but not what you are looking for. "He served with distinction and all that...." Nicholas interrupted again. "If it's not there, don't read it to me. Fax over the report. I'll see that it stays unofficial."

The computer hacker was more than willing to oblige. He was not that fond of Nicholas anyway. He had designs on Amanda and just when he thought he was invincible, Nicholas would show up and he was back on the streets.

Nicholas had retrieved the fax, stuffed it in his jacket pocket and was once again working on his outline. He suddenly became aware of a presence. He raised his head as little as possible and he could see the massive forearms, hands and fingers resting on the legs. Although, he was now familiar with the sight, it was unnerving, nevertheless. He looked up.

"Good morning," said Higgins in a quiet voice.

Nicholas rubbed his mouth and nodded. "It really wasn't necessary for you to come back, Mr. Higgins. I can assure you the Department will leave nothing undone to solve this case. I would have kept you current on everything."

"I'm sure," Higgins said. "I couldn't stay away. I'm sure you understand."

"I understand your need to know but believe me, there is nothing you can do here but make it hard on yourself. Trust me, go home. It's for the best." Nicholas waited to see if he would get a positive response. Higgins said nothing. Deciding he would have to be a bit more forceful, Nicholas said, "I don't need anymore help, Mr. Higgins. I've already got too much of everything."

Higgins sat, without moving nor blinking an eye. Just when Nicholas was becoming uncomfortable, he said, "In Sagebrush Flats, we say there are two things a man can never have too much of."

Nicholas almost smirked. If this corncob thought he was going to pull that on a veteran cop, he was even more corncob than Nicholas thought. That one had been making the rounds in the police station since the beginning of time. Nicholas would not be impressed with barnyard witticisms. "And what is that, Mr. Higgins?" Nicholas asked sarcastically.

"Land and cornbread," Bartholomew said with just a hint of a smile. He knew he had tricked the detective.

Nicholas blinked. He let his gaze drop to the desktop. He had been upstaged by the corncob. "Cornbread," he repeated quizzically. "That's not the way I heard that one. Well, I guess jokes get turned around to fit.....," he stopped, hoping it would drop before it got worse. He was suddenly not happy. He was very tired of Mr. Higgins. "Go home, Mr. Higgins. Nothing good can come out of your staying here. Go home to....."

"Sagebrush Flats," Higgins filled in for him.

"Yeah, right. We'll do the investigation. In fact, I was on my way to do that." He stood. "See what I mean. I could have already been doing the job." He made an expression to indicate he was being delayed.

"I'll certainly not interfere. I just want to be here. This is a very trying time."

"I don't mean to appear insensitive but believe me I need to get to work." Nicholas gathered some papers, raked a few items in a drawer and slammed it. Higgins did not move. Nicholas looked at him, shook his head and walked away. At the door to the room, he looked back. Higgins had not moved.

Nicholas got in the car and instructed Calvin to drive to Memorial. Nicholas was quite agitated. He didn't know what he was going to do with this guy. It was hard to do anything with a man whose daughter had just been murdered. Normally, they expected to talk to you a couple of times every day and Nicholas could handle that. He did

not think Higgins would be appeased with that. He did not know what Higgins would do or had already done and that was worrisome.

"We're here," his thoughts were interrupted when the driver called out to him. He looked up at the imposing structure. He got out and walked toward the entrance.

Calvin got out, lit a cigarette and eyed two muggers that were inching toward the car. A quick recon would reveal if there was anything laying on the seat. They looked at Calvin who made a tearing motion at this throat. The muggers hurried away. Calvin laughed loud enough for them to hear. He was pleased that the news was getting around. Every time a mugger gets iced, it does wonders for street safety. Calvin thought one should get iced every day.

Nicholas went inside and straight to the administrator's office. He noticed the name on the door while the secretary was announcing him. "Monica Simmons," he said to himself. The office door was opened and the secretary motioned for him to enter. She was not happy. She had no intention of allowing him to see the administrator without an appointment and the first opening would be next week. Nicholas had sat on the corner of her desk which had not pleased her at all but she had continued with the reasons why he could not possibly interrupt her schedule. He took out his badge and held it inches from her nose and waited while her voice droned into silence. The secretary had excused herself and gone into the office, barely opening the door enough to squeeze through and hopefully not enough to allow Nicholas to see inside. He wondered what difference it made, since one way or the other, he was about to be in the office. He didn't have much time to think about it before the secretary opened the door. She stood with her hand on the door knob and with the door not fully opened so there was not enough room for Nicholas to get through, that is, not without a little contact. Nicholas took full advantage and brushed his chest against hers. At just the right instant he expanded his chest so the

contact was a bit more pronounced. It was not what the secretary had expected, although Nicholas was not sure what she did expect.

He walked to the huge desk, showed his badge, introduced himself and without being asked, he took a seat. Monica Simmons watched everything and showed not the slightest hint of being impressed.

Nicholas launched his attack. "One of your employees, Amy B. Higgins was murdered." He held up his notepad but did not need it. There wasn't enough in the notepad that he didn't know it all from memory. But it wasn't necessary for anyone to know that.

Monica Simmons had interrupted and advised that she and the entire staff would cooperate to the fullest but she was quite sure that she could not lend any information to the investigation. It was a big city and a big hospital. There would be a limited number of people who knew the victim in spite of her employment at the hospital. She made an analogy that surely the Detective did not know all of his fellow employees. She had put her hands on the arms of her chair to stand and complete the dismissal of Nicholas. Her motion had been frozen and her sentence broken by the waving of his hand and stern look. She had leaned back, glared at him and with a bored look allowed him to go on. She may or may not have known that he was going to continue no matter what. She made a big show of glancing at her watch, more and more often. Each time, Nicholas talked slower and repeated himself more often. When he finally concluded with the cause of death, Monica Simmons' lips parted, she gasped and involuntarily shuddered. Noting this, Nicholas said, "A horrible death for sure." He waited for any comment and when there was none he continued, "And now I'm sure you can see why I'm here. The removal of the victim's kidneys and subsequent murder by carbon monoxide poisoning happened right here in this hospital. This is no witchcraft sacrifice. The ME is positive it was done by a skilled surgeon." He paused. The woman was obviously shaken. He understood, remembering his own reaction. "That does cut down on suspects," he added.

"I cannot begin to explain this nor will I even try. I am certain that no one on this staff could possibly commit such a heinous act and I will lend all of our assistance to proving that. What do you wish for me to do?"

Nicholas advised her he would need to talk to every surgeon on the staff and he added, very soon. He was advised that would be arranged. If it were agreeable they would start at eight o'clock the next morning. She would need the rest of the day for the surgeons to arrange their schedules. Nicholas agreed. He left her office and finding the secretary sitting at her desk, leaned over and asked in a low voice, "Was it good for you?"

He was almost out of the office when he heard her answer, "Yes." As he rode the elevator down, he seriously considered going back and asking if she would go out with him.

Monica stared at the closed door. She thought she had dealt with virtually every situation, both expected and unexpected, that could possibly occur in this hospital. Even her own situation had called for some quick reaction. She had never failed to either solve, bribe or effectively cover-up every potentially damaging situation that had come along. She swiveled slightly in the chair and touched her finger tips lightly together. But this.....had caught her by surprise. She didn't know what to do first. The cop would talk to the doctors, of that, she was sure. At this point, she didn't really think anyone on the staff was responsible. She didn't like any of the surgeons but then, who did? Surgeons made it impossible for nearly anyone to like them. She, also, did not think any of them were capable of such a morbid act. If anything, they tended in the opposite direction. They would go to extreme measures to prolong a life. First, to add to their own credentials and reputation and second, to add to the fee they would present to the insurance company or the surviving loved one or the county or someone. Surgeons were not noted for being stuck with an unpaid bill.

She played several scenarios through her mind but none seemed logical or even remotely likely. Whatever had happened would surely lead somewhere else. The victim had just worked here. She decided to proceed but with a little protection. It would be foolhardy to be without legal council. She picked up the phone.

Bartholomew Higgins was unaware, or perhaps, unconcerned about the strange looks being cast at him. He sat in the booth, his head slightly drooped and the shot glass completely engulfed in his massive hands. He took a sip and even one finger dwarfed the glass. He had left the station and completely undecided what to do, began walking aimlessly. The sidewalk traffic was interfering with his concentration so he ducked into the first bar. He had been so lost in thought he had not noticed it was a gay bar. He tilted his head back to finish the drink and was looking into the eyes of an obvious homosexual who was now grinning broadly at Higgins. Slowly he lowered the glass and looked around the bar. Everyone in the place was looking his way. He mumbled under his breath and said to the gay guy, "Look, I've made a mistake. I just wanted a drink and I didn't notice....." He hoped that would be enough explanation.

"Sure you did. You're just getting cold feet." The man batted his eyes.

Higgins grunted and slid out of the booth. The man gave him no room and they bumped.

"Oh, do it again," the man cooed.

Higgins' eyes flared but the man did not notice. He glanced around to see if he had an audience. "Last warning, Twinkle Toes. I made a mistake. Don't you make one," Higgins said and stepped toward the door.

The man cut him off and said, "A kiss first. Then you can go." Laughter rippled through the bar.

With the speed of a striking cobra, Higgins' massive fingers encircled his neck and flexing them, the man's air supply was cut off. His cheeks and eyes bulged. Higgins tightened his grip and lifted. The man's toes barely touched the floor. Higgins loosened his grip and with a flick of his wrist sent the man sprawling. He looked around the room and seeing the crowd was still too stunned to react, he quickly left. He hurried down the sidewalk to put as much distance between himself and the bar, before they could recover and pursue. It was a good idea but Higgins underestimated the bar patrons. Two of them rushed out the back and ran down the alley. They knew just where Higgins would intersect the alley. The men arrived at the end of the alley and one looked around the building. Higgins was a half block away. The man nodded to his partner and stepped out on the sidewalk. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Higgins approach. The man in the alley took a lead sap from his pocket. A quick blow and the target would be unconscious. In his other pocket, he touched the knife. After relieving him of his valuables, they would carve him up a bit. He needed to learn a little respect. He looked at his partner standing on the sidewalk. He could tell by his posturing that the target was seconds away.

Higgins did not notice the man until he drove his shoulder into Higgins and forced him into the alley. Instantly, Higgins saw the big sap in the man's hand. He was beginning to bring it down. Higgins did not resist being driven into the alley. Had he have done so it would have caused him to stop directly in the path of the sap. He allowed the man to push him into the alley. His eyes never left the sap and with lightning reflexes he grabbed the man's wrist and stopped the downward flight in an instant. He braced his legs and the man could push him no further. Still holding the man's wrist, he bent it back and the crack of the bone sounded like a rifle shot. Before a sound could come from the man's gaping mouth, Higgins grasped his throat and his massive fingers crushed everything in his neck. The second man

still had his arms around Higgins' waist and was pumping his legs trying to drive Higgins to the ground. He was unaware his partner was already dead. Higgins reached down, took his head in both hands and snapped his neck like it was a twig. He glanced around and seeing no one, hurried down the alley. He turned toward his hotel, hoping to be safely inside before the bodies were discovered. Higgins did not know it would take a wino scavenging in the trash to find the bodies and even then he would take everything of value before announcing his morbid discovery. When the cops took them to the station for their statement, they could usually finagle a free meal or, at the least, a few bucks for their trouble.

The next morning, Nicholas did not go to the station. Because of the early meeting at the hospital he went straight there. He did not see the report on the murders as the bulletin was circulated through the office. It would be several days before he found it while cleaning up his paperwork.

Nicholas arrived precisely on time. The secretary watched him approach and batted her eyes. Now he was really wishing he had called her. He had tried repeatedly to call Amanda but never got an answer. He was sure she had spent the night with that programmer. Nicholas was not in a good mood. He looked at the secretary. "Can I call you?" he asked.

She picked up a piece of paper and held it out to him. "Ms. Simmons said to show you right in," she said.

He glanced at the paper. Name, address and phone number. Nicholas suspected she was a very good secretary. Efficient. He carefully placed the paper in his shirt pocket, flashed his best smile and went into the office. He was half way across the room when the man in the chair looked around. He was smiling broadly. Nicholas stopped dead in his tracks. He was so surprised he could not speak. The man stood up and held out his arms.

"It's been a long time, Nicholas."

Nicholas stepped up and they just stood there, smiling. "Timothy," Nicholas finally said.

Monica looked first at one then the other. She had seen many cop-lawyer encounters but never one quite like this one. She said, "I take it introductions are not necessary." Neither said anything. Monica continued, slightly bemused at the display of surprise, "So that everything will be official, Timothy Lawrence is our attorney of record. The board wishes that he be present at all interviews of our employees. Is that acceptable, Detective Vaughn?"

Nicholas nodded dumbly but did not look at Monica. "I wish I had known you would be here and I would already be over the surprise."

"Didn't know it would be you until a few minutes ago." He nodded toward Monica, "She just called your name a few seconds before you came in."

Monica was anxious to conclude this matter and really didn't care if it was old home day or whatever. The surgeons would complain for weeks about the lost income from canceled surgeries and especially every time budget constraints were mentioned. "Can we proceed, Gentlemen? We have a real problem with time. The sick and infirm wait for no one or in the case that they do, sometimes they die." Monica winced at her choice of words but for once was relieved that neither seemed to be listening to her.

She was surprised when the lawyer turned to her and said, "Of course, proceed." Nicholas also turned to her but only nodded agreement. She reached for the intercom but was also thinking she should not relax her guard in the presence of these two. They heard much more than they let on.

The interviews began. After the first three, Nicholas knew the rest would be futile. It sounded like they were all reading from the same script. Nicholas was beginning to suspect that, perhaps, Timothy was not as surprised as he let on to be. Someone had burned a lot of

midnight oil preparing the doctors for their interview. Of course, it was possible that Timothy only knew a cop would be here, not necessarily that it would be Nicholas. Nicholas began to think of a way to learn that bit of information. He immediately thought of the secretary. He absentmindedly rubbed his shirt pocket that contained the piece of paper. Some times you could combine work and pleasure.

But that aside, one thing was becoming painfully clear. Barring a conspiracy of virtually everyone in the hospital from the administrator to the janitor, it would be next to impossible to perform such a surgery without being discovered. It was unimaginable that the entire staff would be a party to murder. Nicholas was growing increasingly puzzled. The hospital gown worn by the victim came from Memorial. It was identical to the thousands that were in the storage room down to and including the laundry number stenciled on it. That had been easily explained by Timothy. These gowns were easily accessible to anyone, beginning at the laundry, through the delivery and could have been taken to purposely throw off the investigation. The point was acknowledged by Nicholas but Nicholas was now flying on instinct. His instincts were firmly entrenched in Memorial. He would continue the interviews. One never knew when something would pop up when least expected. Although, it was the furthest thing from a solution to the case, it could certainly be put in the least expected category.

The tension was beginning to wear on Monica. Nicholas had taken notes but as the hours passed he could see nothing that she should be concerned about. Only after he had been through several interviews did he realize that Monica knew little more than he. She had no idea what would be learned from these interviews. Or more accurately, she didn't know what the surgeons would say. Or even more accurately, she didn't have a clue what these surgeons were doing, other than surgery. She knew where every penny came from and went but she knew nothing about the actual work performed by the surgeons. He wondered if that really

mattered. She had a close handle on the money. Did it matter if she didn't watch the actual cutting? As the interviews droned on, he was turning that over in his mind. Maybe she was stressed because these surgeons were a bit free spirited. They didn't think anyone could tell them what to do. Maybe she was worried that one of them would say something that was not in the best interest of the hospital although not necessarily a murder confession. From time to time, the police department was plagued by such a free spirit who would resort to any means to obtain a confession or bust a case.

Nicholas had daydreamed his way through the interview and was startled when Timothy nudged his arm. "What else?" he asked.

Nicholas waited a few seconds before answering. Maybe they would think he was thinking instead of not paying attention.

"What a dork," the doctor was thinking. "He's so stupid he doesn't know what I just said."

"The detective is about to fall asleep," Monica was thinking. "There's no reason for me to be worried."

"Nicholas is lost," Timothy was thinking. "This is going nowhere and he is lost."

"No further questions," Nicholas said, taking a line from the lawyer's book of interview. He stared at the notepad laying in his lap. The doctor left.

Monica rubbed her temples and said, "One more."

Timothy yawned.

Nicholas stood and faced the door to greet the next doctor. His mouth dropped open and for the second time today he was speechless. Doctor Deborah Warren came through the door and stumbled over her own feet at the sight of Nicholas Vaughn and Timothy Lawrence standing before her. She covered her mouth in surprise, smiled broadly, ran forward and threw her arms around Nicholas' neck.

"Geez Deborah, I never made the connection you were here." He held her tightly. So much so, Monica stood and cleared her throat.

They stepped back and looked at each other. Nicholas looked at Timothy. He had an bemused smile on his face. He stepped forward and extended his hand. Deborah took it and they nodded. Nicholas looked back and forth. Not exactly the greeting he would have expected.

Monica spoke first. "I take it introductions are, again, not necessary."

Nicholas rushed through the list of questions. He was so excited but he did not fail to notice that Deborah's answers sounded very much like all the others. He was very disappointed when, at the conclusion of the interview, she had to return immediately to surgery. After promises to get together at the earliest possible time, she left.

Timothy checked his watch several times and explaining that he could not miss an appointment, left also.

Monica stared across her desk at Nicholas. He was hopelessly lost in thought. She asked twice if there was anything else before Nicholas heard her. He closed his notepad, thanked her for her cooperation and left. He walked by the secretary, barely glancing at her and saying nothing. She was miffed.

Monica sprawled back in her chair. She hiked up her dress and propped her feet on her desk. She was looking at the ceiling and breathing a big sigh of relief. She had not really believed that such a thing could happen in this hospital but it was the lifting of a burden to come through that unscathed. The hospital had more than a few skeletons and an administrator never knew when one would inadvertently be exposed.

She was looking at the door when the couple came into her office. She made no attempt to remove her feet from the desk top nor to pull down her skirt.

"You look really stressed," the man said.

"You'll never know," Monica replied.

The woman walked behind Monica, grasped her shoulders and began to massage. "We've got a cure for whatever ails you."

The man walked to the door and flipped the lock.

## CHAPTER 7

A barrage of emotions had Nicholas spinning in circles. First, the case. What had seemed like a certainty suddenly was lost in space. There seemed no doubt that all trails led to the hospital. Now, he was not so sure. He needed time to regroup and gather his thoughts. His second emotional high was the meeting with Timothy and not yet over

that shock, in walks Deborah. In that split second, his memories soared into the stratosphere. But instead of unrestrained happiness, they were uneasily cautious. It was not a happy reunion. If Nicholas had not let his emotions govern his instincts he would have thought their unexpected meeting was strained. Everyone was tense and on guard, except Nicholas. He was puzzled. Not one to believe in fate or coincidence, he was really puzzled. What were the odds they would all come together under such unusual circumstances.

He picked up the phone and tried to call Amanda. No luck there which only bolstered his fears that he was losing his place to the computer programmer. He tapped the phone with the end of a pencil and thought. Maybe he should implement Plan B. If Amanda was gone he certainly did not want to be caught empty handed, so to speak. He took the paper out of his pocket and dialed the number. After ten rings he hung up. Maybe he was going to be empty handed. He started rummaging through the papers on his desk but before he had done much he shoved back from the desk and left the building.

He flopped heavily into the back seat and instructed Calvin to drive anywhere. He did not relish the thought of an empty house. Perhaps, a random drive would sharpen his concentration. He needed something to focus his thoughts.

Calvin glanced into the mirror. "This is just great," he thought. "Just what I wanted to do. Chauffeur around a brooding, sulking cop. And when I thought my life was going to get better." He checked his location and thought of the nearest place where the traffic was sparse. If he had to do this it may as well be someplace where he didn't have to dodge errant drivers.

Nicholas looked around the back seat of the car. His memory went back to the back seat of another car.....so long ago.

Bartholomew Higgins checked his appearance in the mirror. He didn't like these clothes but he no longer looked like someone from

Sagebrush Flats. Satisfied he could do no more, he left the hotel room. Moments later he was walking briskly toward Memorial Hospital. He would be there in time for the shift change. If anyone ever expected to go unnoticed, that was the time.

