

Breathe Not the Sins of Others

by

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O SON OF MAN!

Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command, accursed wouldst thou be, and to this I bear witness.

—Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*

Prologue

He shivered.

Huddled in a fetal ball, skin glistening with perspiration, his body convulsed, shaking him like a dog drying itself after a swim. Despite the July night's muggy oppression, gooseflesh rippled the sheen of sweat covering his body. Hot tears of shame slid down his cheeks, joining the salty flow onto the saturated sheets.

He shook again as the sound smacked him.

No matter how hard he pressed his hands over his ears, he could not shut out the sonic assault. With each note of the terrifying symphony, he quaked.

Unbidden, his tortured mind reviewed the history of the appalling sounds—so innocent played as single notes, so chilling played as chords.

On that first night, squeaks from the bed in the next room, tentative and irregular, had slid through the wall with the ease of a breeze through a screen door. A soft murmur by a deep voice, somehow soothing and menacing at the same time, had followed. A higher voice had then chirped a response and the two voices began an exchange with fear gradually replacing trust as the chirps' primary characteristic. Then the bed had given a final protest, the door had closed, and quiet footsteps had brushed down the hall to his mother's room.

Within a few weeks, the squeaks became an insistent, rhythmic tattoo. As their rhythm had increased in tempo and duration, so had the frequency of the symphony's performance. Only the sporadic absence of the player of the bass notes kept it from becoming a nightly occurrence.

During each performance, however, new notes were added. The piece never seemed to be quite finished. He remembered vividly the first little yelp, so quickly muffled. Struck only a few times and then abandoned. Its memory still sent a shaft of ice through his heart.

An overlay of soft cries replaced it. Sharp, imperative commands answered *sotto voce*. Within a few days, both of these elements became mere punctuations in the opening movement. As the tormenting tattoo ascended to dominate the second movement, he couldn't decide if their absence was more frightening than their presence.

Soft sobs always closed these concerts, providing a plaintive background for the boy's whispered prayer of thanks that the concert had concluded, and his unanswered supplication that it never be played again.

The entire symphony's only saving grace was its brevity. Once the opening movement had been established, the second went quickly. But not tonight. The opening had been interminable with all sorts of hesitations and exchanges between the voices, as though it was a first rehearsal by rank amateurs. Then suddenly the bass voice spoke with a force and a rage he had never heard before. For the first time the words were clearly distinguishable.

"Harlot! Once you were pure! You were innocent! Now, look at you! Look what you've done to me! You've put your filth on me!"

A sharp slap and an immediate cry of pain shot through the thin wall separating the rooms, driving directly into the boy's ears like an ice pick.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," his sister cried. "I tried to tell you. What's happening to me?"

"It's God's punishment on you, Melissa. His curse on all women, making them unclean. Making them unworthy of righteous men."

“Am I going to die?”

“It would be better for you if you did, now that you’re cursed. Soon you’ll be forcing men to think unclean thoughts like your mother does. You’re already starting to show the signs. Soon they’ll be so obvious they’ll be overpowering, tempting every man who looks on you to fall into sin. I prayed that you would be spared, but God did not see fit to answer.”

“What can I do?”

“Pray. Pray to God to spare you from this degradation. Pray for him to take you now before you defile another man.”

“Take me?”

“Yes. Take you into His arms. Take you to heaven. It’s still not too late, if you go quickly.”

“But I don’t want to die.”

“You want to be temptress like your mother?”

“Mother’s not a temptress.”

“She’s the same as all women. Cursed!” He spat the last word as though ridding his mouth of a vile taste.

“But she’s not evil.”

“You’re becoming just like her. Soon you’ll be taking on the same sluttish ways as your mother. You’ll be a temptress. A whore! Just like all women! I thought God had given me the power to resist her wayward advances when He gave you to me. But now you’ve defiled me, brought me down into unrighteousness. You don’t deserve to live anymore than she does.”

Two loud smacks drove through the wall followed by the sound a sack of potatoes makes when it falls off a truck. A hush descended the way an audience holds its breath at the end of a brilliant performance before bursting into applause.

The boy eased his cramped limbs, waiting for the footsteps in the hall. They didn’t fall.

“Please dear God, let it be over,” he prayed in silence. “If You truly care, let it be over. I can’t protect her from him. Only You can.”

A scream that could only come from the depths of a tortured soul shattered his Amen. Lingering like smoke, it trailed into nothingness and died.

He jumped from his bed. He had to go to her. He had to comfort her. The deep voice, softened as though in prayer, froze him in his tracks, reestablishing the fear he had momentarily overcome. That soft voice always accompanied a tour through a hell in which he found himself flying across a room, or screaming in agony as somewhere in his thin body a bone snapped.