The mugger was staring in the shop window. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Higgins coming. Higgins passed by and slowly the mugger turned his head and watched. He was impressed by how the big man moved effortlessly through the crowds. The mugger had never seen anyone do that. He watched as Higgins arrived at the corner and waited for the light to change. Higgins turned sideways but appeared to be gawking like so many other tourists. In spite of his appearance, the mugger knew the man was a tourist. Years of observation were not easily fooled. Suddenly, he saw something even better. An old man accompanied by an old woman. So obviously tourists even a blind man could spot them for several blocks. The mugger's eyes took in the purse, the bulge of a wallet and several pieces of jewelry. "Oh my," the mugger thought. "I better get this one before every brother in the city descends on them." He looked back at the corner but the big man was not to be seen. The mugger moved down the street careful to monitor his target's every move and scoping out the best place to strike. Right up ahead was the perfect alley. He had used it several times. He knew it perfectly.

Higgins went around the corner and picked up his pace. He went further into the alley, his eyes locked on the far end. He had seen the mugger staring at him and he didn't like what he saw. Higgins had misinterpreted the mugger's stare as one of recognition instead of sizing up a target. Higgins could see how someone might have lain in hiding and watched. Now that someone had seen him again. He had to act quickly and decisively. He increased his pace to a running walk. He was nearing the end of the alley when he abruptly froze. The mugger was backing into the alley dragging an old woman by the front of her blouse while an old man, his eyes bulging in stark terror, was

stumbling along trying to keep up. A blade flashed and they both dropped to their knees obviously obeying an order from the mugger. He already had the woman's purse and the old man was digging in his pocket for his wallet. They were both so terrified, they could not speak. In a split second, Higgins summarized the situation and closed the remaining feet between him and the mugger. He wrapped his huge arms around the mugger's head and snapped his neck like a match stick. He dragged the body a few feet back into the dimness of the alley and hoping the old couple could not identify him, dropped the body and walked away. He called back over his shoulder for them to get out of the alley. He did not look back for fear that they might see his face. In a matter of minutes he was on his way back to the hospital.

He practically jogged up the steps and into the lobby of the hospital. This time he did not hesitate. He kept his head down and tried to act like everyone else. Don't look around, act like you know exactly where you are going and by all means give the appearance of being late. It was almost a guarantee that no one would give you a second look. How could they when everyone kept their head down. Watching someone too long was not healthy as the now deceased mugger could attest.

Higgins timed his pace so the door he had discovered on his first visit would not be entirely closed. He grabbed the edge of the door at the last instant and went inside. Again, he donned a jacket and went to the elevators. He had picked up a clipboard and studied it intently while waiting for the elevators. Three nurses talked animatedly and scarcely gave him a second look. Clipboards worked wonders for inhibiting unwanted conversations. Higgins now knew why so many people in hospitals carried clipboards.

The elevator doors opened and he stepped inside. He hoped Samuel Franklin, anesthesiologist would not be working this shift. That was the only thing that could interfere with his snooping around. He had not decided what he would do if he did encounter Samuel Franklin.

Maybe a decision was not necessary. Action and reaction had always served him well.

Amanda was really disappointed. She had lots of hope for the computer programmer's abilities. Not his computer abilities but his bedroom abilities. He finished tying his shoes and stood up. "I've got to go," he said again. He looked at Amanda stretched out on the bed. She was a sight to behold. Why couldn't he keep his mind on that? At the most inappropriate moment he thought of that cop. It was no use. She would have to decide. It was either him or the cop. He hurried out of the room without looking back or saying anything more. Amanda listened for the door to close. It did and she reached for the phone.

Nicholas was almost dozing when his cell phone rang. He held it to his ear and mumbled. He sat up, suddenly interested. He smiled and said, "You know I was always a softy for that kind of invitation." He listened a moment longer before disconnecting the call. "Take me to Amanda's," he called out to Calvin.

Amanda sprang from the bed, went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. She glanced back in the bedroom at the clock. Not much time. Nicholas would be here in no time. She looked around to see if the programmer had left anything in the room. She saw nothing. Nothing obvious, anyway. She stepped into the shower.

Bartholomew Higgins leaned back in the chair and held the cool beer can to his forehead. He was back in his hotel room. He had thoroughly checked out the peculiar wing of the hospital. This time he had not been interrupted but he had not found any glaring evidence. Realistically, he had known not to expect it would be sitting in the middle of the floor. Hopefully, he would have found something to narrow his search. That was the place, of that, he was sure. It was like a hospital within a hospital. That was not going to be enough. Who, besides the anesthesiologist, had unlimited access to that area.

Higgins sipped from the can. There was no use in procrastinating. With no more leads in sight he had no choice. If the anesthesiologist was the only one he could get his hands on, then the anesthesiologist it would be. A few minutes of Higgins' persuasion and the man would tell things even he did not know he knew. Stranger things had happened. Higgins sat down the beer can and stared at the wall. He had spent years trying to forget. Now, it was coming back and only taking a few minutes to do so.

Timothy Lawrence leaned way back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He let all the facts soak into his mind. There weren't many facts. He had not thought much about it when the hospital administrator had called and asked for his representation at the spur of the moment. Most clients did not anticipate needing an attorney. He thought even less about it when he learned he would be present while a cop asked some questions. Just a precaution he was told. "Precaution, my ass," he had thought. "Nobody calls for an attorney as a precaution. At least, not at my rates." He had arrived early and Monica Simmons had reviewed the circumstances that prompted her to call. Now, Timothy was more convinced that it was indeed simply a precaution. It was a strange situation but not one that would be the hospital's responsibility. Not that he could see at this time. Then the surprises had started. First, in walks Nicholas Vaughn. A cop. Timothy had heard that he had semi-retired from his business. He had not heard that he had become a cop. Timothy always wished he had kept in touch. Now he really wished he had done so. He could not imagine how all that had come about. But for now, it would have to wait. He did not think it would be a good idea to renew a friendship with a cop who was investigating his client. For some reason he did not think this had ended. What had really happened? He could not imagine. He could hardly wait to find out. He reached out and flipped the edges of a file folder. Yes, this would be interesting. He help up the folder,

gazed at it, laid it back on his desk and opened it. It was the file for a long time client. For several years, Timothy had guided the client through a maze of overseas banks. They had plenty of money and were anxious to get it into tax havens around the world. Timothy looked at the first page. Neatly typed at the top.....Dr. Deborah Warren.

Deborah Warren swore softly under her breath and gazed at the view of the city. She sat down at her desk but too restless to sit, stood up and looked out the window again. She wished she knew how to figure odds because this one must be way off the scale.

Just finished with a transplant and with no time to come down from the accompanying high, she had hurried to Monica's office. She had not known that Timothy Lawrence would be representing the hospital. How could she have known? Now that she had time to think about it, she did not think it was any concern but she could have done without the surprise. Monica, the bitch, was sure to have noticed. Deborah didn't need any agitation in her life. But the surprises just keep coming. The cop.....is.....Nicholas Vaughn. Hardly a day passed that she did not think about him. Actually, she was reminiscing. She didn't think too much about what he was doing now. She didn't think there was much she could do about it anyway. As it turns out, perhaps she should have found out what he was doing now. She and Timothy were both surprised. There was no way Monica, the bitch, missed all that surprise. The room was bustling with surprise.

She sat down again and forced herself to think. What had really happened? Nothing. The more she thought about it, the more it was nothing. She unlocked a desk drawer and took out a notepad. She flipped it open and carefully studied the symbols on the last page. It was in code. Her very own secret code. Her lips moved as she mentally deciphered the code, turning the symbols into numeric data. It really wasn't necessary. She knew the numbers better than she knew her own

phone number. However, it was always reassuring. Her personal fortune was building at an astonishing rate. Timothy had been mildly amused when she had called him. Would he find tax havens and places where she could put her money. Of course, he would but just how much money are we talking about he had asked and the boredom was evident even over the phone. Even the great Timothy Lawrence had been stunned by those numbers. A surgeon would be wealthy, for sure, but those dollars were fit for a king. "Holy shit, Deborah!" he had exclaimed. "How much do you get for replacement parts?"

"We're not talking about a rebuilt transmission," she had countered.

Timothy had come back with a fee that had startled her. "Holy shit, Timothy!" she had exclaimed. "How about something for old time's sake?"

Timothy had an instant of glorious flashbacks. "You're right," he said dreamily. "Those were the days." He had cut his fee to one percent which was still some major bucks for nothing more than a few phone calls and a bit of paperwork. Those overseas banks would do all the work just to get the deposits. Even allowing for the astronomical rates they paid, they were still nearly tripling the rates they charged. International cartels of drugs and guns were not at all hesitant to pay any rate for large sums of money. It was only a startup cost. Soon, they had money to burn. The Russian Mafia was just beginning to branch out. It was new, only born at the breakup of the USSR and just beginning to venture beyond the Russian borders. They were trying to finance their criminal activities with the sale of nuclear weapons but that was too slow. They would pay any rate for fast cash.

All this meant for Timothy was he got one percent for making a phone call. All the rest was taken care of and he presented Deborah with a formidable pile of paper. It gave the impression he had done

lots of work when, in fact, all that mattered was the account numbers. Deborah could make her own transfers.

But the memory of all those nights in the back seat with Deborah were worth a lot. After a few months he quit billing her. He had hoped that might get one last reward but it did not even get a thank you card.

Deborah placed the notebook back in the drawer and carefully locked it. She stared at the locked drawer and thought. Perhaps, it was time to get close to the action. That is, if there was any action. It would also be nice to know if there was no action. It would certainly be restful to the mind. She found the business cards and laid them side by side. For an instant, her mind wandered. She regretted ever letting those times get away. They could have stayed together, at least, every now and then. She picked up the phone and dialed. First, Nicholas and then Timothy. They had accepted her invitation. They would meet for dinner. They would allow plenty of time. They would start early and stay late. They would catch up on all those years. Timothy and Nicholas had really sounded excited. She knew she was. In fact, she could hardly wait.

She called the hotel and made reservations. They would dine in a room, just the three of them. Room service would cater everything. There would be no distractions nor interruptions. She was already anxious. She was glad they scheduled it for tomorrow night.

Bartholomew Higgins had stared at the wall for hours. His options were limited and he did not like limited options. Instead of controlling he was being controlled. Try as he might, he could not devise a plan that would allow him to work on this Samuel Franklin but at the same time remain safe from detection. He expected Franklin to make plenty of noise unless, of course, he had a very high tolerance for pain. Even so, in this town where people were thicker than fleas on a dog's back, the slightest unusual noise was likely to be noticed.

That the observer would do anything about it was still another matter but Higgins was not going to leave a trail of any kind. It was a lesson that had served him well so many years ago. However, implementing a plan under these conditions was causing no small amount of problems. An idea had come to mind early on but he had immediately dismissed it as too risky. After hours of eliminating every other option, he was now considering it again. He should have known. First idea is your best idea. It was a philosophy that had seldom failed him, especially when under duress. Had he followed his instincts, it would be over by now. He sat up as his mind swung into action. Good, bad or indifferent, he had decided. His mind automatically engaged and soon a plan was coming together. There was more risk than he would have liked but that went with the territory. He was like a shark on the scent of a drop of blood. He would have carried out this plan no matter how great the risk or how unlikely the chances of success. Higgins had plenty of experience operating behind enemy lines. Not a lot of difference here. In fact, the good guys did look just like the bad guys which had not been the case when he entered the city limits of Hanoi. For awhile he flashed back but soon he was planning the task at hand. Compared to that foray this one should be a piece of cake. A few hours later he had it neatly formulated in his mind. He would need a few supplies so he studied the list and satisfied that he had thought of everything, stuffed it in his pocket and left the room. He walked for several blocks before he found a store that was open and was the type that would carry the merchandise he sought. He entered and tried not to draw attention to himself.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he knew he was not succeeding. A few seconds later, he knew he was the only white man in the place. He had a bad feeling about what was going to happen when he left the store. He also had a bad feeling about how many witnesses would remember he was here and be able to identify him. He pretended to study some merchandise while making up his mind about what to do.

Then he spied the transvestite. He could barely suppress a grin. Then, he turned his attention to his purchases. The transvestite approached.

Higgins stood in line to pay for the items. The transvestite was close behind. They had reached an agreement. Higgins looked nonchalantly around. Everyone in the store was smiling, barely able to not laugh aloud. The stranger had been picked up by Tommy Leroy. Was he ever in for a surprise! Higgins hummed and stepped up to the register. He smiled at the transvestite who was now in a hurry. Waiting in the alley was Tommy Leroy's assistants. In a few minutes they would have his money and everyone in the store would have a good laugh. He would learn the truth when Tommy Leroy started talking in his gruff voice. Higgins led the way out. The transvestite tried to herd Higgins to the left so Higgins took his arm and forced him to the right. The transvestite resisted but the pressure on his arm convinced him otherwise. He stretched up to this full height and took small steps hoping the exaggerated action would lessen the pressure. It did not. Higgins marched him into the first alley before releasing his arm. The transvestite blew through his teeth and rubbed his arm. Before he could speak, Higgins delivered a kick to the groin and Tommy Leroy fell forward, gasped several times and began to retch. Higgins looked both ways to be sure they were not being observed, leaned over the heaving transvestite and said, "Doesn't it just ruin your whole day." The transvestite gagged in response but Higgins was already gone. The transvestite would not be anxious to talk about this unexpected turn of events. Higgins expected it would not be a topic of conversation in the store. He would quickly be forgotten which he was counting on. Soon, he was back in his room and he laid out his purchases and reviewed his plan. It was as good as it was going to get, he decided.

He realized he was hungry. Even that was a problem. Higgins couldn't eat a meal or have a drink without people getting themselves

killed. He would try the hotel restaurant. Surely, nothing would happen there. He would eat and be back in his room in no more than an hour. Surely, nothing could happen in that length of time.

Higgins was beginning to relax. He was having a delicious meal and the hotel restaurant had proven to be first class. Nothing but the finest in here. Higgins carefully wiped his mouth and looked around. No one was paying the slightest bit of attention to him. Yes indeed, this was proving to be a great idea.

Across the restaurant at a table which was poorly lighted sat a weasel looking man. He was impeccably dressed and was as unobtrusive as Higgins. He also had the same objective as Higgins. That was to have a meal and for no one to remember he was here. He had an altogether different reason. He robbed the hotel patrons and he had sized up Higgins as an out of state oaf who would be easy pickings. He squinted and looked across the room. It would not be long. It looked like the big oaf was nearly finished. The man tugged at the cuff on his jacket and felt the stiletto that was in it's holster strapped to his arm. The man had never had to actually use the knife. Just brandishing it had always been enough. He was an expert in choosing his victims. He had never encountered one who tried to resist. He no longer even thought about what he would do if that ever happened.

Higgins picked up his check and began digging in his pocket for tip money. The man did the same. He wanted to get ahead of the intended victim.

Higgins waited his turn to pay. He didn't give a second look at the man in front of him. He was thinking about getting back to his room and getting some sleep. Sleep did not come easy for Higgins and he didn't want to lose this rare opportunity.

Moments later, Higgins approached the door to his room. An untrained ear would probably never have heard the soft footsteps behind him. Higgins turned his head slightly and caught a glimpse of the figure coming up quickly behind him. He made a half step which gave

the appearance of slightly stumbling. The results being that the attacker was closer much quicker than he expected. He reached for the knife but had only begun to pull it from his sleeve when Higgins' massive fist slammed into his throat. Higgins dumped the body in a trash chute where it plunged several stories into a huge trash receptacle. That was removed early the next morning long before any offending odor had time to develop. The body was never found.

Nicholas checked himself in the mirror one last time. Satisfied he could do no more, he went to the door and left for the dinner engagement. He had many mixed emotions. He was anxious to visit with Deborah and Timothy but his instincts were waving like a red flag. Something was very wrong and he couldn't get zeroed in on it. Normally, by now, he was sure of what had happened and only had to find the proof. This one was flying all over the place and he knew it was because of Deborah and Timothy, mostly Deborah. He got in the car, gave Calvin the address and sat back. He could hardly wait.

Timothy watched as Erica picked up discarded clothes. He wondered for the thousandth time why she didn't let the maid do that.

"I'll probably be late. This is an important meeting." She didn't answer. Timothy watched for a moment trying to decide if she was even listening. He started to say something else, decided against it, arose from the chair and left the house. As he drove, he redirected his thoughts. He wasn't all that anxious for this little party. He knew about how it would go. At first, they would be reserved. A few drinks and they would be more relaxed and finally eager to relive the past and catch up on old times. He smiled. He certainly wouldn't object to that. Deborah could make old times worth reliving. He frowned. Nicholas, however, was a different matter. A cop, of all things and investigating a murder in the hospital where Deborah is chief surgeon. As he listened to the facts about the case

he had been stunned. It appeared that the murder had most assuredly taken place in Memorial. Before the interviews were over he had been sure Nicholas would arrest someone. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion. But it had not happened and Timothy was as confused as Nicholas seemed to be. Of course, it had been years since he had even seen Nicholas. He might not have been confused at all. Perhaps, he only gave that appearance. Cops had all kinds of techniques. Many of them liked to appear to be goofy as hell. It threw the suspects off guard, made them think they were safe as long as this bozo was doing the investigation. Timothy smiled. He had dealt with cops and their various tricks for years. He thought he had seen them all. Then he had sat there for hours with Nicholas and didn't have a clue. He couldn't read Nicholas at all. After tonight he might have a better idea but he really didn't think so. It was going to be quite an experience.

Deborah made one more last minute adjustment to her makeup. She had surprised herself making such a fuss over her appearance. She stood and looked herself over in the mirror. She smiled. She wanted the boys to think she had not lost a thing and it did not appear that she had.

It had been quite a surprise, their meeting like that. She could have played 'guess what' for a century and never guessed that one. There they were, Nicholas the cop, Timothy the lawyer and she, the doctor. Nicholas had one expression through out the entire interview....perplexed. He acted like he never did quite get a grasp of the situation. Not like him, as she remembered. Perhaps, this cop routine had dulled his senses. She was flabbergasted. Why was he a cop? It had been the main reason she wanted to get together with them. A multimillionaire turned cop?? It was the beginning for a good novel. She checked again and everything seemed to be perfect. She was a stunning knockout, even if she thought so herself. She picked up her

purse and glanced at the answering machine. More messages since the last time she had looked. She had not returned those calls nor even listened to them for that matter. She really wasn't interested and William knew that. She wondered why he even bothered with calling. That had been resolved long ago. She didn't waste her time and she wondered why he did. It seemed that a United States Senator could find ways to entertain himself. That had certainly never been a problem. It should not be one now. She went out of the room, out of the house and into the waiting car.

They came from opposite directions and as if they were tied to a string, they arrived within minutes of one another. Nicholas was first and only had time to walk to the large window and look out at the view of the city. Minutes later, Deborah came in. They rushed to each other and embraced. Nicholas did not want to release her and in those few seconds, Timothy arrived. They all stood in the center of the room, hugging and shaking hands. The chance for an intimate verbal exchange was gone. Finally, they separated. Nicholas and Timothy began to mix a drink for themselves. Deborah called room service and checked that everything was ready. They decided to relax in front of the huge window and talk awhile. They all were anxious to hear about the others. Nicholas and Timothy outvoted her and she would go first. She began.

Not much had happened immediately after they had gone their separate ways. She plunged into her work and quickly became the star of the surgery team. Not long afterwards, she specialize in transplants and soon was one of the world's most successful in that field. 'Replacement parts' they were called, although not within earshot of an outsider. Most recipients would not be happy to hear of their only chance to live being spoken of so callously. It was an incredibly lucrative specialty. She was quite wealthy. Then came the first surprise. She and Timothy had not completely lost touch. "Strictly business," Timothy had quickly interjected. He had watched

for Nicholas' reaction but he could not detect that there had been one. Deborah had quickly learned that the IRS was going to have all of her money if she did not take drastic steps to prevent it. She had called Timothy for advice and he had been able and willing to help. Her money was safely sequestered in tax havens all over the world. Now, she and not the IRS would reap the benefits of her work. Timothy nodded in agreement and both were anxious to get off the subject. It was obvious to Nicholas that they were doing a bit more than hustle a few bucks offshore. He could have cared less. He was a businessman before he was a cop. He had more money stashed in tax havens than either of them could imagine. It was a wonder that they had not run into each other while making the transfers.

Then Deborah sprang her second surprise. She had married William Payne. Senator William Payne, no less. That, in itself, was no great shake but the Senator was twice Deborah's age. Nicholas had a fleeting thought of long ago and wondered how the old SOB was still alive. He and Deborah must be sleeping in separate states, otherwise he would not be alive. He decided it was too soon to make chancy remarks so he said nothing. There was a moment of silence while Deborah and Timothy looked at him, obviously expecting him to say something. Finally, he said he had no idea she had married and congratulated her. Deborah paused, looked out the window and was apparently deciding if she wanted to tell more. They all sipped their drinks, trying not to act like they did not notice. Finally, Deborah added, "He is busy in spite of the fact that most American's think their representatives never do jackshit. Notice I didn't say they actually accomplish anything or do anything constructive. I just said he was busy." They all laughed. "His profession and mine are not harmonious with a family life and more so with me in New York and he in D.C." It was all she would say and Nicholas knew she was answering the suspicion he already had. It was the only thing that had kept William Payne alive. Deborah was saying something else but Nicholas was not hearing.

He was thinking. "What had she been doing all these years? Who had she been doing, he meant. Why did he let her go? All these years, it could have been him."

"Nicholas, over here." He blinked and looked around. She was standing at the bar. "Do you want another drink or are you two ready for dinner?"

"Let's eat," they said in unison.

It was truly a feast. Everything was delicious and their mood became much more festive. They shared amusing stories about their experiences. Doctor, lawyer and cop experiences would always generate amusing stories. Finally, they finished and made their way back to the sitting area in front of the huge window. They looked at Deborah and waited for her to continue. It had not been clear if she was finished. She concluded, "I wish I had more to tell but I'm sure you don't want to hear a vivid description of an operation. My life is simple outside the operating room. So simple in fact, I don't mind doing the extra transplant in the evening. It beats going to an empty apartment." She took a drink and added, "Of course, this is the life I wanted and it is just as well the apartment is empty. A couple of years of my schedule and anyone would take a hike. The same goes for William." That was it. She said no more except to pass the baton. She wiggled her finger back and forth at them and said, "Who's next?" When neither said anything she let her finger stop on Timothy.

"Well, after my moment of fame things really took off. I was doing what we always talked about doing, making a shitpot of money. I've been fortunate. I've worked hard but things have come my way. I like to think I took advantage of the opportunities but I have never had a shortage of opportunities. My life, personal that is, has been a bit more conventional than Deborah's. A wife and kids in the suburbs. There is really nothing more to say about it. I guess in many respects, my.....er.....shall we say arrangement is not much different from Deborah's. I've wondered if I never showed up again how

long it would be before any of them noticed. Discounting the money, of course. If the money stopped they would notice right away."

They all chuckled and took a drink so they could think about that. William Payne had no idea of the extent of Deborah's wealth. Of course, he could and did get by very well on his Senator's pay, not to mention the millions he received in kickbacks and bribes. So, if Deborah disappeared all he would miss would be her not joining him at the many gala events he attended. On the other hand, were he to disappear, Deborah would miss absolutely nothing.

Timothy continued, "I suppose I shouldn't complain. I wanted to be a rich lawyer and I am one. Deborah wanted to be a rich doctor and she is one." Simultaneously, they looked at Nicholas. It was obviously his turn.

He wondered why he felt nervous. Of all the people in the world, he should not be concerned about confiding with them. "I was well on my way before we graduated, as you know. Things got better and better, money wise, that is. I married but when I had an identity crisis or whatever the TV shrinks call it these days I didn't handle it too well. I wasn't getting any satisfaction from running my company any more so I put it in capable hands and joined the police department. My wife wanted to be married to a millionaire which I still was but somehow a cop millionaire didn't fit her image. Anyway, for whatever the reason that marriage ended. I married again and again the cop thing got in the way. Funny thing, but we still see each other and the cop thing is not a problem. Of course, not being around all the time does make it easier for all her friends to do whatever they do that they don't want me to know about. That was the problem. Her friends didn't like having a cop around." He waited a moment to see if they asked any questions. He was hoping they did not so he could end his personal story. He was surprised he could summarize his life so quickly. However, that was also the case for both of them. "My biggest regret

is that the three of us didn't stay together. I can see now that we could have. We could have found a way."

Timothy added, "I've thought about that myself. We just let it happen."

Deborah said, "I've wondered if we just wanted a little space for a little while and a little while turned into years. That does have a way of happening."

"We're not the first, I've learned," Timothy said. "It seems that is usually the case, unless they go in business together and then one will kill the other." They laughed.

Deborah looked from one to the other, "There's nothing we can do to change it but I realize now how much I've missed you guys." They toasted their glasses in agreement and were quiet for a moment. Deborah continued, "I thought this would take all night. Not that I have that much to tell about myself but I was expecting you two could go on forever."

Nicholas said, "I could talk about my business but fact is you were there when it started and nobody wants to hear about every nut, bolt and screw. That's what it would be and my personal life is certainly nothing to write home about. All I can say is I wish I could change it."

The conversation took a more lighthearted turn. A few minutes more of reflecting on their personal lives and they all would be hopelessly sunk into the dumps. They were able to turn the tide with more anecdotes from their career experiences.

Later in the evening, Timothy instigated a slight change in the subject. "We've told all the stories where we came out a winner. I'm wondering how funny are the ones that nailed us." Deborah and Nicholas looked at him but said nothing. This was his idea so he could be first. He got the hint. "You know, like I've had a few cases where my client was guilty as hell but withheld information from me. One guy's prints were the only ones on the murder weapon, for example. The

prosecutor was on a long losing streak to me and he managed to keep that choice bit of information buried in unimportant papers. I was overconfident and didn't pay attention. After all, this guy had not given me any reason to be concerned about his abilities. He had never demonstrated that he had any." They laughed. "So, I didn't read the discoveries thoroughly and I missed it. He popped me in the courtroom with the fingerprints. It took some dancing but I managed to put the fault on my client. He got twenty-five years but he deserved it for being so stupid."

Deborah interrupted, "I thought all your clients were guilty as hell. You make it sound like every once in a while there is actually an innocent one."

Timothy joined in the laughter even though it was at his expense. He placed his finger along side his jaw and looked thoughtfully out the window. "By jove, I do believe you are right. They all have been guilty as hell."

Nicholas was having a hard time laughing. He had seen too many vicious killers freed by the manipulations of lawyers. Guilt or innocence was not an issue in the courtroom. Manipulating the system was. Nicholas could tell they were about to get into it. Timothy would say the cops and prosecutors didn't do their jobs and allowed the guilty to go free according to the law. Nicholas would counter with the abuse of meaningless technicalities. In the end, they would be fighting mad and nothing would change. It would be far better to take this in another direction.

Timothy sensed that as well. He never passed up the opportunity to bash a cop but this time he would. Sooner or later, he would confront Nicholas in the courtroom. It was a thousand wonders that it had not already happened. For a moment, Timothy visualized that event. There had never been a cop that he didn't take apart on the stand. Even the ones that had an air tight case were left in a shadow of doubt. It was usually all he needed to gain the upper hand. Timothy

turned to Deborah. "When something goes bad for me, my guy is looking at ten to twenty with time off for good behavior. When something goes bad for you, your guy is looking at death."

"Not too funny when that happens," she said. "Of course, I've had my share of unsuccessful operations. However, I can add that I've never lost one who had even the slightest chance for survival. In fact, I've pulled more back from the grave than I've lost to it. The only reason I have a few losses is that I took the patient when no one else would. A few times they were already dead when I took the case. Not many of those made it but the ones that did made me famous." She let the guys think about and then continued, "Of course, there is usually a bit of humor in the most serious surgery and believe it or not, it comes from the patient. Hardly, a transplant goes by that the male patient does not ask for an additional transplant that will leave him more well endowed, if you know what I mean."

Timothy and Nicholas stared at her, wide-eyed. Timothy haltingly asked, "You....can.....do.....that? I mean a guy can get a bigger...."

"No, goofy," Deborah said. "I meant when a patient is at the brink of death, about to undergo a surgery they will probably not survive and the last thing they think about before they go under is getting a bigger....."

"That wouldn't be the last thing they thought of," Nicholas interrupted. "They've been thinking of that for years and this is the first and probably last chance to do anything about it. I don't blame them at all."

"Me neither," Timothy added. "In fact, if it can really be done I'd like to get on the list."

"Recipient or donor?" Nicholas asked.

"We go way back. Remember I have seen you in the shower."

They both looked at Deborah. She stuck a finger in each ear. "No way, you're getting me in this conversation."

"Clinically speaking, Deborah. How would you rate....."

She started humming and pressed her fingers deeper into her ears. "I can't hear you," she sang out.

They fell silent and slowly she took her fingers out of her ears. A second later, Timothy asked, "Do you ever do that kind of transplant?"

"No, no, a thousand times, no. I wish to hell I'd never brought it up."

"I think you're missing out on the real money. What would I give for a liver or a lung? A million? For that! Ten million, at least!"

"Easily," Nicholas added. "He's right, Deborah. You should seriously consider this."

Deborah fell back and pointed her index finger at her temple. "Bang," she said.

They decided to give it up. They all got up and made themselves another drink. Now, back in front of the window, they were silently searching for another subject.

Finally, Timothy asked, "How about you, Nicholas? Surely something funny must happen in the cop world."

"It's kind of depressing. I'd never really thought about it but everything that happens seems to be bad. Bad for someone. I'd never realized how little humor there is in my life. When we bring down a bad guy something bad had already happened to a good guy." He was silent for a moment and Timothy wished he had never brought it up. Nicholas continued, "We've done drug raids on the wrong house a few times. Always seem to catch a couple in the act. It can ruin the mood to suddenly be staring down the muzzle of a dozen automatic weapons. The guys will always laugh about the looks on their faces and how long it will be before the guy can try again but we seem to always miss the house number by two and the real target next door is alerted by all the commotion and they escape. Bottom line is that's really not funny."

"It would be funny to see those looks. Do you ever take pictures?"

"You of all people should know better. That would be proof and we always get our asses sued off anyway without furnishing proof."

Actually, Timothy did know. He had taken two of those cases and the settlements had been huge. He was fishing for a little information for when the next one came along. If he could subpoena photos, well, they would be priceless in negotiating a settlement. He couldn't tell if Nicholas caught on to him or not.

Deborah asked, "How about the ones that got away" Do you have any unsolved cases?"

"More than I like to admit. I have the best solve rate in the department. It's not a secret that I do spend some of my own money and I work double hours to achieve that rate. If I were not rich it wouldn't be that good. I'd be right back in the pack. But I have the money and I'll hire some outside expertise to bust a case. I have lots of consultants. For example, my ex-wife is a computer specialist and she will work a job if a computer will help solve it. Sometimes it will. The Department could never afford those kind of fees. But to answer your question, they do get away. I always think about those, sometimes for years. Seldom does it do any good. I don't count a drug dealer doing another drug dealer. Or a pimp doing another pimp. I don't even bother to investigate. As far as I'm concerned they helped us out. Many people will say with one dead and another convicted and in prison, there are two gone. I'd rather leave the live one out there to either kill again or be killed. Don't have to furnish room and board."

Deborah was stunned to hear him say it. Timothy was fidgeting. This was close to his area of criminal defense. He was wondering whether Nicholas actually drew the line to allow someone else to eliminate the perpetrator or doing it himself. Nicholas stared out the window. "This one is puzzling." He was really talking to himself. For another second, he was silent.

Finally, Deborah broke the silence. She glanced at her watch. "I've got the perfect ending for our evening. I've been thinking about it since we planned to meet." She opened her hand to reveal a coin. "What do you say? Heads, it's Nicholas. Tails, it's Timothy." The guys smiled and nodded. She tossed the coin.

A while later, Timothy glanced at the closed bedroom door and then looked back out the window. He sipped his drink. He held the coin between his fingers and slowly turned it in the light. He tossed it a few times and it came up heads and tails. He gazed back out the window. "After all these years and she still can make a goddamn coin come up heads every time.

## CHAPTER 8

Nicholas was bent over his desk, intently shuffling paper. He appeared to be the busiest person in the room but actually wasn't even seeing the paper he was holding. He was still in the throes of the night with Deborah. He had tried every technique he ever knew to try to prolong his time with her. Now he was thinking of ways to be with her again. All those years, gone, irretrievably lost. He would not duplicate that mistake. He was giddy with the thought. He was silently humming and basking in the glow when he became aware of a presence. He cut his eyes upward as far as he could without moving his head. It was enough that allowed him to see the hands that could belong to no one but Bartholomew Higgins. Nicholas scribbled a notation on the paper in front of him and without looking up said, "Mr. Higgins. A timely visit indeed. I need to talk to you."

Higgins was taken aback. He had purposely approached to see how close he could get before Vaughn became aware of him. It never hurt to test your skills. He could not see that Vaughn had cut his eyes upward. All he could see was his head had not moved. He also did not know that Vaughn could identify him a block away by his hands, fingers and forearms. Higgins mentally filed the bit of information that Vaughn had a little sixth sense.

Nicholas made another meaningless notation, purposely keeping Higgins waiting. When he did look up, he had the distinct impression that Higgins could have stood there, patiently waiting all day.....without moving. It caused Nicholas to lose his advantage. He stammered slightly and was forced to point at the chair, indicating for Higgins to have a seat. He sat down and stared unwaveringly at Nicholas. The detective had indicated he had something to say and Higgins was forcing him to say it. The silence grew longer. Again, Nicholas lost his advantage. Again, he knew the man could and would sit there for hours, waiting.

Nicholas leaned back and tapped the edge of his desk with a pencil, trying to look like he knew something that he really didn't know. From Higgins' expression he didn't know if it was working or not. Finally, in his mind, he conceded this was not working. Higgins was, indeed, a tough nut to crack.

"Mr. Higgins, some things are happening in our fair city that are not good. Not good, at all." He waited and then winced inwardly. Higgins had not blinked nor so much as twitched a muscle. "People are being murdered at an alarming rate and in a gruesome fashion." He had not intended to wait again.

Higgins spoke before Nicholas could continue. "According to what we see on TV, I don't know how you would know."

"Despite what you see on TV, we are not a bunch of complete idiots."

"Neither are we," Higgins responded quickly, having perfectly set up Nicholas for that one.

"Yeah well," Nicholas stammered, "I'm not playing games, Mr. Higgins. These incidents literally reek of a vigilante. I'd hope you were not the type of person that would think ridding New York City of it's least desirable inhabitants would in some fashion atone for the loss of your daughter. Not to mention, those people were not responsible for her death."

"You are right on all counts," Higgins agreed.

They stared at each other. This was really getting on Nicholas' nerves. The man knew exactly what to say or more precisely, what not to say. He was not going to trip up himself. Nicholas would have to settle with terse warnings. Nicholas had already conceded they would be ineffectual. Nicholas didn't know all the details but he had surmised that this guy had walked through the valley of the shadow of death. He would not be intimidated by a cop.

After an uncomfortable silence, Higgins said, "What I came up here for was to find out what was happening on my daughter's case. You

said you would keep me advised. Actually, I haven't heard from you since the last time I was in your office. When I do come back, I get this." Higgins' stare was penetrating. Nicholas wished he would go away. "All I asked for was a report on your progress."

Nicholas thought he was going to say, 'If there was any progress' but he didn't. Now, Nicholas was forced to say, "There has been no progress." He squirmed in his chair. Then added, "I'm sorry to say." Nicholas almost slapped the top of his desk. How could this guy do this so effectively.

For an instant, Nicholas detected a crack in his armor. Higgins' head dropped slightly and he gulped. In the next split second he regained control. Nicholas knew they would be sitting here this time tomorrow if he didn't get the guy out of his office. "I didn't contact you because there is nothing to report." Now Nicholas was blinking. "And mostly because I didn't want to have to tell you that." For the next split second, the men silently bonded. For that split second they coexisted in the same space. Then they returned to their positions. "I'll share my insights but I can't compromise the case."

"We are not at odds. I want this case solved and the killer brought to justice. I would never do anything to jeopardize that."

"I know you wouldn't intentionally. But I have seen cases where the relatives of victims were not as under control as they thought. It is easy to sit here and think you are but with a known suspect, however lame the evidence may be, it is not so easy. The compulsion to run out and confront someone is nearly overwhelming. Sometimes that compulsion is to kill them. I don't have to tell you what a sordid mess that is. Then, we get into an interdepartmental investigation as to how the relative even obtained this information and next thing, someone is standing on my fingers. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Higgins? Right now everyone is your friend and sympathizer and is working hard. Do the wrong thing and suddenly you're a bad guy and nobody wants to be your friend."

"I'm here to listen to whatever you say. Nothing more."

Nicholas eyed him carefully. He seemed to be sincere but Nicholas also knew the man was dying inside. He would do anything to get his hands on his daughter's killer. Nicholas idly tapped the folder but stopped when he noticed Higgins' eyes were on the folder. Nicholas picked it up and opened it. It was woefully thin. He was sure there was nothing in the folder that Higgins could not know. There was nothing in the folder that the whole world couldn't know. There was just about nothing in the folder. "I had a clue that led to a hospital....Memorial...where your daughter worked. It looked good and I'll be honest with you, I thought it would be solved in hours, certainly no more than a couple of days. Now, I have all kinds of doubts. I can't put together a scheme that includes Memorial but leads elsewhere. Of course, there are ways but nothing logical. So. I considered ways that Memorial was not involved but could be made to look like they were. That's not hard to do but the list of suspects goes up astronomically. I've made quite a few interviews at Memorial and my most likely scenario seems to be in shambles. I think I can share that with you. I was sure some doctors had done something experimental and it had gotten out of hand. Maybe not even that complicated. A routine surgery that went bad and they tried to salvage something.....," he let the sentence drop when he realized he was about to say something that would be devastating for Higgins to hear. He looked at Higgins and as he expected, Higgins' expression had not changed. "However, none of this works after I completed the interviews. I think you'll agree that every doctor and nurse cannot be in on a conspiracy. That's what it would take. That will give you an idea of my dilemma."

"My daughter's kidneys were removed. It seems to be quite obvious. Somebody needed a kidney. Or two somebody's needed a kidney. They took my daughter's and gave them to the highest bidder."

"It doesn't work that way. There is a list and they go by that list so there will be no charges of what you just said."

"You are very naive if you believe that, especially for a New York City detective."

"And you've been watching too many made for TV movies," Nicholas countered.

"I can quote plenty of statistics to the contrary. But you have to have an open mind to see that the facts speak for themselves."

"Let's suppose you are right, just for the sake of argument. That does not eliminate the conspiracy problems. Too many doctors and nurses would have to be involved. I don't think that can happen."

"Do you have any idea how much money is involved here?" Reluctantly, Nicholas shook his head negatively. "It's as good as a pro athlete's contract. Staying alive doesn't have a price tag especially if the one trying to stay alive is rich."

"On what are you basing your assumption?"

"A few observations on who gets transplants and how quick they get them and their occupations."

"I think even the village idiot could figure out who you're talking about but I don't think you can base everything on two coincidental cases."

"You can base it on anything when even your conversation is biased. Why did you include the word 'coincidental'?"

"That's what it is until proven otherwise."

"That's not the way it works in the real world. What is it with you, Detective? Who are you covering for?"

Nicholas reddened and clinched his fists at the insinuation. Slowly, he let the words sink in. Could he be doing that? Was he ignoring something because Deborah was on the staff? He didn't think so but Higgins' words were ringing in his ears. "To show you I'm a fair minded man, Mr. Higgins, I'll take your idea under advisement and

give it fair consideration. I don't want you to think what I know you are already thinking."

"Thank you for leaving no stone unturned."

"We never do. Some times the stone turning seems excruciatingly slow but I never shortchange a case. I'll admit sometimes I have to go on to another case and sometimes another after that but the first one stays on my mind and sooner or later, the pieces fall in place. Justice will be served." Nicholas knew he was sounding like a travel brochure but he hoped he was giving Higgins some assurance. Higgins was keeping all the symptoms well covered but Nicholas knew he was a simmering volcano, about to blow. One would be well advised not to be flying overhead when it happened.

"I'm glad we had this visit. It makes me feel better. I know you guys are covered up and you do the best you can. Unfortunately, it's small consolation for the grieving parent. I've never felt so helpless and I've been in some helpless situations. However, burying my child was not one of those situations."

"Now would be the time that I would say, 'I know how you must feel' but it would be insulting for me to say that. Hell, I don't know how you feel. I can't even imagine how you feel. I do sympathize with you and all I can offer is to do my best to see that justice is served. Even that has a hollow ring because justice can never be served. The only justice would be for the killer to die and your child to be returned to life."

"I can see you have put some thought into it."

"So many times you can't imagine. There again it is a meaningless statement. If this happened to millions of people it would have no lessening effect on your grief."

"You've really put some thought into it."

"All I want you to know is I care about what happened and I'll do everything I can to solve the crime."

"I guess a man can't ask for more than that." Higgins stared at the floor for several seconds and Nicholas waited, giving him every opportunity to say whatever he wanted. Finally, Higgins looked up, stood up and extended his hand. "Thanks for your time. It makes me feel better to talk to you."

Nicholas took his hand and even though he knew what to expect, he was still surprised by the man's hands. Nicholas was quite sure his hand could be crushed off by Higgins' grip. He had a vision of the recent homicides and the manner of their deaths. It still didn't feel right. Higgins was not the type to go on a killing spree in search of vengeance. Well, maybe a killing spree but not random street thugs. Nicholas thought he was entirely capable of extracting revenge but only from the killer. Still, Nicholas had a feeling and he was seldom wrong.

Higgins released his hand, turned and was gone. Nicholas waited until he was out of sight, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and tried to visualize how the street killings could have occurred. For an instant, he knew he should be focusing this attention on Amy Higgins' murder.

A while later, Nicholas was leaving the station. The only way he could figure Higgins was responsible for the street killings would be for Higgins to be roaming the streets and doing so in the most dangerous places. It just didn't figure. Why would he be in alleys instead of staying on the sidewalks. Even if the man was prowling everywhere, he could stay in lighted areas. Even the idiots knew that plus Higgins had absolutely nothing to gain by cruising alleys and dark streets. His daughter's case would not be solved in such a manner.

Nicholas checked and Calvin was pulling into position to arrive in front of the building at the instant Nicholas arrived at the foot of the stairs. All Nicholas had to do was stick out his hand and the door handle would be in it. One day he would have to remember to ask how he did that. But for now, he had more important things on his mind. At

the spur of the moment he had called Deborah and asked if she would meet him at a hotel for a drink and.....he had intentionally trailed off the sentence to see how she would respond. "That too," she had said quietly. It had taken much longer than either of them had anticipated. It was late and they were still in bed.

"Why did you marry William Paine? Nicholas asked suddenly.

"I hate to admit it but it was business." Nicholas said nothing but turned his head and looked at her. They were sharing a pillow. She continued, "My reputation as a transplant specialist was made. I was making money but it was far from my expectations. Since I had nothing to measure against I don't know how I had expectations but whatever they were, I wasn't making enough. First, I started hearing rumors, then I started getting inquiries. It seems the Japanese are willing to pay quite handsomely for the ability to prolong their lives. What I needed was an avenue and most unexpectedly, I found one. I was at a party. It was the rich, famous and infamous. There were more than a few Orientals in attendance who I later learned were Japanese. They were heavy contributors to the president, I also later learned. They were collecting the rewards of their illegal contributions or bribe money as it's sometimes called.

"I know about that, in spite of network television's efforts to cover up the crimes of their fair-haired boy."

"Television's conspiracy to elect and cover-up the most corrupt administration in history is the crime of the century but that's a whole different story." She turned slightly so she could see him. Nicholas continued to stare at the ceiling. She went on, "The little Nips were somewhat shy about broaching the subject and I didn't have a clue that they wanted to. What was there was some big time rich Japanese who had parents or sometimes even themselves who were in desperate need of a transplant. My reputation preceeded me. Here was a hope, a possible solution but they didn't know how to initiate a

meeting. Or maybe they didn't know how I would respond. There was nothing in the bribe handbook on organ transplant."

"I don't see why it was such a problem. If I went to Japan and I wanted something, I'd ask. Do you do, 'whatever'? If yes, we would proceed. If no, I'd ask someone else."

"It's not like it was directions to the subway. They look at things differently."

"They'll bribe the President of the United States but they won't ask about medical treatment," Nicholas said incredulously. "Two atomic bombs were definitely not enough. We should have dropped forty or fifty."

Deborah ignored him and went on, "They preferred an intermediary. Unknown to me at the time, William was the President's link to Japan. He was making the deals and making the arrangements. The money was flying into the President's campaign funds and from there into his pockets. Actually, the First Lady manages the funds. The President has to unzip his pants to give his brain some air so she takes care of the money. Most of the insiders think when his term is up, she will dump his sorry butt, take all those millions they've squirreled away and disappear." She stopped a minute to get herself back on the subject. "So, William was tight with the Japs. It was working well for them. They didn't have to stick their necks out. Well, after the party they approached William about approaching me."

"Sneaky Jap is not exactly an inaccurate description."

"That started with the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. It has nothing....."

"They were sneaky then and they're sneaky now. I'm thinking sixty or, maybe seventy A-bombs."

"You're keeping me off the subject. I thought you wanted to hear this."

He nodded in agreement and she went on, "William did ask me. I saw no problem. If they wanted to pay for our facilities, let them."

There are no restrictions on international medical treatment. Americans routinely go abroad to seek treatment with medicines and techniques that are disallowed by the FDA. If I thought there was something I needed, I wouldn't hesitate. So, let them come here and pay. After that meeting, William and I had lots of meetings. Lots of dinners and first thing I know, he asked me. I still don't know what I was thinking. He's okay but we should not be married. He likes being seen with me. All his friends are envious. Young, a famous surgeon, you get the picture. And now, I'm becoming acquainted with some Japanese who are in dire need of my medical expertise and they have deep pockets. Mine and William's relationship is a match made in a bank vault."

"What is he getting out of this, besides you?" Nicholas asked.

"That's all. He has his own deals with the illegal contributions. His pockets are lined so he doesn't feel he has to take part of mine. It was enough to get me on the inside with the Japanese. He likes to be a mover and shaker. If somebody wants something to happen, get William Paine. He likes that reputation. I'd rather be out of the glare and get the money. But we all have our own preferences. I should be glad. William just keeps making the introductions and I keep making the money."

Nicholas was growing a bit tired of this story. He wondered how it all came to be but he had not counted on all the details. He had a mental picture of Deborah and William Paine. He did not want to have that mental picture. He threw off the sheet, sat up and looked at Deborah. Now, he had eliminated William Paine from his mental picture.

She held out her arms. "It's good to know some things never change. In fact, a few get better and better."

He eased into her arms. "And better and better," he repeated.

Bartholomew Higgins looked at the sandwich and frowned. He had taken a bite from three sides and it had not gotten any better. He

carefully peeled back a slice of bread and studied the insides. It had sounded much better than it tasted. He pulled open the second slice of bread. Whatever was making the thing taste like horse shit was not evident. It had to be one of the well advertised 'secret ingredients'. He looked at the condiments on the edge of the plate. He had never seen anything like them and had no idea what they were. He doubted they belonged to a real food group. He longed for a big chunk of barbecue or a chicken fried steak. Now he knew why so many New Yorkers kept their eyes closed. They didn't want to see what they were eating. Now if he could only figure out how to keep from smelling the stuff. Suddenly, he was aware. Slowly, he raised his gaze from the sandwich to the dining area. A low grumble rolled out of his throat. Everyone in the place was watching him. He placed the sandwich on the plate and brought the coffee cup to his lips. He sipped and looked back at the customers. It sure didn't take much to entertain these people when they would watch someone not eat a sandwich. Higgins picked out the most fearsome looking person in the diner and stared openly at him. In seconds, the man looked away, refused to look back at Higgins and turned his attention back to his own uneaten food. Higgins continued to stare at him and soon everyone was looking at their own plate. Higgins looked at the waitress. She was standing near the register, busily studying her fingernails. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Higgins decided to not press his luck. Sooner or later, he would make a mistake and Detective Vaughn would be all over him. He could not continue to make a practice of cleaning up New York City. He looked around the room. Why did he draw muggers like cow dung drew flies. He guessed they could spot an out of townner from a mile away. That was certainly the case back in Sagebrush Flats, Texas. "Of course, we don't look to rob or kill every stranger that comes through," he thought.

He was suddenly weary. He looked at his watch. He needed to sleep awhile. It would hone his senses. It was a lesson he learned

long ago. He slid out of the booth and walked quickly to the register. He was taking the money from his pocket as he approached. He handed too much money to the waitress who's eyes were glued on him. He leaned closer as she took the money and said so only she could hear, "Who ever follows me, tell them not too." He closed his hand over hers as she took the money. Her eyes widened when she felt the size of his hand and instinctively knew the strength that was within them. His fingers looked like the bread sticks she served. She looked into his eyes but saw nothing. Higgins' face was an unreadable mask. He walked quickly out of the diner. As the door was closing, two men who had not sat together, rose simultaneously and walked toward the register. As they dug bills from their pockets, the waitress pretended to be looking at the order pad she was holding and said under her breath, "Let that one go, fellows. I don't want to lose two customers and trust me....I would."

The men stared silently at her. They finally looked at each other and returned slowly to their seats. Higgins walked as fast as he could without running. He glanced back every few seconds and swung out wide at every alley. If they were waiting in ambush, at least they would have to lunge for him. It would be all the warning he would need. His hotel was only half of a block away. They had not followed. They must have heeded the warning. He relaxed and thought of the much needed sleep he would get. After the rest, he would make his move. No matter what he thought, Detective Vaughn was about to get some help on this case.

Higgins awoke with a start but his training kicked in and he did not so much as twitch a muscle. His eyes opened but he did not blink. If he had been camouflaged for his environment there would not have been a single movement to reveal his position. Higgins stared at the ceiling. He had impressed himself. He thought those instincts were long forgotten. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He flexed his huge fingers. His mind was already fixing on the task at

hand. He dressed carefully although there was nothing about his attire that required special attention. It was as non-descript as he could make it. That was also part of his plan. To blend in, not be noticed, not be remembered. So far, that had not been so easy to do. For some reason, he was very noticeable, at least, to certain people.

He finished dressing and stood before the mirror. He looked like everyone else out there on the sidewalk. He thought so, anyway. He put the supplies in his pocket, took a deep breath and left the room. Moments later, he was in the pedestrian traffic moving effortlessly through the crowd, toward Memorial Hospital.

He went up the stairs and once inside, he looked quickly all about. In a second, he spotted two nurses going to the employee entrance. He judged their speed and in one step was in time with them. They arrived at the door just ahead of Higgins. They opened the door and went through. Again, he waited until the door was almost closed before pulling it open and stepping through. The nurses were already down the hall. They did not look back to see who had entered. So far, he had blended perfectly. He took a lab jacket, slipped it on and followed them down the hall. He was confident he would not be noticed until he was on the surgery floor. Only then would he have to do something stealthily to get to the new unoccupied section of the floor. There he would learn what was going on, of that, he was confident.

Now, he was approaching the elevators. This would require a bit of maneuvering. If one was the last to enter an elevator then they would be by necessity, the first to exit. This was not what he wanted. If he stepped out of the elevator and stopped or even hesitated, it would break the flow as the following passengers were forced to go around him. Someone would look back to scowl at the lost buffoon and they might remember. "Yes," they might recall. "I noticed this guy who acted like he didn't know where he was going." They would be asked, "Can you describe him?" A very small detail to be sure but one Higgins had not overlooked. He was in luck. A newspaper dispenser was

near the elevator doors. He could use it to time his entrance into the elevator. A thoughtful person held the door for him thereby placing him at the front and therefore the first to exit. He stopped in front of the dispenser and dug in his pocket. The thoughtful person released the door and it shut. Higgins stepped in front of the next set of doors and waited. Now, he would be at the back of the elevator. A moment later the door opened and Higgins stepped to the back of the cab. It was immediately filled with other passengers.

By the time it arrived at the surgery floor it was two-thirds empty. No one had turned to look at him but he knew it was human nature. He held his wrist up and looked at this watch. Just as that blocked a clear view of his face a nurse glanced at him while continuing to talk to her friend. Higgins frowned and lightly tapped the face of his watch. She looked away and appeared to pay no attention. The doors opened and they filed out all going to the left toward the occupied area of the floor. Higgins turned right and went straight to the utility closet. He did not look back. Inside, he changed the lab jacket for a jumpsuit. He grabbed a mop and a carry case of cleaning supplies. He stepped into the hall and went purposefully away from the occupied area. As he rounded the corner he glanced back. No one at the nurse's station appeared to have noticed him.

He found the gleaming surgery room and went inside. He turned on the light and looked around. He studied the layout, found the place he needed to be, snapped off the light and settled in to wait. He sat on the floor, his legs stretched out in front of him, his head resting against the wall. He was confident he would detect the slightest movement in the hall. In a few minutes he could feel the distinct vibration of the elevators. It came through the walls of the building and tingled the spot where his head rested lightly against the wall. His confidence rose even more. He closed his eyes and dozed lightly.

Higgins lost track of time. He resisted the urge to look at his watch. Long ago, he had learned it was better not to know how much time had passed. Sometimes, it made you careless. Just when you gave up and did something to reveal your position, something happened.

He kept the back of his head pressed gently to the wall and so it was when he felt the footsteps. He came to full alert. He hesitated a second longer and then he knew. Two people were coming. Walking together and quickly. Higgins visualized the layout of the room in his mind. He felt for the cleaning supplies and stepped across the room, feeling for the door knob he knew was there. His hand brushed it, he grasped it, opened the door and stepped inside. The door had tiny louvers which gave him an unobstructed view of the room. Inside was a big metal box which he presumed contained the power supply for some equipment. He had already scouted the room for a hideout in the event that something happened just as it was happening at this instant. The door opened and the light came on. Higgins sat on the box and peered through the louvers. He was surprised to see none other than Samuel Franklin and he was followed by a young, cute nurse. They looked in, stepped inside and shut the door. Higgins saw that he locked the door. Higgins moaned silently and rubbed his forehead. He knew what was in store. They had that look.

Franklin dimmed the bright lights and they stepped into each other's arms and began a passionate kiss. Without disengaging they began to disrobe themselves and each other.

Higgins rubbed his forehead again. "The best laid plans," he thought to himself. He looked back through the louvers. His plan had worked perfectly. Samuel Franklin was in the trap. "Allow for every contingency," they had always said. The unexpected will always happen," they had said. His trap had one too many in it. For now, he could think of nothing to do but wait.

With no more clothes to take off they finally broke, what Higgins thought must be, the world's longest kiss.

"Ever done it on a operating table, Samuel?" the nurse asked.

"That's why we came in here."

The nurse bound upon the table and held out her arms to Franklin. Higgins thought that her perfect positioning indicated this was not her first time on the operating table. Franklin did not seem to notice.

He also didn't think he would be called upon as much nor as long as the nurse required. "I hope you don't think you're through," the nurse said about thirty seconds after they started. Franklin mumbled something which Higgins couldn't hear but it hardly mattered. The nurse had lots of plans for Franklin. "I let you talk me into coming in here and you are going to make it worthwhile. So, get started." Franklin complied.

Then to everyone's surprise, Franklin again, became active. Franklin was very pleased with himself. The nurse was ecstatic. Higgins held his head in his hands. Encouraged by Franklin's unexpected revival, the nurse demanded even more attention. Finally, she glanced at the wall clock and said, "Twenty minutes to go, Sammykins. I can't stay off my shift any longer."

Higgins breathed a sigh of relief and though he could not tell, so did Samuel Franklin.

Now, Higgins was a clock watcher. Franklin could not see the clock but Higgins was willing to bet he was silently counting seconds. The nurse did not easily give up Franklin's attentions. In fact, she went three minutes over her time limit. After a sudden and energetic outburst, she collapsed. Franklin rolled his eyes upward, a thankful expression on his face.

The nurse thrust her legs straight into the air and rode an imaginary bicycle for a few seconds. Then she rolled off the table onto her feet. "This was great, Sammykins. We must do it again." She walked around the room, stopping to pick up her clothes and putting them on. Franklin crawled upon the table and breathed deeply. He did not answer the nurse. Higgins went on full alert. Was the guy going

to fall asleep? Although, any normal person would have to fall asleep after that, Higgins could not believe his good luck. The nurse was continuing to chatter endlessly and only after the second hesitation allowing for Franklin to say something, did she notice he had fallen asleep. She leaned over him and looked closely. She smiled. She looked up and down his nude body and said, "Not worth a second time, I don't think." In a few more minutes, she was out the door.

Higgins waited a full five minutes and when Franklin still had not moved, he carefully and silently opened the door, an inch at a time. He crossed the room and locked the door. He took the supplies from his pocket and eased up to the table. "What a bad ending to an otherwise perfect experience," he thought as he thrust his massive fingers down and encircled the sleeping man's throat. He squeezed and Franklin was instantly paralyzed from lack of oxygen, pain and when his bulging eyes focused on the figure looming over him, fear. He was totally incapacitated. Higgins had bound and gagged him before Franklin could react. While the man was still immobilized with fear, Higgins set about to completely restrain him. In seconds, it was done.

Higgins leaned over him. "What a pity to ruin an otherwise perfect tryst with the beautiful, insatiable nurse." Franklin closed his eyes and gulped against the gag which tightly bound his mouth. "We are going to have a talk. Actually, you are going to talk. Failure to do so will result in an unpleasant ending. Your memorable experience here will become your last experience. Of course, we don't want that to happen, especially you. So, give me a minute while I gather some persuaders and you would be well advised to get your mind in the right frame." Franklin looked at him with puzzled and pleading eyes. "Do not be concerned. You know what I am about to ask. Your concern should be whether you intend to divulge that information in a timely manner." Higgins went to a fully equipped surgical tray and began choosing various items. Franklin strained to see what he was doing. He was barely able to crane his neck enough to see his body. Only then

did he remember he was nude. He tried to scream through the gag. It only made a muffled moan. Not even enough to stop Higgins from picking more items from the surgery tray. Franklin thought he was going to faint. Suddenly, Higgins loomed over him again. "We had a theory when I was in Vietnam. Everyone wanted to know how to end the war. Well, our theory went like this. We would take Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon Johnson, take off all their clothes, give each one a long, sharp sword, lock them in a pitch black room and say, 'Who ever comes out alive, wins the war.' Now, it doesn't take much imagination to figure out what their major concern would be. It's not pleasant to imagine your most important parts dangling while the other guy is waving a sword. So, we figured some serious negotiations would be going on....and very fast. Some of the guys sent that suggestion to their congressman. A few months later they were all gone. It seems they were mysteriously assigned to the most dangerous missions. More like suicide missions. From then on, we kept our theories to ourselves. But I digress. My point is I have the equivalent of a sword." He picked up the gleaming scalpel. Franklin's eyes bulged. "I'm about to begin relieving you of body parts. We'll start out with the insignificant ones, painful but insignificant, nevertheless. But in a matter of minutes I'll be removing significant ones. Significant to you, of that you may be sure. As is usually the case, you control your own fate. Tell me what I want to know and escape unscathed. I'll ask one question and you will answer immediately. Don't answer or lie to me and something gets cut off. We are going fast so be ready and remember, I'm the one that must be convinced. Shall we begin?"

Franklin closed his eyes and tried not to think about what was about to happen to him. For a moment he wondered if the man would spare his life if he cooperated. Perhaps, he would. For another moment he had visions of escaping from what was not a desirable fate. Then, he had visions of what had happened. No way, would this man let him live. Now, he had another decision to make. Would he give up the

whole operation or would he suffer the consequences and let the secret die with him. He couldn't decide. He looked into the eyes of the man who was now staring at him. At that instant, Samuel Franklin knew he was going to die. He could die hard or die easy, but die he was going to do. Every man always wondered if he could take it where others could not. He decided to find out. The longer he stayed alive, the better chance he had of being discovered. He swallowed and closed his eyes.

Suddenly, his nostrils were pinched closed. He could not breathe. His eyes were now wide with fear. The man was daintily holding his nose with two fingers. The gag was tight enough that it allowed no air into his mouth. Franklin tried to twist his head. The man's hand was clamped to his head like a vise. He was going to suffocate. His brain was screaming for oxygen. He was screaming against the gag. Franklin's test of his manhood had not gone well. He was losing, not to pain but to fear.

Just as his vision was becoming blurred, the man spoke, "Pay attention when I'm talking to you. That means look at me. Perhaps, you are not taking your plight seriously enough." Higgins made no movement to release his grip. Franklin tried to thrash his body against the restraints. He was barely able to move. Higgins released his nose and Franklin sucked a huge breath into his lungs. Before he could exhale, Higgins pinched his nose shut again. Franklin thought his ears were going to explode. "See how uncomfortable this can be," Higgins said calmly. "Now, I expect cooperation." He released Franklin and stepped back. After a few rapid gulps of air Franklin was breathing normally. He looked at the man. He certainly wasn't going to close his eyes again. Higgins' eyes turned to icy orbs. His teeth were bared and he leaned close to Franklin's face. Franklin noticed he was now wearing thin rubber gloves. When did he put those on? Why did he put those on.....unless there was about to be bloodshed. Franklin gulped. If there was to be bloodshed, there was no doubt whose blood

would be shed. "My daughter was murdered in this hospital and I think in this very room. Her kidneys were surgically removed and she was killed soon afterwards."

"His daughter," the man had said. Although, Franklin did not remember the name, the man had just revealed his identity. That could only mean one thing. Franklin was not going to be alive to do anything about it.....unless.....he could buy his way out of it. Higgins loosened the gag.

"I have some money, lots of money. I'm talking millions. It's yours. All of it. Let me go. I'll disappear if you won't kill me. You take all the money."

Higgins' eyebrow arched. He looked at Franklin oddly and then he understood.

"Lots of money, you say. Millions, you say. You best get started talking....unless you want me to hold your nose again."

Franklin knew his plan had not worked. The guy would not trade for money or anything else. Franklin craned his neck and looked at his nude, trussed body. He looked at the gleaming scalpel Higgins was holding. He moaned as he realized how he was about to be butchered. "If I tell you everything, will you kill me instantly, painlessly? Don't let me see it coming." Franklin was staring at the ceiling, waiting for the answer he did not want to hear.

"That could be a goal for you to work for. If I'm satisfied with your answers, I'll agree to that. Jerk me around and I'll double my pleasure which will automatically double your pain."

"This wasn't my idea. None of it. I was a necessity and they bought me." Franklin paused a bit too long so Higgins held the scalpel to the light and looked down the length of Franklin's body. "Replacement parts.....er.....transplants, I mean are a valuable commodity." Franklin moaned. He was talking about this guy's daughter. Anything he said could set him off and he would start slashing. "Rich people will pay any price to stay alive. A doctor

learned about these people and the price they would pay and first thing you know, some deals were made. We started out just redirecting the organs that were available. But the money became too much so there were no risks too great. I am an anesthesiologist. No surgery is complete without one." He instantly regretted the attempt at humor. "I was approached and offered one million dollars per surgery. It soon went to two million because I demanded it. I think I was still getting shortchanged but....," he let the sentence die. He already wondered why the man was not slashing.

"How many are doing this?"

"It takes a lot less than you would think. A few skilled nurses with plenty of problems will work much cheaper than me. Ten thousand is much money when you are in enough trouble or your problems seem insurmountable. And, of course, you have the world's greatest transplant surgeon."

"And that would be?" Higgins asked calmly.

"Dr. Deborah Warren."

"Who are the other doctors?"

"She's the only one, I swear. It's her operation, the rest of us were hired hands." Higgins frowned at the comment so Franklin said no more. That didn't last long. When your life was at stake it was hard to keep quiet. "What do you say, man? Do we have a deal? All the money.....it can't change things..... but what do you say?"

Higgins crammed the gag back into his mouth. "You're getting on my nerves. I need to think." He moved across the room out of Franklin's limited range of view.

It seemed like an eternity to Franklin. He mumbled against the gag and strained against the restraints. Higgins had left the room so quietly Franklin did not know he was gone. In less than thirty minutes Higgins was back and Franklin did not know he had left the room. Suddenly, Higgins appeared over him and removed the gag. Higgins asked, "How long can you live without kidneys?"

"Oh man, come on.....I don't know.....That's not the way it happened."

"Tell me how it happened."

"It won't help you, believe me. This is terrible! Don't make me do this!" Franklin was becoming frantic. This sort of conversation was just the thing to set the man off. He was holding a scalpel and the look on his face was not at all encouraging. Not encouraging for Franklin's health and well being, that is. He was barely able to refrain from sobbing uncontrollably. "She didn't suffer," he wailed.

"Tell me how it happened," Higgins repeated.

"She was still under from the surgery. When the doctor told me I administered carbon monoxide. It was painless." Franklin lost control and opened his mouth to scream. Before he made a sound, the gag was crammed back into his mouth. Higgins loosened the restraint on his arm and positioned it just over the edge of the table. He retied it securely. He moved a large stainless steel can under his hand and slashed Franklin's wrist. Franklin bucked against the pain but it was over in an instant and he stared quizzically at Higgins. The next sound they heard was his blood dripping into the can. For Franklin, it sounded like the blast from a cannon.

"It's painless. You won't suffer. Is that about the way it goes?" Franklin made an all out attempt to scream, break the restraints, do anything to free himself. Higgins watched with detachment. Finally, he was exhausted and lay still except for breathing deeply. When the pounding in his ears subsided, he realized his blood was not thudding in the bottom of the can. It made a thickly splash. Higgins looked at Franklin for a long moment. Then he moved out of sight. An instant later the room was pitch black. Franklin heard the soft opening and then closing of the door. It was pitch black again. The only sound was the dripping of his blood into the can. He began to sob. The sound was barely audible through the thick gag. He wondered how long this would take. He wondered if he would

know when the end was near. While Samuel Franklin bled to death, Higgins used the time to reconnoiter more of the new part of the surgery floor. There wasn't that much of interest. It occurred to him that if you've seen one surgery room you've seen them all. He looked at his watch. He had no idea how long this would take but he did not intend to go back until the man was dead. He would spend his last minutes totally alone and in total darkness.

## CHAPTER 9

Nicholas had managed to slip away for the afternoon. He had instructed Calvin to take all calls and intercept all possible

interruptions. Nicholas was a most sought after person and it was a time consuming task. Calvin didn't have anything else to do and he was savoring the opportunity to throw his weight around. He looked out the car window and up at the multi-storied hotel. He wondered which room Nicholas was in. Then he eyed the approaching cop. He had already seen the illegally parked car and was zeroing in. Calvin would wait until he was writing the ticket before he lowered the tinted window and flashed Nicholas' parking ID. The cop would really be steamed.

"Why didn't you stop me sooner?" he would demand to know.

"Hey, I'm on a big case. I don't have time for you flatfoot," Calvin would counter. Then Calvin would order him away before he blew the cover on the whole operation. The cop would comply because he couldn't be sure it was not true. He would not be happy about it and he would remember.

Deborah stepped inside the door. She unbuttoned her blouse and dropped it. She unzipped her slacks and let them fall. She went to the bedroom door and looked inside. Nicholas was naked, laying on the bed. He was propped up on pillows, his fingers locked behind his head. He grinned as he looked her over, framed in the doorway wearing nothing but bra and panties.

"You're overdressed," he said.

A while later, Deborah said, "I'm sorry we got back into each other's lives under such morbid circumstances but I'm glad we have. This is like being a teenager again."

"I'm trying not to think about all the time we've lost."

Deborah turned to him and suddenly he was not thinking about the past.

Later, Nicholas was trying not to doze. He propped up and looked at Deborah. "I need to ask you some things about the murder." Deborah did not answer. "This thing is getting nowhere fast. Perhaps, if you talked to me I might have a sudden burst of inspiration."

"I wish I could help but I don't know how I could. I thought you were satisfied that it didn't happen at Memorial. It just happens that the poor girl worked there."

"I had decided that but now I'm not so sure. I was so excited about meeting you I've not put the proper effort into this case. The girl's father, the guy is on the edge and understandably so. I'm concerned if I don't get somewhere, undesirable things are going to happen.....if they have not already done so."

Deborah nestled up against him. Nicholas' hand began to roam. So did hers. "What do you want to ask me?"

"I don't remember," he said.

Later they were dressing. Nicholas' mind was back on the case. He intentionally did not look at her but stared at the shoe he was trying to put on. "Tell me Deborah, is there anyone at Memorial who could do such a thing? Who has the expertise and the opportunity? You know the place and the personnel better than anyone. Give me a clue. You know I'll never give you up. Whatever you say will forever be confidential."

"I don't know. I really don't see how such a thing could happen without anyone knowing."

"Do you know every operation that is going on in every room every day?"

"Of course not. Some kid has their tonsils out....."

"That's not what I mean. You know what I mean. Transplants, do you know about every one?"

"Yes, I do. Most of them are my cases. Not all, but most."

"It's the ones that aren't your cases that I'd like to know about."

"It takes a team. Lots of people prepare the donor and recipient. The paperwork is atrocious. You can't imagine....."

"I'm not looking for the obvious. The obvious is obvious. The black op.....that's what I'm looking for."

"The black what? Geez Nicholas, you are taking this cop thing far too seriously. I think I liked you better when you were building valves."

"I hoped you would give me some ideas. There must be something in that place that is odd or unusual. Maybe you don't have time to check it out. If you're not suspicious, you don't notice. Sometimes, when you talk about things, you remember the unusual."

Deborah stepped in front of the mirror and adjusted her clothes. "I just don't know about anything like that. A black, whatever. I've got to go. My patients wait." She was headed toward the door.

"When can we do this again?" he called after her.

"You have my pager number," she said as she left the room.

He stared at the door. He smiled. He picked up the phone and dialed her pager. She was still in the elevator when she got the signal. She looked at her watch and considered going back to the room. No, she couldn't. Mr. Whatever-his-name, his liver wouldn't last that long. He was being prepared for surgery this very minute.

Timothy had dragged his chair in front of the window. The view from his office was not spectacular but adequate for someone who seldom bothered to look. It was early evening and Timothy had a rare case of the do-nothings. He had lots of work. There was always lots of work but now he wasn't interested. He stared out the window but was looking at nothing. He could have gone home early today but knew if he did so he would soon be pacing the floor searching for something to do or rummaging through his briefcase searching for a case to review. It always turned out that way. He could have invited the beautiful new paralegal to stay and work on a case. She had almost pulled up her dress while telling him how anxious she was to make a real contribution. Yes indeed, she could have made a fine contribution. Instead, he had done nothing. Now, after resting peacefully for thirty minutes, he was glad of his decision. He was revitalized. He looked

at his watch. It would be any minute now. He felt the slight change of pressure in his ears. It was caused by the elevator rushing upward. You could not detect it unless the floor was empty and quiet. He heard the hiss of the elevator doors opening. He swiveled in the chair so he was silhouetted against the dusk outside the window. She came into his office and paused. "What happened?" he asked.

"The old guy's liver gave out too soon. The replacement parts were just a bit too late."

"Too bad."

"You're telling me. This was some major bucks. They went right down the toilet just like his liver that had been dissolved by all that whiskey."

She climbed in his lap and straddled his legs, peering over his shoulder at the view through the window. "Let's do it right there," she said and pointed to a spot in front of the window. "If anyone has some binoculars they can watch us."

"That does happen," Timothy said as he unbuttoned her blouse. "The paralegal's have a telescope set up in the file room. They say that building over there has the best shows." He pointed to a building.

"We can't let that happen, now can we?" She stood up, unzipped her slacks and let them fall to the floor. She walked in front of the window and undressed. Timothy quickly followed suit, stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She turned to him, they kissed and sank slowly to their knees. Then, they lay on the plush carpet.

"Have you ever done it here?"

"Not with you, Deborah."

"I know not with me. That's not what I asked...." She gasped. "Never mind. I don't want to interfere with what you are doing."

Bartholomew Higgins grunted slightly and his eyes popped open. He had awakened from a nightmare. It had taken years for those nightmares to subside and now they were returning. He made a low growl

in his throat and rubbed his forehead. He wiped across his face with his hand and got his bearings. He felt in the darkness until his hand bumped into the lamp. He knew within inches of it's location since he had taken careful note when turning it off. He had found an unfinished office that contained a desk and a nice chair. There he had rested and finally dozed while waiting for Samuel Franklin to die. His eyes adjusted to the light and he looked at his watch. He had slept longer than he had expected. Surely, the man was dead by now. Higgins glanced toward the door, judged the distance, snapped off the light, took the correct number of steps and the door knob hit right in his outstretched hand. He went into the hall and walked toward the surgery room.

He stepped inside, the table was illuminated by the light from the hall but he closed the door before he could see much. He listened for a few seconds and hearing nothing, snapped on the light. He walked to the table and looked at Franklin. He was dead. Higgins looked in the can. It didn't look like a lot of blood but he didn't know how much blood a person had. He picked up the can, went to a sink and carefully poured it down the drain. Now, it did look like a lot. It took longer than he expected to wash out the can and the sink and gather all the tape and rope he had used to tie up Franklin. He found a large sheet of plastic and wrapped the body like a mummy. After it was securely wrapped and tied, he carried it to the far end of the hall and dumped it down a trash chute. Several seconds later the body crashed in a trash bin in the basement. There the whole bin would be hauled away early in the morning. Higgins looked into the chute. "Ashes to ashes, trash to trash." He went back to the operating room and carefully checked to see that it was clean of all evidence of what had transpired there. Satisfied that it was, he retraced his steps back to the elevator and soon was outside. He walked purposefully back to his hotel and inside, sat down and leaned his head back. He exhaled sharply. "Dr. Deborah Warren," he said softly.

Deborah heard the soft knock on her door and cast her eyes upward to see who was there. She pretended to keep her eyes fixed on the paper laying on her desk. It was one of the nurses on her surgery team. "Yes," Deborah acknowledged, still not looking up. She did look up when she heard the office door shut. She leaned back, tapping the edge of the desk with a pencil. Deborah did not like the look on the girl's face. A closed door could only mean something she did not want to hear. The nurse approached, unsteadily. Deborah decided not to make it easy. She fixed an impatient look on her face and continued to tap the pencil. The nurse cautiously took a chair and wrung her hands in her lap. Deborah decided this would never end so she asked, "What's the problem, Judy?"

"I was wondering when we would have another surgery, you know." The 'you know' was the distinction between a routine transplant and an unscheduled, highly profitable one. One from which the surgery team would get a cut. Judy had a little problem which was why she was on the team in the first place.

A few years ago while she was still in college, she had met a guy who fancied himself a future movie producer/director. He had an unlimited supply of pot and was more than willing to share. Provided, of course, if Judy was more than willing to share her favors. She had been. The months with the guy were now a long lost fog. She had come close to flunking out and had broken off with the guy. At the time, it seemed to be nothing more than a severe case of bad judgment. The guy always had a camera and was always snapping photos. He also fancied himself as an expert photographer. One can always sell good photos, he had often said. Unfortunately for Judy that turned out to be true. It seems that in the drug induced fog, Judy had done much more posing than she would have ever done otherwise. She remembered a few topless poses, all in good fun she thought. The guy had assured her the pictures would be destroyed and had torn them up in her presence. For

some reason, negatives never entered her mind. Sometimes, she had a memory of a few more provocative poses but she assumed they, too, would be destroyed. Most of those were destroyed. At least, any of them where the man was identifiable. As Judy's pot intake increased, her inhibitions decreased and her memory became even more clouded. Her boyfriend/photographer would call in a few more subjects, all about as high as Judy, and the flashbulbs really began to pop. Judy was in all sorts of pornographic scenes with men, sometimes three and four at a time and, finally, with other women as well. The combinations were limitless and so were the photos. After Judy broke away from the guy, she tried not to think about the bad experience. She completed her degree, got a well paying job on a Memorial surgery team and soon afterwards, married. Then one day while she was on a break, she looked up from her cup of coffee and standing there looking like something a cat puked up was.....the photographer. His producer/director career had never happened. In fact, no career had happened. He was a hopeless drug addict who one day would die of an overdose or get killed by another crazed druggie in search of a couple of dollars. It had not happened soon enough and the man had a photo collection second to none. Judy was easily recognizable in hundreds of them. This was not going to be a big problem the man had assured her. All he needed was a little cash. Something to get by on until some of his photos were sold. Not these, of course, he had laughed deviously as he flashed several of the best of Judy. At first she had refused. It took less than ten seconds for the man to walk to a bulletin board hanging prominently in the coffee bar and pin up one of Judy's best. There were several people sitting around but none seemed to notice when Judy snatched the photo off the wall. The man had laughed. So many bulletin boards, he had said. Judy got the hint. Just to reinforce his position, he had warned that a handful of the best would be delivered to Judy's husband. She had instantly capitulated. How much did he want, she had asked. Fifty dollars a week had quickly escalated

to two hundred. Judy was doing all kinds of financial dido's to come up with the money. Supposed payments for job related supplies, payments to a pension fund and birthday gifts for fellow employees. All of these were actual expenses, except in Judy's case she was giving the money to the photographer. Somehow, and Judy was never real sure how and had been too afraid to ask, Samuel Franklin had become aware of her insatiable need for cash. He had approached her with a solution and a fringe benefit to boot. She could make more than enough to handle her problem and have plenty left over for herself. It was a deal she could not refuse. She was on the surgery team. Ask no questions and tell no one and the money began to flow. It was too good to be true and sure enough, she found that to be the case. Samuel Franklin was due a finder's fee, as he called it. After all, where would she be without him? How much did he want, she had asked. She was calculating in her mind. Figuring how much was left after her payment to the photographer. Why did she expect that would be the exact amount demanded by Samuel Franklin?

He untied the draw string holding up his hospital pants and the baggy garment fell in a heap around his ankles. Judy sank slowly to her knees in front of him. A few minutes later, Franklin retied the draw string and as he walked out of the vacant room said, "I'll see you again soon and think of it this way, you get to keep all your money." To Judy's dismay, she had to agree with him.

Every time the team prepared for an unscheduled surgery, Judy would glance around at the other nurses. They dressed quickly and without the usual banter. They avoided one another's eyes. Judy never failed to wonder what sordid episode had brought each one to the place at this time. There were millions of stories in the city. Hers was only one of them. She wondered where she had heard that.

"By the very nature of the situations, we never know exactly when the necessity will arise," Deborah said angrily. "You know that. I don't know why you are wasting my time." She leaned forward as if she

were through with this conversation and about to return her attention to the piece of paper.

Actually, that's not why I'm here. There is something else." Now, she had Deborah's attention again. Deborah said nothing but stared at her face, waiting for her to go on. Finally, Judy decided she was not going to ask so she continued, "I was looking for Samuel Franklin...I mean....I had to give.....I had something for him," Judy finally blurted out. She grimaced. She should have thought of a better way to say that, she thought.

Deborah looked at the young woman. She had heard rumors of Franklin's recruitment techniques and subsequent payoff demands. It was of no concern to her as long as they worked. In fact, she had thought the man to be rather innovative and clever. He was rich from his own payments and had little to gain by taking money from the nurses. Instead, he received a variety of sexual favors from each. Deborah wondered what Judy's specialty was.

The silence grew longer as Judy searched for the words to continue. Finally, she said, "I've looked for Franklin for a couple of days. No one knows where he is. No one has seen him."

Deborah was half out of her chair before she caught herself and eased back into the chair. "Maybe he's sick," she said lamely.

"He is missing, Doctor. I'm not the only one wondering.....," she grimaced again, realizing she was saying too much.

"That's a not so secret, secret. I know about the, shall we say, arrangement." She looked at Judy as her mouth opened and her eyes widened. "Not to worry, my dear. I'd be the last one to mess up your playhouse." She noticed that Judy looked relieved. "Who has looked and where have they looked?" Deborah asked. Judy filled her in. Even the personnel department had become involved when he failed to show up for a scheduled surgery.

Deborah was trying to think and not appear overly concerned at the same time. However, she was gravely concerned. Without an

anesthesiologist the whole operation comes to a screeching halt. She had no contingency plan for a replacement. She realized Judy was still sitting there, waiting. Deborah dismissed her with a warning to let personnel handle it. She nor any others of the team were to show any concern. They were not to draw any attention to themselves. Judy readily agreed to that and left. Deborah jerked the phone out of it's cradle and punched some buttons. In seconds, she was connected. "Timothy, I'm sorry to interrupt your meeting but I have a ....er....situation. Time is of the essence. Actually, it's worse than that."

Timothy was perturbed at the interruption even if it was by Deborah. He stood to make millions from the outcome of the meeting. He had been interrupted so he may as well make the best of it. After all, he could hardly keep his eyes off the spot on the floor....in his office....in front of the window. "How can I help?" he asked.

"Do you have access to a private detective? Very good and very discrete?"

"But of course. In fact, more than one."

Deborah breathed a sigh of relief. "I need to find someone, immediately if not sooner. A case of life and death and that is no exaggeration."

"Spare me the theatrics, Deborah. I've got the best money can buy and there in lies the secret. Money and buy being the operative words, if you get my drift."

"I still have those magic bank account numbers you gave me. Suppose I transfer a million dollars to your account. Will that be enough to get the ship launched, so to speak."

"That's the thing I like about you best. Well, not the best thing but certainly one of the best."

"I like it when you talk dirty, Timothy but right now I need this other thing really bad."

"Give me the gory details and the ships will be launched as you so eloquently put it."

"Samuel Franklin, the anesthesiologist at Memorial is missing without a trace."

"Huh," Timothy said, puzzled why the man was missing and why Deborah was willing to spend so much money to locate him. "A Memorial employee, you say. That will give my investigation a place to start. They can hack the computer system and learn all the particulars. That will save some time. If there is nothing else, I'll get this started."

"Keep me advised of the progress several times a day. For this kind of money, it should be hand delivered on gold leaf."

"A little testy, Deborah. This was your idea, remember. Give me a number where my man can reach you on the first ring. It won't help your blood pressure when he has nothing to report, for possibly, a day or two."

"It better not be a day or two," she said as she scrambled through a drawer looking for a cell phone. She found it, read the number to Timothy and clipped the phone to her belt.

They hung up. Timothy called the number and relayed the information to the private investigator. He told the man to put every available man on the job. The silence on the line prompted Timothy to add, cost was no objective. Timothy could almost feel the elation coming through the phone. It was a feeling he, too, had often experienced.

"There is one other thing," Timothy added. As a professional courtesy, I'd appreciate a report every time Dr. Warren gets one. This one has made me curious. Call the number and leave a message. I'll check it a few times a day and see what you have learned." The private investigator said something. Timothy chuckled. "For once, I really don't know and that is the truth." They laughed again and hung up.

Higgins was quite proud of himself, at least, so far. He had found a jumpsuit that fit him and was of the color and design used by maintenance employees of Memorial Hospital. He had mastered the technique of working, neither too fast nor too slow. He was mopping the floor, slowly making progress, always keeping his head down and drawing not the slightest bit of attention of any of the employees scurrying back and forth in the long hall. No one had noticed he was using a dry mop. It made his job so much simpler. He was slowly working his way to a cross hall. There he would turn right and he would be in the hall where the surgeon's offices were located. Including, that of Dr. Deborah Warren.

Suddenly, the hall was empty. That happened every now and then. Higgins grabbed the handle on the mop bucket and propelled it about fifteen feet further down the hall. He caught up with it and began scrubbing the mop on the floor again. Now he was at the corner. A few more swipes and he would be in the surgeon's hall.

Higgins worked slowly but methodically. A short time later he was in front of Dr. Warren's office. The first door was open. The doctor's secretary's office was there. In between swipes with the mop, he looked inside. The secretary was nowhere to be seen. The next door leading to the doctor's office was closed. Higgins sensed someone was in there. He swabbed the mop back and forth in front of the open door. He was carefully noting everything in the secretaries office.

A few minutes later he was becoming uneasy about staying in the same place too long. Then he spotted just what he needed most. A utility closet was across the hall and just a few feet away. He checked up and down the hall, stepped to the door and opened it. It was perfect. A small utility closet that contained nothing but some rags and a few cans of cleaning supplies. He went back to his mop duties and waited.

His patience was rewarded. The inner door was opened and Dr. Deborah Warren appeared in an animated conversation with someone.

Another woman with a harried look was glancing back and forth. As soon as there was room, she squeezed between them and sat down at her desk. Higgins moved from in front of the door but not so far that he could not continue to observe. He was getting a good look at Dr. Warren. Then he could hear.

"I must keep an appointment," Deborah said. She was about to walk off and leave the man talking to himself. He threw up his hands and turned to leave her office.

Higgins went into the utility closet and stripped off the jumpsuit. Underneath, he was wearing a suit. He took a clip-on tie from his pocket, buttoned the collar button on his shirt and affixed the tie. He folded the jumpsuit as tightly as he could and stuffed it into a large manila envelope that was in the mop bucket. He placed the bulging envelope under his arm, opened the door and peeked both ways before stepping into the hall. He was walking authoritatively when Deborah exited her office and cut in front of him. She barely seemed to notice him and did nothing to indicate that she gave him a second thought. In a few steps, she was putting distance between them. Higgins continued to walk purposefully and held the envelope tightly under his arm as if it were the most important thing in the world.

She was waiting impatiently for an elevator, having looked at her watch several times when Higgins walked up behind and stood looking up at the floor indicator. She was going somewhere in a hurry. This could pose a problem. Would she take a cab? Did she have a car? There was nothing he could do now but follow and see how it played out.

Minutes later, Deborah was headed toward a long row of waiting taxies. Higgins was several feet behind but already checking out the others who appeared to be going for a taxi and timing his approach. He wanted the cab behind the one that Deborah took and it appeared nothing would interfere with his getting it. Deborah reached the front cab and got in. Higgins entered the one behind. Her cab sped away. The driver cut his eyes in the mirror. Higgins had not spoken.

"I doubt you've ever heard this before but follow that cab," he said and pointed. The man sighed an audible sigh and jammed down on the accelerator.

They zigged and zagged their way through the traffic and Higgins' taxi was never more than two or three car lengths behind. At one point the driver called over his shoulder, "Can't get too close, else we'll be spotted for sure." Higgins didn't know if the man was joking or not so he said nothing.

Suddenly, the cab jerked to the curb and stopped. Higgins looked at the building. A multi story office building. It wasn't getting any easier. He looked at the meter, doubled the fare and dropped the bills over the seat. The driver looked but said nothing. Higgins opened the door and got out. He stepped between two parked cars and onto the sidewalk. He walked slowly hoping to time his approach with her exit from the cab. It worked. She was out and through the door a few feet in front of him. She acted as though she were on a mission for which he was glad. It was making his job easy. He had stood inches from her in the hospital elevator and had she paid attention, she would have easily noticed him now.

Inside, she went to the elevator and waited again. Higgins wondered how anybody ever got anything done in this town. All they did was wait for elevators. He was not being so careful anymore. No one seemed to pay attention to anything. He didn't want her to get a look at his face but she seemed oblivious to everyone, including him. The doors opened and those waiting surged in, not waiting for those inside to surge out. It created a bit of a jam but with practiced shoulder shrugs and pushing through, the transition was made. Higgins noticed it all happened without anyone putting their hands on anyone else. Higgins surmised that must be the one taboo of elevator etiquette. Inside the cab and moving, Higgins glanced at the panel of floor buttons. Nearly all of them were lit. The Doctor was on the front row. Higgins was one row back and a man stood directly in front of

him. He was sure he could easily maneuver around him when Deborah left the cab. It came sooner than he expected. The doors hissed open and she shot out and turned left. Higgins shouldered by the man barely hearing him grumble something. He turned right, took the package from under his arm and pretended to be reading an address. He stopped before an office door and glanced back down the hall. Deborah was disappearing through a doorway. He walked quickly down the hall and looked at the name on the door. 'Timothy Lawrence', it said in eloquently scribed letters. Above the name in much smaller letters it said, 'The Law Firm of'. Around a nearby corner was a bank of pay phones and a cushioned bench. Higgins took a receiver, held it to his ear and sat down. He pondered his next move. He didn't have long to wait. The door to the lawyer's office opened and women came out. Higgins peeked around the corner.

"I'm glad this day is over," said one. Higgins could not hear what the other replied. He barely got a glimpse of the eloquent receptionist area before the door closed. He stood, held the envelope containing the jumpsuit in plain sight and carefully opened the door. He looked in not sure what he was going to say if a dozen people were waiting and watching. There was no one in sight. Higgins went in and held the package like he was looking for someplace to leave it. He eased down a hall looking in each office. He paused in the hall. Any second, he would be seen. He did not think this was a good idea. He was about to hastily retreat out the door when he heard low voices coming from somewhere further down the hall. Suddenly, the lights began to go off. Higgins jumped but quickly realized it was happening in a systematic manner. The office was closed for the day and a computer was turning off the lights in the hall. He waited until the hall was darkened and went on toward the sound of the voices. The office lights began to blink out. Apparently, if someone intended to be in their office they had to do something or be left in the dark. The lights turned off in the occupied office. Higgins frowned and

peered cautiously through the slightly opened door. Silhouetted against the huge window were two people. It took Higgins a second to realize they were nude. They sank to the floor. Higgins drew back out of sight.

"Well, well," he thought. "So, the good doctor is boffing a lawyer or vice verse." He would wager they both had it coming. He leaned gently against the wall. How was he going to continue to follow the Doctor. The building was empty. Even recovering from the throes of ecstasy that she was now, apparently, experiencing she could not help but notice him. There would likely be no one but the two of them in the elevator. He had no choice. He would have to wait in front of the building and hope he could get a cab fast enough to follow her.

They became louder and louder. Higgins grimaced. This was the last thing he had expected. Well, he had not known what to expect but this had not been a possibility. Listening to them made an image of a long ago joke cross his mind. He smiled at the thought. A louder outcry almost made him chuckle. Suddenly, he thought. That joke...of course...what an idea. It would work anywhere, even in New York City. He would wait awhile longer. From the sound of things he would have plenty of warning when they were about to finish. Sure enough he did. He eased down the hall and out of the office. He took the elevator down and walked out on the sidewalk. He had to wait a few minutes before a cab cruised by. He hailed it and got inside. In response to the driver's request for a destination, Higgins said, "My wife is fooling around. I need to follow her. Can we wait until she comes out and see where she goes?"

"Sure thing man, only I'll have to charge you time."

"Okay," Higgins said dejectedly. He hoped his attitude would discourage further conversation. The cabby took the hint and stared out the windshield. In a few minutes his finger tapped on the steering wheel, keeping time to some unheard melody playing only in his mind. Higgins watched the entrance to the building.

After some time had passed, the driver showed signs of getting nervous. Higgins dropped a twenty onto the front seat. The driver looked at it and relaxed. His tapping finger increased it's pace.

Then Deborah and a man came through the door. They stood, talking. A cab was coming down the street and pulled over for an obvious fare. Deborah and the man kissed and he opened the door for her.

"That's her," Higgins said. The driver had guessed that and was already sitting up. He started the engine and waited. Deborah's cab pulled away and he followed. Higgins stared at the man standing on the curb. He got a good look and thought he would recognize him if he saw him again. It was, no doubt, Timothy Lawrence. He turned his attention back to the taxi in front of them. They did not have far to go. In less than ten minutes, the cab pulled to the curb. Higgins leaned forward to look at the building. It was a splendid hotel.

"How much?" Higgins asked. The man told him and Higgins dropped the money on the seat and placed his hand on the door handle. Deborah got out and Higgins followed. Neither he nor the driver had a parting word.

Deborah went inside and Higgins was close behind. A few minutes later he was astonished and then cursed himself for being so careless. Had he not been so lucky he would have blown his cover and possibly much more. Deborah went into the restaurant where she was immediately ushered to a table. A man stood and greeted her. Had he not been so enthralled with Deborah he might have seen Higgins standing in the doorway. In fact, it was a miracle he had not. The man reached across the table and took her hand. He looked like a starry eyed teenager. Higgins was so stunned he had not moved. He came to his senses and moved behind a large plant. He found a place where he could see though the plant. A waiter was there. They were going to have dinner. How could he keep up his surveillance? He backed out of the entrance to the restaurant, found a place to sit and held up a newspaper,

pretending to read. This would be okay for awhile but he couldn't stay here very long. Hotel security would surely notice.

"What a development?" he thought to himself. "Better yet, what did it mean?" he asked himself. This certainly required some contemplation. Dr. Deborah Warren was having dinner with none other than.....Detective Nicholas Vaughn!

Higgins felt the envelope laying against his leg. He folded the newspaper and looked around the huge lobby. He could see no one that looked like maintenance. Bell hops scurried all about but no one else. He looked at his watch, frowned and went to a bank of pay phones. He dug in his pocket for coins and pretended to use the phone. He went back to the sofa and tried to act impatient. He knew security was watching. He could feel it. Then, a solution presented itself. A beautiful young woman wearing a dress the size of a handkerchief pranced in and went straight to the bank of phones Higgins had used. Higgins watched closely as the woman dug in her purse, pretended to find a coin and pretended to drop it in the slot. Now, she was pretending to talk on the phone. Higgins laid down the paper and went to the phone beside her. She turned slightly away and said something inaudible into the phone. Higgins lifted the receiver, leaned toward her and said, "A hundred dollars if you'll have a drink with me and pretend there's going to be much more, sort of like you're pretending to talk on the phone." The woman turned slowly toward Higgins and smiled at him. She was surprised but tried to act like this was nothing new. She had no idea what this was about but she did know he wasn't hotel security. A hundred dollars in a crowded lobby....what could go wrong? She replaced the receiver and linked her arm through Higgins'. "The bar is this way," she said.

Higgins took some money from his pocket and peeled off a hundred. He discreetly slipped it in her hand. He didn't see where it went after that. They went to the bar and Higgins found a table where he

could see the entrance to the restaurant. They sat down, ordered and the woman looked curiously at Higgins.

The hotel detective watched a few minutes longer and then turned his attention elsewhere. The minute Higgins sat on the sofa the detective thought he was up to something. There was no indication what, but the detective knew it was something. Then the hooker comes in and it looked like she was what the man was up to. Now he was sure. Sometimes his instincts were wrong. He eyed Higgins again. He would have never pegged this guy for hooker material. Oh well, maybe he has missed on this one. He turned his attention to another suspect. This guy was going to pick some pockets. The detective allowed himself a slight grin. He liked pickpockets. They had fun with pickpockets. The staff took them into a storeroom way down in the basement and broke their fingers, one at a time. The news got out and the hotel was hardly ever bothered with pickpockets. This guy was either new in town or desperate. The detective lifted his hand to his mouth and spoke. The rest of the team was alerted. They converged on the lobby. The detective took one last look at Higgins and the hooker. That was strange. The man seemed to be in control of the situation and the hooker had a totally puzzled look on her face.

The pickpocket moved behind his victim. The detective walked briskly across the lobby. Higgins and the hooker were forgotten.

Higgins wrapped his huge fingers around the glass but didn't pick it up. The woman's eyes were glued to his hands. She had never seen anything like it.

"You know what they say about a man's hands?" she asked.

"Yeah and it's true," Higgins answered. "Look, here's what I want. We sit here, have a drink and pretend we are having such a good time. Some people are going to come out of the restaurant and go to a room, I think. I can't be seen but I need for you to follow and verify that for me. Will another hundred be enough?"

The woman nodded affirmatively but did not speak. This guy was on a mission. She knew the look. This was the time to take the money, do what he asked and get out. She was going to make two hundred dollars and not even have to lay down. That happened so infrequently she was instantly leery. She looked around. In a crowded lobby, what could happen? She relaxed and sipped the drink. The man was staring at the door to the restaurant.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"No name," Higgins replied.

"Nice to meet you, No-name." Higgins did not appear to hear her. She took another sip and decided she wouldn't take any chances with her money. "That other hundred," she said.

Higgins dug in his pocket and slid it across the table. He looked away and then back and the hundred was already gone. The woman's entire dress wasn't much bigger than a five pound flour sack. He wondered where she was putting those bills.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"They'll come out," he nodded toward the restaurant, "And go...up," he said for lack of a better way to say it. "All I want to know is if they go to a room and which room." He thought about that and added, "Although I don't know why it matters which room. I can't see in the room." He was thinking about the law office. He certainly had been able to see in there.

"There may be a way if you want to spend some more money," she said. Higgins was thinking that over. The hooker waited and thought. She had an arrangement with the security guard who monitored the surveillance camera system. A few rooms had hidden cameras and it was in those that she plied her trade. The guard got to watch and he also video taped the entire performance. The guard then sold the tapes and it was a tidy supplement to his income. She got the use of a free room in an exclusive hotel. It was a fair trade, although her customers would be far from pleased to learn they were in the movies. She often

wondered if any of them had ever happened into a porn show and seen themselves. She looked at Higgins. He couldn't seem to make up his mind. "What do you say?" she asked.

"Right now, I don't think it matters. How long do you need to set it up?"

"Five minutes," she answered.

"I'll decide," he said and looked back at the restaurant.

The hooker looked across the lobby and stared at a desk clerk. He seemed to sense she was looking at him. It took a few seconds for him to find her. Their eyes locked and he nodded. The arrangement had been made. The hooker didn't know who or what was going down but she decided to have some evidence. This little movie would be for her and for once she wouldn't be in it. She looked back at Higgins. "Do you want to talk or just sit here?" she asked.

"Just sit here," he answered.

She shrugged and took a sip of her drink. She looked into a corner of the lobby. Four men were discreetly escorting a man toward the service elevator. Only by looking closely could you see the handcuffs on the man's wrists. He was not at all concerned with his plight. He was looking around, nonchalantly, like he only wanted to hurry through the routine and get on with his business. He was probably thinking a hundred bucks would unlock those cuffs. She shuddered. If he only knew what was in store.

She remembered the time when she ventured into the hotel. She had been trolling for customers and she had been checking out the place. Forwardness and inexperience had not served her well. They made her when she walked through the door and within minutes they grabbed her and she was hustled into that very elevator and down to the basement. She was cocky and confident. A couple of freebies and she would be back in the lobby plying her trade. She suppressed another shudder. They slammed her onto a mattress that had seen better days

about twenty years ago. Her wrists were cuffed and a gag forced into her mouth. It was then that she became very afraid. Two of the guards each grabbed a leg and she thought they were going to use her for a pulley bone. Then the ugliest of the guards loomed over her and banished a baseball bat. He held it up and marked the spot on the bat indicating how far it was going to be forced into her body.

She took a big gulp of her drink. So much, that it got Higgins' attention and he ordered another for her. Then he looked back at the restaurant.

Then the guard had offered a deal. She would have taken any deal. She was going to entertain the security guards.....for as much and as long as they wanted. She had frantically nodded agreement. She heard the bat thud on the floor and the ugly guard was grinning fiendishly and pulling at his belt. She closed her eyes and tried to think of something else. How many guards? She couldn't keep up. Every time she opened her eyes, she was sure she had already seen that one. How long? She had no idea. When she finally was able to walk out of the room, a couple of days had passed.

The head of security had been impressed. "You take your whipping like a trooper," he had said. "The world needs more people like you." He had looked at her reflectively and said, "Tell you what, from now on, you can work the lobby free of charge. We'll even keep an eye on you and guard against any perverts that may come your way."

She nodded her head, closed her eyes and waited until he was finished. Then to her surprise, his word had been good. She had worked the hotel for some time and it had been a trouble free environment. Of course, the head of security did not know about her deal with the camera monitor. That bit of knowledge would probably get another session in the basement. She was more than sure she would not get out alive next time.

She looked back at the service elevator. It would be nearing the basement. She shuddered and looked around the bar. There should be something to keep her mind off of the basement.

A couple over there, their eyes locked on each other's face. His hand under the table and between her legs but neither of them aware that a floor light was illuminating everything under the table.

Another couple over there but it was her hand in his pants. They, too, were illuminated by a floor light. she gazed around the room. A few patrons were watching the under-the-table shows but most seemed to care less. They methodically sipped their drinks and stared at nothing. She looked at the desk clerk and he instantly looked at her. She looked away. Just checking to see if he was alert. She tapped on the table and Higgins looked at her hand and then her face. He waited for her to say what she wanted.

"I don't think anything will escape your notice. You could pay a little attention to me. I'm beginning to feel neglected."

"I'm not in a talking mood. I'm working and I can't work and....do that at the same time." Higgins looked at her face. "Such a beautiful girl," he thought. For an instant he was tempted to ask, "What's a girl like you doing in a business like this?" The thought forced a smile to his face.

She saw and returned the smile. "What are you thinking? Let me in on the secret. I need something to laugh about."

"You would never believe....well....maybe you would. It's not exactly an original question."

"In that case, spare me," she said. She emptied her glass and before she could set it on the table, another was placed before her. She looked at Higgins for an indication that he was tired of the bartender working him for drinks. He gave no indication of anything so she did not signal for the bartender to ease up. He did look at his watch.

"How could anyone take this long to eat?" he asked. "I'm going to see if I can get a look inside. Maybe I can tell if they are anywhere near finished."

She slid a napkin across the table and said, "Draw....which table....I'll get that information for you and you don't have to risk being seen."

Higgins gazed at the door. The layout of the entire room was forming in his mind. He drew the position of the tables perfectly and marked the one where the Doctor and the Detective sat. The hooker was impressed and watched in amazement as he sketched the room. His was a story she would love to learn. She took the napkin, looked for the bus boy and motioned imperceptibly for him to come to their table. He did so and she whispered to him and held out the napkin. Without a word, he took it and went toward the restaurant. In minutes he was back and whispered in her ear. She looked at Higgins and said, "The maitre d' said they were finished and were talking. They appeared ready to leave."

"Thanks for small favors," Higgins mumbled and then they came through the door.

"There they are!" he said a bit too loud.

The hooker looked, then she looked at the desk clerk. He saw her, followed her gaze to the couple approaching the desk and nodded confirmation. The hooker stood. "I'll see you right here," she said and walked away. She would go to the elevator and ride up a couple of floors so Higgins would be none the wiser but it really wasn't necessary. The couple would be given a specific room and she already knew the number. She would go to the security area and there she and the camera monitor would watch. She still could not decide if she should share this choice bit of information with Higgins. She stepped into the elevator with Deborah and Nicholas. The last thing she saw as the doors closed was Higgins' face, watching intently. They got off at the floor she had known they would. She rode up one more floor and

then punched the down button. She went past the floor where Higgins waited and got off at the next level. She was still several floors above the basement. She wondered how the pickpocket was feeling about now. If they held true to form, they would have driven a few blocks and dumped him in an alley with ten broken fingers. If he was lucky he would make his way to a hospital. If he wasn't lucky.....the elevator doors hissed open and she walked toward the monitoring room. The desk clerk had set everything in motion and the monitor was expecting her. The camera was on and the tape was rolling. She walked up behind the monitor.

"You could take lessons here. They put on a better show than you."

"Not a chance," she smirked and leaned closer to the screen. She watched for a few seconds and conceded, "You may be right."

"That guy never knew what hit him. His pants were down before the door shut. I wish I was married to that woman."

"Somebody probably is but as you can see.....there is a good reason for having more than one husband."

"No kidding. I don't think this guy will get out alive."

"Whoops," the hooker said. "Maybe we have underestimated the man."

They watched a few more seconds and the monitor said, "This one is going to be worth quite a few bucks. What's the story? Can I sell it or what?"

"I don't see why not. It's our secret but I would like a copy." She watched a few more seconds. "I may use it for a training film."

She left the room and went down the hall to the elevators. She had decided. She would not tell the man about the video. She reached for the button when a massive hand covered her mouth. The fingers almost encircled her head. An arm wrapped around her chest and her feet were lifted off the floor. A quiet voice said in her ear, "Let's

go back in that room. For two hundred dollars you shouldn't keep secrets."

She was barely able to nod her head while it was gripped by the huge hand. Higgins hustled her back to the door. She knocked and pressed her lips close to the door. "It's me. I forgot something." The door was unlocked. They stepped inside. Higgins looked quickly and saw the man was unarmed. He slowly turned, his eyes widened but before he could react, Higgins vice like fingers tightened around his throat.

"Be still and you will live. I want nothing here but to see." He nodded toward the bank of monitors. Odd sounds came out of the man's mouth. Higgins loosened his grip.

The man huffed and puffed and massaged his throat. He was not even acting like he would resist. The hooker had not moved. She was watching wide eyed and mute. Higgins took her arm and guided her beside the monitor. They were both in front of him where he could see them and the bank of monitors. He had already located the one featuring the Doctor and the Detective. "The lady has.....lots of.....friends," he said to himself. The hooker and the monitor had no idea what he was talking about. Higgins decided he didn't need to see the whole show. "Well now. I'm not here to miss up your.....whatever," he tossed his arm around to indicate the whole room. I'll be on my way and leave you as you were. I'd expect you would return that courtesy. The lady here, she didn't help me. I forced her. She would have died if she had not tricked you. I hope you don't hold that against her." The man still rubbed his throat, but nodded agreement to Higgins' statement. "Watch the show and don't let me see or hear anything from you." He was out the door in a instant. He went around a corner and waited. The door opened and closed and her high heels clicked on the concrete floor. She went to the elevator doors but it was obvious he could not have gone that way. The high heels clicked a few cautious steps.

"Hey!" she called out. "I know you are here." Higgins peered around the corner. She walked boldly to him, pressed her body against his and wrapped her arms around his waist. She looked up at him and said, "I want a date. I mean a real date. Of course, it will end up with us in your hotel room but believe me I won't be doing it for money."

Higgins took her shoulders in his massive hands and pushed her back. "After what I've seen, my dear, I won't even take it out to piss in a hotel room. Cameras are everywhere."

Higgins had instructed the taxi to take him to his hotel. Now, as they drove along he was getting another idea. He gave the driver another destination. He leaned back and pondered his move. All things considered, it seemed risky and unnecessary. Higgins had been doing more of that lately. He smiled to himself and watched as block after block of buildings passed. The cab lurched to a stop. Higgins looked all around. The area was nearly deserted. That was not necessarily good. He paid and walked to the entrance. Inside, the layout flashed in his mind. He rode the elevator up. Exiting into the hall, he walked slowly toward the door to the office of Timothy Lawrence.

## CHAPTER 10

It was not too late to abort this plan. Once again he wondered what he had to gain. The doctor had been here. Maybe for nothing more than sex. The doctor was making her rounds. But, there could be more. What if the lawyer was involved. It sure looked like the detective was, at least, with her sexual antics.

Higgins felt the iron pry bar rubbing against his leg. He had found it in the basement and tied it to his calf. It was the closest thing to a weapon he could find. He had not needed it but had not disposed of it either.

Now, he was at the bank of phones across the hall from Timothy Lawrence's office. There was still no one to be seen or heard. He pulled up his pant leg and untied the bar. He stepped across the hall, turned the knob and found the door was locked. He jammed the bar into the door frame and in seconds was inside. He waited a few seconds and hearing nothing went straight down the hall and into Lawrence's office. Higgins wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and began shuffling through the papers on the desk. There were many papers and it took awhile. He was further hampered by not knowing what he was looking for. Just when he had nearly decided he had taken a serious risk for nothing, he pushed aside a stack of papers and uncovered a beautiful leather bound portfolio. Adjusting the handkerchief so his fingertips were covered, he opened it. A few pages into the binder he saw her name, 'Deborah'. Not Dr. Warren, not Dr. Deborah Warren but 'Deborah'. He looked at the floor in front of the window and remembered the scene of earlier today. "I guess they should be on a first name basis," he said softly. He looked back at the page and flipped a few pages forward. This was going to take some time. He flipped back to the first page, pulled the desk chair up and sat down.

He was careful to keep the handkerchief around his hand. Higgins had no experience in the world of international banking. Even so, a novice could follow the carefully recorded transactions. More money than Higgins thought possible for one person to accumulate was flowing through a series of off-shore bank accounts. Without these records no one could ever trace the final destination of the money. Higgins was looking at it and he wasn't too sure. He was sure the good doctor was hauling in some major dollars. That might be useful to know when the time came. He continued to read and finally was about satisfied that he could learn nothing more when he suddenly came to attention. Here was a page of instructions. A sort of do it yourself guide for international banking. Higgins read the page. Then he found a notepad and copied the page. While he was at it he copied all the pages pertaining to Dr. Warren's transactions. Finally, he finished and arranged things on the desk like they were when he began. He stood and looked carefully. Satisfied that he had left no evidence of his presence, he left the office. He looked at the door frame. There was no way to conceal the evidence of his break-in. They wouldn't find so much as a paper clip to be missing. He wondered if he should take something so there would be no lingering suspicions as to the reason for the break-in. He decided he didn't want any additional risks. He tied the bar to his calf and rode the elevator down. It took much longer for a taxi to happen by than he expected. In fact, it took too long. He grew impatient and started to walk in the direction of his hotel. He had walked many blocks and found a trash receptacle to dispose of the pry bar before he was able to flag down a cab. Higgins never knew but failing to get a cab in front of Timothy's building kept Nicholas from learning he was there.

The next morning after Timothy and his staff had discovered the break-in and spent hours determining nothing had been taken, Timothy could not put the unusual event out of his mind. Finally, he had called Nicholas. As he ran the story by, Nicholas tried not to act too

bored. The longer it took, the more curious Nicholas became. Too many strange things had been happening lately. He gave the usual vague 'I'll check into it'. However, he intended to check into it as much as he could. In less than two hours, a fingerprint team was on the site. Nicholas had expected that would be futile and it was. Too many employees and clients coming and going. There were any number of matches but they were identified as clients. Nicholas went one step further. Every cab company in the city had to check their records for a pickup on that night. It wasn't that hard since there seldom was a pickup at a deserted office building after business hours. The search did not disclose a single one. Nicholas was forced to discontinue the investigation. He did not forget about it.

Later in the day, he called Timothy. Perhaps, he had found something missing and they could put the whole thing to rest. That was not the case. Timothy was more suspicious than ever. "Nobody breaks into a law office for nothing," he had nearly shouted at Nicholas.

"True," Nicholas had agreed. "But you can find nothing disturbed so what are we to think?"

"Maybe they got spooked and ran. Maybe we have files missing and may not know it for months or until they show up at a competitors. Maybe, anything. This is really getting on my nerves."

"For now, there is nothing more I can do. We'll just have to wait and see if something shows up. If information starts to appear in your competitor's hands, then we'll know."

Timothy grumbled a reply that Nicholas could not hear. He didn't ask him to repeat it because he wanted to be through with this conversation. They bid good-bye and hung up. Nicholas looked at the folder laying on his desk. It was still woefully thin. He picked up the phone. "I'm still in bliss," he said. He listened. "You're kidding," he said excitedly. "Tonight!" He listened again. "You sure know how to make my day! I can hardly wait!" He hung up. Deborah was wound up. She was making up for lost time. Nicholas was glad he was

here to be the beneficiary of all this good fortune. He shuffled through the papers on his desk. He threw away everything he could and crammed the rest into a drawer. He had to make it look like he was doing something. A message fluttered out of the stack he was holding. It was from Amanda. The 'please return call' box was checked. He wadded it up and dropped it in the trash. "Sorry Amanda. I don't need you any longer. I've found someone twice as good." Satisfied that his desk looked presentable, he arose and left the office. He needed to find something to pass the time until he met Deborah at the hotel.

Higgins awoke with a start. He had almost rather stay awake than sleep and dream. The nightmares were disturbing. He arose from the bed and looked out the window. He had decided. There was no need for delay. He would do something and soon. He found the brightly colored pictures he had found in a file cabinet on the surgery floor. They were from a medical book and showed the human body parts in color. He held one in the dim light and studied it. Slowly, he worked his way through the stack and started again. He found the one he wanted and began to read. After every sentence he flipped the page and looked at the picture. It was a slow tedious way to learn anatomy. He studied all the pictures. Side view, back view, front view and cross section. He took off his shirt and stepped in front of the mirror. He looked at his body and then held up the diagram. He extended his finger and poked himself just above his waist and on the side of his back. He held his finger in place and looked again at the diagram. "Kidney," he said.

Timothy was exasperated. He didn't like being burglarized even if he couldn't find anything missing. He looked at his watch. He didn't want to go home. He would only be more frustrated there. He didn't want to do any work even though there was tons of it to be done. In the time he had sat there staring at the wall he could have made

thousands of dollars. He had tried several times to beep Deborah and she wouldn't return his call. He had called her cell phone and still got no response. That had done nothing for his mood. He knew she was there leaving only one reason why she wouldn't return his call. She was with Nicholas. She made sure there was plenty for everyone but he still couldn't suppress a twinge of jealousy. He had waited too long. The paralegals were gone. He could always call one back but that was better when it was spontaneous. He would see one walking by or crossing her legs and he sent a silent signal. The minute the office was empty they would run together like two rams. It would just ruin the mood if he had to wait for one to come back. Besides, he couldn't put names with bodies. He wouldn't know which one he had called until she showed up. She might not be the one he had been thinking about. He pulled up to his desk and picked up a piece of paper. He read, held it over the trash can and dropped it. He choose another piece and did the same. If he did this all night he would have his desk clean by dawn. After an hour, he had one side of his desk clean. All that was left was his leather portfolio. He opened it and immediately froze. He flipped a few pages, forward and back. He remembered what he had been doing. Some things he did not forget. He held the book up to the light. It simply wasn't there. He began a systemic search all over the desk top, to no avail. He rolled back from his desk and looked on the floor and there he saw the faint reflection. He leaned over and picked up the tiny gold string. A 14 karat gold string. It was the bookmark that went with his leather binder. Someone had tampered with his binder and not noticed the tiny gold string. "Now, who?" he was wondering. The binder was covered with his desk paraphernalia as it always was. He stared down the hall at the door that had been repaired. Maybe that break-in made a bit more sense now. He was still contemplating what he should do, if anything. Actually, he was debating what he could do. On such thin evidence he wondered why he would do anything. It was just one of those things. No one came into

his office when he wasn't there and under the threat of death, no one, for sure, so much as breathed on anything on his desk. It was always possible he had inadvertently knocked the string on the floor but he always carefully placed it between the pages where he made the last entries. It was a habit of many years. In his mind's eye he could see the string in it's place as he closed the binder. He was not wrong but even so he was not sure of what to do. He was even hesitant to tell Deborah. He didn't like the idea of admitting that someone could force the door, walk right into his office and read her banking information. Actually, it was hers, his and several more clients. He was still thinking when he heard soft footsteps in the hall.

"Hello.....Mr. Lawrence," the very feminine voice called out.

"Come in," he said and stared at the door. One of the most beautiful of the paralegals was peering in his office. "Perhaps this night will not be a total loss," Timothy was thinking. She stepped inside and gently closed the door. She hesitated and when Timothy said nothing about the closed door she advanced to the front of his desk. He nodded at a chair and she sat down and executed an exaggerated leg crossing. Timothy's eyes widened. "Wow!" he thought to himself. "They made a movie like this?" Timothy tore his eyes from the display and looked at the woman. She was suddenly confident and turned on her most seductive look. "That's really not necessary and you're using time that could best be used doing something better." The woman was momentarily taken aback by Timothy's directness but she quickly recovered. She stood and did something to her dress and it fell in a heap around her ankles. Now she was wearing ear rings and high heel shoes. She kicked the dress aside and stepped out of the shoes. "Nice ear rings," Timothy said. She walked around his desk and straddled him while he was still sitting in the chair. "This is not working while my clothes are on. She stood and started untying his tie. Timothy tugged at his belt.

Later, Timothy was sprawled on the floor. The woman was standing in front of the huge window, stark naked and doing various poses. She giggled, "This is kind of fun. I wonder if anyone is looking?"

"Probably half the city," Timothy said but not loud enough for her to hear.

She turned and looked at Timothy. "Well, let's give them something that will spice up their otherwise mundane lives."

"I think we already did that."

"Let's do it again."

Millions of men would give a fortune to experience what Timothy was at this moment, experiencing. But his mind drifted to Deborah and their bank account codes. Then it drifted to Deborah and Nicholas. He tried to push that image out of his mind. He looked out the window. There.....across the street and high up in the building....someone was silhouetted in a window. Timothy squinted and the person became clearer. They were looking straight in his window and through binoculars. He was getting a perfect view. Timothy slowly raised his arm and waved. He watched as the man lifted his arm and acknowledged. He never stopped looking through the binoculars. The woman was right. It was kind of fun. Timothy decided he would make the guy the most envious person who ever lived. Soon, he was no longer thinking about Deborah.

Higgins was trying to concentrate but was having difficulty doing so. He was ready for action not for thinking. It was a mistake and he knew it but he wasn't controlling it. It was not the first time that had happened. In Vietnam.....he grunted and shook his head. This was no time for those memories.

Part of his problem was he could not make too many plans. This was a make-up-as-you-go plan. That was not a new concept to him. Not a single mission ever went as planned in Vietnam. When you could spray several thousand rounds of ammunition into the problem, improvising was

a bit easier. On most of Higgins' missions that was not a viable solution. It was then that he learned about make-up-as-you-go missions. It was necessary to have a basic plan. From there, it was where the successful was separated from the unsuccessful. Higgins basic plan was decided. It had been simple. Now he was wrestling with contingencies. There were far too many and they were giving him problems. Just when he had about decided the whole thing was nothing short of a suicide mission, he was engulfed in a soothing calm. He was tranquil. He knew how to succeed. Confidence and boldness. Those were the keys. He would make it work. In a few minutes he was dozing.

Nicholas and Deborah were snuggling. "You make it hard for me to keep my mind on business but something has to be done on the murder of that nurse."

Deborah did not answer. She stirred slightly and said, "What....I had my mind on better things. I don't know how I've done without you for all these years."

Nicholas hugged her. He was reluctant to break the mood. "That case.....if I don't do something.....somebody else is going to. I wish you would give me some inside information. I'll take it from there. No one ever has to know my source. I've never given up a source and I would die before giving you up."

"I know that. That is no problem. The problem is, I don't know anything. I don't have a clue how that could have happened and I certainly do not know who did it."

"That's not what I'm asking. Tell me how things work. Who does what? I'll take it from there."

"I'll help, for sure. I wonder if we could do that during business hours. I sure hate to waste this time on business."

In a few minutes her point was well taken. Nicholas agreed.....business would have to wait.

Deborah was having a hard time concentrating. She was not that interested in their tryst but it kept Nicholas from asking things she didn't want to talk about. What she really wondered was what happened to Samuel Franklin. She was sure he had reached his limit and split for parts unknown. She didn't know if he was a beach person, a mountain cabin person or what but she had now concluded that whatever person he was, he was now there. He had plenty of money and apparently he had decided it was enough. That, she had not counted on. Now, the whole operation was shut down and she didn't know where to turn for a replacement. So far, an emergency had not shown up so she had not been called on. One was way overdue. She winced every time the phone rang. She had considered advising her Japanese friends and perhaps they would know of a Japanese replacement. They seemed to come up with just about anything they wanted. No one at the hospital would think anything about a foreign anesthesiologist showing up for a job, especially when his credentials were impeccable and from a leading American medical school. The Japanese could do things like that. She had seen similar things happen.

Maybe Franklin was right. Maybe it was time to retire. Her fortune would make Franklin's look like a child's piggy bank. She wondered what reaction the next recipient would have. She had been thinking about that and shuddered, which Nicholas had mistaken for satisfaction and increased his tempo.

A dying Jap would have little to lose from taking out his frustration on the doctor who failed to deliver. Perhaps, she should simply advise them what had happened. Surely they could not hold her accountable for Franklin's sudden departure. If they had a solution, great. If not, well, all good things had to end, sooner or later. Somehow, she did not think this would have such a happy ending. She had watched those sneaky little bastards....she shuddered again and Nicholas had really gone into overdrive.

The more she thought about it the better Franklin's idea was looking. Hers would not be so easy. For one thing, she would have to significantly alter her appearance. She was easily recognized all over the world and there was William Payne. A Senator's wife could hardly go missing without major ramifications. This would require plenty of consideration and she was beginning to worry about how much time she had to make these considerations.

Nicholas was making a Herculean effort and despite her preoccupation, she could no longer ignore the effect it was having on her. A few minutes later and she was no longer thinking about the problem.

She had an equal effect on Nicholas and they ended up staying all night in the hotel. They over slept and had to part in a head long rush to make their second appointments of the day. They had already missed the first.

Deborah rushed into her office. Her secretary was exasperated. Deborah had not answered her pages nor cell phone. She rushed passed the secretary without a word which further exasperated the secretary. Inside her office, she hit the intercom. "What's next?" Sometimes it was better to offer no explanation rather than a lame one.

"Today is your paperwork day. You have no surgeries and we were going to catch up," the secretary said icily.

"Well then, let's get started catching up," Deborah matched her tone. Ordinarily, she let the secretary have her way. Today was going to be a long day and she decided to spend it with the upper hand.

Hours later, they had made a huge dent in the paperwork. The top of her desk was almost in sight. But Deborah was growing restless. She had almost reached her paperwork quota. The secretary walked in and gleefully deposited a tall stack of papers in the center of her desk. Deborah frowned. "Your correspondence. I've prepared all your dictation. All you need to do is sign it, unless of course, you wish to check it."

She ignored the secretary's catty remark and with much flourish, signed her name on the first document. Half way through the stack, her pager buzzed. She looked at the display. It was Timothy. She dialed his number since she could talk and sign her name. She didn't want her secretary to know but she had no intentions of reading all this stuff.

Deborah's office door had been open all day as had been the door into the hall. She seldom looked out but if she had and had been paying attention, she might have noticed the janitor passing back and forth and spending a great deal of time mopping the hallway in front of her door. Since she rarely looked she did not notice. Now, she had Timothy on the phone and he was adamant about getting together tonight. She was enjoying the playful banter and slowly swiveled her chair until her back was turned to the door.

Higgins had waited hours for this moment. He grabbed a cloth bag, stepped into the secretary's office, muttered 'trash' and began to dump her trash can. She did not look up. Higgins glanced into the doctor's office. She was still facing away from her desk and still talking on the phone. Swiftly and quietly, he stepped into her office. He placed the note on her desk slightly away from the stack of papers. It was an interoffice memo, or at least, it was suppose to look like one. Higgins was guessing that the doctor would not notice the difference, no matter the appearance of the real hospital interoffice memos. He hastily dumped her trash and left. He gathered his mop and bucket and left the hall. His plan had taken a long time and he had not had a clue that he would be able to pull it off. Now, he could do nothing but wait.

Finally, Deborah had convinced Timothy that tomorrow night was better. She hadn't yet lost the glow from last night's marathon with Nicholas. The timing was everything. Just as one memory faded was the time to replace it with another. There was a time when she liked to have memories stacked on top of one another. Her schedule dictated that she add on memories instead of piling them up. She and Timothy

bid good-bye and she turned back to her task. The secretary sensed that Deborah was in one of her rare frames of mind and if she did not let the work flow abate, she could clear her backlog of paperwork. She became a flurry of efficiency. She never brought in so much that Deborah would become discouraged and quit nor did she let the stack get so low that Deborah would think she could finish if she put on a rush. Deborah methodically signed everything that was placed before her. Her mind was still on last night. She knew if she kept on thinking about it she would work herself up into moving the engagement with Timothy up to tonight. She was not discouraging herself from thinking about it.

Finally, she stood and stretched. While looking at her desk from that height was when she saw the memo. She frowned. "How did that get there?" she wondered. She glanced out the door. The secretary had gone to a vending machine, she remembered. She picked up the memo and read it.

The secretary came back and one glance told her she should have never left. Deborah was doing nothing, staring at the wall. The secretary sighed. She had that look. The work was probably over for the day. She sat down, expecting Deborah to bolt out of the office at any second. After some time passed and she was still in her office, the secretary peeked in. Deborah was signing papers. The secretary was pleased. She had misread the signs. She looked at the diminishing pile that remained. With any luck they may finish.

Deborah was thinking about the memo. It had no hidden meaning if you just read the memo. If you just read the memo, it had no meaning. It was like an inside joke. Funny to only those who knew why it was funny. Deborah was letting her imagination run wild. It was easy to decide that the one and only Samuel Franklin had written the memo. Soon, she was sure that was the case. Franklin had pulled a temporary disappearing act. It was to get her attention and prove his indispensability. He was about to bargain for a bigger slice of the pie. He had made his point that was for sure. Now, what remained was

for Deborah to decide what she was going to do about it. There was plenty of money. She could certainly afford to give him more money. On the other hand, she had decided to run the problem by her Japanese friends. They had as much at stake as she. They should take a bigger share of the problems although that was certainly not part of any agreement they had made. The only agreement they had was to pay enormous sums of money for services rendered. They had certainly fulfilled their end of the arrangement. To expect they would take a more active role was probably a stretch. If they were caught anymore involved than they were now would be risking an international incident. No, she didn't think it was prudent to pursue that avenue. Not until all other avenues were exhausted. She held up the memo and read it again. Yes, she decided. Samuel Franklin was flexing his muscles. She might put up some resistance and hint at an alternative solution but for now she would have to take whatever he dealt. She put the memo in her pocket and began to sign papers again.

She was clearing out the backlog in record breaking fashion and her secretary could barely contain her glee. If the secretary had only known how robotic Deborah had become, she could have placed the deed to her house in the stack and Deborah would have signed it as well.

Deborah could hardly keep her eyes off the clock. The increased noise level in the hall told her it was five o'clock. Several times she glanced at her secretary but she was showing no signs of leaving. Deborah sighed and continued to sign her name. At this rate, she should have no more paperwork for the rest of the year.

At six o'clock, Deborah was reaching the absolute limits of her signature signing capabilities. Finally, she saw the signs. Her secretary was putting the final touches on arranging her desk top in perfect order. The pencils in the pencil holder, just so. All paper clips in their holder and neatly aligned. The desk pad in perfect symmetry. She stood and surveyed her kingdom. She stepped to the door, bid Deborah a good night and was gone.

Deborah tossed the pen on her desk, sprawled back in her chair and exclaimed, "Thank God!" She walked to the hall and glanced both ways. No one was in sight. Her secretary was really gone. She shut the door, went back to her desk, opened a bottom drawer and took out a small flask. It contained a few ounces of bourbon, a gift from Timothy for some long forgotten reason. She hiked up her dress, way up and propped her feet on her desk. In three swigs, the flask was empty. She closed her eyes and let the bourbon take effect. In a few minutes, she was much more relaxed. She would have to remember to refill the flask. She wondered what Mrs. Blumenfeld would do tonight or any other night for that matter. She wondered if there was a Mr. Blumenfeld. Deborah had never asked. Maybe, she was Miss Blumenfeld.

Deborah looked at her watch. It was a few minutes before the meeting. She would be a few minutes late. She would not give Franklin any reason to think she was anxious. Let him wait. By the time she arrived, he would have decided she wasn't coming. Deborah looked at her watch again. That should be good enough. Forty minutes should have Franklin hopping from one foot to the other. She stood, straightened her dress and went down the hall. There was another way to the surgery floor. She would be there in less than five minutes.

Bartholomew Higgins waited in the room in total darkness. His back was pressed against the wall as was the back of his head. He could feel the building. It's elevators, it's doors that slammed, it's humming and it's imperceptible quivers. So far, he had not felt what he was waiting for. Then he felt something different. A slight jar to his head but different from those at the nurse's station. He turned his head until his ear was pressed to the wall. He listened intently. Then he heard. Click, click, click. Someone was coming and not from the nurse's station. It was a female, in dress shoes. He was on his feet in an instant. He took a position behind the door just as he had when he practiced. It would have to be quick. He put his head against

the wall and willed himself to concentrate. The footsteps stopped outside the door and the doorknob clicked. A crack appeared below the door hinge and for a second he could see into the hall. It was Dr. Warren. He tensed. She reached for the light switch, flipped it but nothing happened. She pushed the door wider. Light from the hall spilled into the room. Now, Dr. Warren was in the room but she held the door open. She had said nothing. Higgins could wait no longer. He pushed against the door. It came out of her grip. She gasped but before she could turn or call out or take a step, Higgins chopped the back of her head with his huge hand and she dropped like a stone. Higgins did not attempt to break her fall. He stepped over her, looked into the hall and seeing no one, closed and locked the door. He took a small flashlight from his pocket and found the lights over the operating table. He exhaled sharply and looked at the doctor. He bent down, slid his arms under her and effortlessly lifted and carried her to the table.

Deborah came to consciousness. For a second, she thought she was going to be sick. She was gagged, blindfolded and trussed up so thoroughly, she thought she was paralyzed. She strained against the restraints but could only make faint moaning sounds.

"I'm going to remove the blindfold," said the voice. The blindfold was removed. She blinked painfully in the glare of the overhead lights. An instant later, she recognized where she was. She cut her eyes upward trying to see the source of the voice. "I can't stress the importance of what I am about to say, Doctor. And as important as it may be, it is nothing compared to what you must say. What you must say must make me happy. Do I make myself clear?" She nodded. "Good, now I will remove the gag. Don't make me regret that decision." The gag was removed. She lifted her head and peered down her body. She was completely nude. She moaned and laid her head back on the table.

"Are you going to rape me?" she hissed.

"I wouldn't think you would notice, Doctor."

"What.....?" she was puzzled.

"I've been following you. You are.....shall we say.....active."

"A stalker!" she thought. "This guy has been stalking me." She tried to remember that seminar. All doctors had to attend. Most of them had dozed or daydreamed through it. At the end they had told what to do if you were actually confronted by a stalker. At this point your life is in grave danger the speaker had told them. You have little to lose by trying any and everything. Then he had read off the possible options. She raised her head and looked at her bound body. "Running is certainly not one of those options," she thought. She already suspected she could not trade sex for freedom. If that was his intentions, he could take all he wanted without trading anything. She did not think that was his intentions. "What else," she tried to will herself to think. Fear was gaining control. Soon, she would be unable to think clearly. It may have already happened. She cut her eyes upward, trying to see her captor. He was still out of sight. "Money," she said. "I'll give you more money than you can imagine if you'll stop this now."

Higgins remained out of sight but said, "I was going to get to that but since you've brought it up we can do that now." He held the pages in front of her face. She immediately recognized them. She closed her eyes and groaned. He had been in Timothy's office. There was no other way he could have that information. "You and the lawyer make a great couple, well, maybe not as great as you and the detective." It took her breath. The man had seen everything. He knew everything. She felt very helpless. "I've been studying foreign bank accounts and now I have some of my own," Higgins said. "Of course, they don't have any money in them." He shuffled the papers. "That is about to change, isn't it?"

"I'll give you money. I've already said that. Just agree to let me go."

His silence did not give Deborah a good feeling. Higgins moved quickly. He placed a telephone on the table beside her head. He dialed numbers and entered codes and amounts for a long time. Deborah could hear the beeps and tones that signaled her money was being transferred from her accounts to his. From time to time she had to give double verification codes for the transactions to be completed and she did so. As the man at the seminar said, "What did she have to lose?" She might be buying her life. If not, then she would have little use for a big bank account.

Finally, he hung up the phone. "I'll see that the money goes to a good cause," he said.

"Okay, you've got what you wanted. Now, let me go!"

"Not quite," Higgins said simply. Deborah's heart sank. He stepped beside the table and for the first time she saw him. She had never seen him before. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Bartholomew Higgins." A puzzled look crossed her face as she tried to make a connection. "Perhaps, you are a bit too stressed to make the connection. How about Amy Higgins? Is that familiar?" Deborah thought her heart was going to stop. Involuntarily, she inhaled and gulped. "I thought you might remember her." Deborah thought she was going to hyperventilate. Her mouth gaped open and she took a big breath but before she could scream his giant hand clamped over her mouth. He crammed the gag back into her mouth and waited. Deborah fought so hard against the gag and restraints she thought blood vessels in her head were going to pop. Her body went limp.

The glare of the lights caused her eyes to flutter. She winced from the brightness. Then she realized she had fainted. Suddenly, Higgins loomed over her. "Your chances are becoming fewer. Are you going to answer my questions? My patience grows thin."

Numbly, she nodded her head. He removed the gag. She was like a zombie. Her will was broken. That name...Higgins. She knew she was doomed.

"I'm waiting, Doctor."

"It started simply enough. My husband had access to many rich and influential Japanese. Rather, they had access to him. They were willing to pay millions for transplants so we set up a way to do it here." She rolled her eyes to indicate the room. "This wing is unfinished and it was simple enough to slip in and out. I had help. Everyone was making lots of money. For awhile the replacement parts were easy to come by. We found ways to move the Japs into priority on the waiting lists. For this, they paid.....," she let the sentence die. He had the money. He already knew what they paid. "Problems soon came up. Even though they had priority there were not enough parts. The Japanese had a solution for that. Throw enough money at the problem and a way will be found." Her mind wandered away as she tried to think of some way to bargain for her life.

"Go on, Doctor," Higgins said impatiently.

"It's a big city. There are many hospitals. We found ways to obtain medical histories on patients. Those that had no lasting problems were possible donors if....."

"If they should conveniently die," he finished the sentence.

She nodded numbly. She knew where this was going. He was going to force her to say it and then he would.....she shuddered. What was he going to do?

"I think I've heard enough about everyone else. "My Amy, what did you do to her?" Deborah gulped and began to sob. "Too late for tears. I want to know what you did to her." Higgins could not know that Deborah was not crying for his daughter. She was crying for herself. She was about to seal her fate. The thought had never crossed her mind before but now she was about to beg for a quick, painless death.

She regained control and began again. "Two recipients approached us at the same time. As fate would have it, they were a match. In other words, they could receive the same organ and both were in dire need. They have quite a little grapevine in our hospital it seems and they found out about each other. A bidding war ensued. We could not believe the money they were willing to pay. It got up to twenty-five million, each. As the bids were going up, we were searching frantically for a donor." She paused again. This was getting harder and harder. "Then, the unbelievable happened. The computers came up with a match but instead of from the patient list, it was from the employee list. It didn't take long for someone to think of a way to double our money. We would let the Japanese keep on bidding but unknown to them, they both were going to win."

"I wonder who thought of that idea?" Higgins said.

Deborah didn't answer. She was deciding she could only die once. "There was just no stopping at this point. It was too easy. She was on duty....we.....," Deborah could not finish. Fear took control, fear of what was going to happen to her. "There's nothing I can say to ease your anguish. I wish I could trade places with your daughter to make amends for what I've done." Deborah suddenly had a thought. She had given him all the money. Maybe she could beg. It was worth a try. "If you will let me go, I give you my word I will devote the rest of my life to helping people. I'll only keep enough money to live modestly. I'll do charity work, free medical, you can name it." She waited to see if Higgins would consider her proposal. He said nothing. "What do you say?" she asked.

"I'm not in a forgiving mood."

"You have a fortune. You can live anyway you choose. With everything you know, I would never be free. I'd have to uphold my agreement or you could sink my boat at any time."

"I would have to think that you would not be happy in that arrangement. You have powerful friends. Attempting to eliminate your

problems would be too great of a temptation. Sooner or later, you would try to have me eliminated."

"You have the evidence. If anything happened to you, out comes the evidence and I am finished."

"The world is a big place, Doctor. Your Japanese friends might find a place for you. Anything is possible." Higgins walked beside the table and looked down at her. "Besides that would deny me the very thing I came for."

"What?" she asked haltingly.

"Revenge."

Deborah opened her mouth to scream but before a sound came out the gag was thrust in her mouth. She fought violently against the restraints and the gag but only succeeded in shaking her head until her vision was blurred. Higgins moved quickly to untie the restraints. She was still tightly bound but not to the table. He turned her onto her stomach and bound her to the table again. She mustered her strength for another attempt at breaking free but it only lasted a few seconds. She was too exhausted. She could lift her head enough to look from side to side. Higgins was not in sight. She looked frantically. She sensed that whatever he planned was about to happen.

Suddenly, he was there. "I don't guess my Amy knew what was happening to her. You will not be so lucky." Higgins held a big colored chart of the human body in front of her face. "I've been studying," he said. He looked at the picture and then at Deborah's body. He jabbed her with a big finger and said, "About there, I'd say." Deborah's eyes were wide with fear. Higgins held a large scalpel. The overhead lights caused it to glint. "I'm about to remove your kidneys. Unfortunately for you, your anesthesiologist cannot be here and unfortunately for you I may have to search around until I find them. Your misfortune continues. I don't have any spares to put in their place."

She felt the point of the scalpel touch her and then the pain began.

## CHAPTER 11

Bartholomew Higgins pulled the glove off his hand, took an oversized bandanna from his hip pocket and wiped his face. It was over one hundred degrees and heat ripples danced in all directions. Higgins sighted down the fence. It disappeared into the heat ripples but Higgins knew the corner was not far away. Then a right turn and then the fence again disappeared into the heat ripples. Fence repairs were a dull, repetitious job but Higgins never did mind. It gave him the chance to see the far reaches of his ranch. The desolation was so complete he felt like he was the only man left on the earth. He stared across the prairie until a mirage formed in his mind's eye. He could see the small child running toward him in gleeful delight. She held a horned frog at arm's length and squealed for his attention. His Amy always wanted to go when he repaired fences. Her exploration lasted until midmorning when she would fall asleep on the seat of his pickup. He gulped down the lump in his throat and went to the pickup for a drink of water. He sipped and gazed across the land. Then the reflection caught his eye. Someone was coming slowly along the fence

row. They were driving so slowly no dust was kicking up. This was unusual. Higgins glanced at the rifle slung on the rack in his pickup. He took it down, bolted in a round and hung it back. He continued to drink and watch the approaching vehicle. He decided he would waste no more time waiting. He returned to the fence, took the hammer off the top of the post where he had balanced it and began to drive staples into the post, securing the wire to it. He checked often on the progress of the vehicle.

Finally, it was close enough not to be obscured by the heat ripples. He went quickly to his pickup, took out the rifle and peered through the scope. He zeroed in on the license plate which revealed nothing except it had a Texas license plate. He focused on the windshield. He winced from the glare. Then it cleared and the driver's face came into view. "Well, I'll be dipped," Higgins said softly. He replaced the rifle and returned to his job. Soon the car came to a stop and the door was opened and closed. Higgins wiped his brow and watched the man walk tentatively through the sandy soil and brush. "A long ways from home, aren't you Detective Vaughn?"

"Mr. Higgins, I presume?" Nicholas returned the polite banter.

"You should have let me know you were coming. I would have waited at my house and saved you the drive."

"At the time, I thought this was a better idea. Now, I wish I had called."

"Must really be important to bring you so far." Higgins eyes were roaming all over Nicholas, looking for the telltale indications that he carried a weapon. He could see none. Nicholas caught his visual search.

"Quite a place you have here, Mr. Higgins," Nicholas said ignoring the question. He looked all around the vast countryside, also ignoring Higgins penetrating gaze. "I didn't know there really were places like this. I thought the movies just made them up, a prop, you know."

Now, Higgins' gaze was becoming menacing. "I hate not to be neighborly, Detective Vaughn but as you can see I have a lot of fence to repair." Higgins pulled himself up to his full height and said a bit more forcefully, "What can I do for you?"

Nicholas looked out across the countryside again. He had the sinking feeling that this was not a good place to confront this man. A fellow could get lost out here, dead or alive. "There is certainly no one to overhear us. May I speak frankly and, of course, off the record?"

"Speak anyway you want, Detective. All I ask is that it be fast."

"I don't think I'll be telling you anything you don't already know." He still did not look at Higgins. He knew he could not read the man. "Deborah Warren was murdered. A particularly gruesome death. Someone cut out her kidneys and she was alive, at least, part of the time." Now he looked at Higgins. He was emotionless. Nicholas did notice his hands. Those huge hands, the fingers slowly flexing. He continued, "But the Doctor wasn't exactly using her profession to it's most noble cause. A flaw I'm sad to say that wasn't exclusive to the Doctor." Nicholas looked at Higgins again. There was still no reaction. "I think, Mr. Higgins, that you killed several people in our fair city. I don't know why you killed muggers and street people. Perhaps, it was vengeance, perhaps they attacked you." Nicholas took a deep breath. "And I think you killed Deborah Warren and probably, Samuel Franklin. He is still missing." Higgins opened his mouth but Nicholas held up his hand and continued, "We finally got to the bottom of the transplant thing. The President and William Payne covered for the Japanese. That was never made public. First, they didn't want to lose all that money and they sure didn't want the public to learn that Americans were being killed so Japanese could get transplants." Nicholas moaned and rubbed his forehead. "Quite a mess and all the more frustrating because I am helpless."

"Why don't you try doing some cop work," Higgins said disdainfully.

"This reached all the way to the President. He wasn't in on the transplant thing but the Japanese were giving the administration hundreds of millions and all that would have been exposed. The investigation died quickly and at the lower levels. The little fish died and the big fish swam away."

"You sure came a long way in the wrong direction looking for a scapegoat, Detective."

"I don't think so. Timothy Lawrence and I figured out what happened to the money. Where it is, of course, remains a mystery." He arched an eyebrow at Higgins but Higgins did not bite. "Deborah gave the money to you but you killed her anyway."

"I grow tired of your baseless accusations, Detective. There is a code of the west. Do not come on to a man's property and accuse him of something that you cannot prove. And there is a footnote to that code. Don't do it even if you have proof and are thirty miles from the nearest witness."

"A point well taken, Mr. Higgins. Perhaps, I should speculate instead of accuse."

"Perhaps, you should haul your ass off my property."

Nicholas did not like the tone of his voice. He had definitely overplayed his hand. "Allow me to finish." Higgins said nothing so Nicholas assumed he could go on. "I was investigating quite thoroughly and making some progress. Something I should have been doing from the beginning," he added. "I started getting pressure, then more pressure, then my department head called me in. I had been compromised. It seems there was a video of me and Deborah, a Senator's wife no less, and that video was about to become front page news, in living color on every TV in the country." He looked at Higgins. The man was tough. There was not a sign of sympathy on his face. "I resigned from the department. I'm no longer a cop." If Nicholas had half expected that

would move Higgins to a confession, he would have been totally wrong. Higgins only shrugged.

"I can't see that we have anything more to discuss, Detective....er....Mr. Vaughn." The faintest smile crossed Higgins lips.

"I came here hoping to end this. You lost a child and I lost the only woman I ever loved. It doesn't help my feelings that the woman I loved was responsible for the death of your child."

"We are not grieving brothers, Mr. Vaughn. I have no sympathy for anyone responsible for the brutal murder of my Amy. I hope your Doctor suffered unimaginably."

Nicholas looked at Higgins. His eyes were beads of hate. His nostrils flared. "I hoped we could part with some feelings of .....ending this. That's why I came. I can see I made a mistake but I don't think any harm was done. We'll go on. We both lost but it saddens me more that Deborah was the cause of your grief. I wanted you to know that even though it changes nothing."

"I'm not in a reconciling mood," Higgins said.

"I'll go now. I didn't come here to make things worse." He took a few steps toward his car. "Oh, by the way, I wonder what a guy would do if he suddenly came into a lot of money. Say, close to one hundred million dollars."

"Can't say, Mr. Vaughn. Never knew any one that had that much money."

Nicholas took a piece of paper from his pocket, carefully unfolded it, looked at it and held it out to Higgins.

Higgins took the paper and looked at it. "Can't read Japanese," he said.

"That's the names of two men in Japan. They now have a new lease on life. They expect to live to a ripe old age, compliments of American medical expertise and the availability of replacement parts."

Higgins stared at the paper as Nicholas made his way back to his car. "Mr. Vaughn," he called out. Nicholas turned and looked. "About that money. If I had that much money I'd go on a hunting trip."

"Where?" Nicholas asked.

"Japan."