“You’ve made your sacrifice to God, my darling,” the voice intoned. “I pray He takes you to His bosom”

His sister’s door opened and slammed shut with enough violence to shake the wall against which the boy huddled. Rapid footsteps rolled down the hall to his mother’s room where the door opened and closed no less gently.

Before his sister’s door had closed, the boy had retreated to his fetal ball and pulled the covers over his head. While silence radiated from his sister’s room like cold from an open freezer, he cursed God for His failure to intervene. Even more, he cursed his cowardice. Though most would say it was well-founded and, therefore, not cowardice at all, but prudence, the boy only saw himself as a craven, sniveling coward.

Two days after he had come to live with them last year, the boy’s step-father, Duane, had called him into the kitchen for a man-to-man talk.

“Tommy, you’re going to have to be the man of the house when I’m on the road. It’ll be up to you to take care of your sister and your mother. They’re only women and God made man to take care of them. So, even though they’re both older than you, you’ve got to be that man.”

His mother had stood mutely beside Tommy, a fresh bruise on the arm she wrapped around his shoulders. She smiled nervously as she nodded encouragement.

Tommy’s elation at receiving this charge of trust had lasted a week. He had done a good job. His mother had said so repeatedly, both to Tommy when he had taken care of some task, and to his step-father when he had returned.

That day, however, Tommy began the slide that would culminate in tonight’s abject failure. Nothing he did ever merited praise because nothing he did was ever good enough. He might get some part right once in a while, but there was always something wrong which negated what had been correct.

From the other end of the hall, a hideous, hurried reprise of the symphony’s final movement interrupted his self-castigation, battered anew his exhausted mind, and decisively established his guilt. It, too, closed with a scream, deeper in tone, but no less shattering than the original.

The door to his mother’s room opened. Scarcely breathing, he listened to booted footsteps pound down the hall to his door. He knew he was about to collect the wages of his sins just as certainly as he knew his executioner believed those sins were undeserving of pardon or mercy. Huddled in his fetal ball, he shook hard enough to rattle the bed against the wall. The door opened slowly.

“Come here, boy,” the deep voice commanded.

Tommy squeezed his legs more tightly together and wrapped his arms around them in an effort to make himself smaller. Huddled in the shadow cast by the door, he tried to disappear, his terror reaching its nadir.

“I said to come here. You know better than to disobey me.”

The menace in Duane’s voice sparked Tommy’s return from the dread that had characterized his relationship with his step-father for so many months. He realized he had gone as far as he could down that path. He could see that it literally led nowhere. He faced a wall that was insurmountable, impregnable, inviolable and he realized he had but two choices: He could huddle like a sniveling coward and accept this man’s unjust punishment, or he could turn and face him.

He had had enough of huddling. All it had ever gotten him was another beating and now, probably, a dead sister and mother. He would probably join them, but at least he would do it like a man.

Carefully, Tommy unfurled himself and started to rise to face the man who had destroyed his life. As he turned towards Duane, he realized that he might be able to go around the insurmountable wall he faced. The window was open and only two steps away. He could dive through it and be in the woods before Duane could make it out of the house. Once there, he knew where to hide. It had worked before, it would work again, especially in the dark. He might be huddling, but only until he could go to the cops. They couldn’t all be like Duane. One of them would believe him. They would have to.

Tommy took one more step in his turn to put off the monster he faced and then twisted away from its outstretched hand. With two bounding steps, he dove through the torn screen and landed on the grass. He rolled to his feet and sprinted for the safety of the forest that surrounded the house.

Knowing exactly where he was going, he cut sharply to the right a hundred feet in, ran twenty more, and skidded to a halt above the river a dozen feet below. He slid down the embankment and plunged into the cold water. Feeling his way to the root that formed a handle against the bank, he dove under the water and pulled himself into a small cavern. He put his feet down and stood up. His head broke the surface and grazed the dirt roof. Even in the driest part of the summer, the river's level had not revealed this hideaway. It had saved him several beatings. Now, it would save his life.

Monday

Chapter One

Questions

”Give it up, Paula. He’s toast.”

“Count. Don’t talk.”

“Five.” Mace paused for her to blow another breath through the mask and resumed the cadence. “One and two and three and four and five.”

What am I doing here, Paula, asked herself. Lack of oxygen was causing her vision to gray out and her attention to wander. I turn fifty-six in two months and here I am on a jail cell floor at a quarter past midnight trying to breathe for two while a deputy uses trite, cop-movie dialogue with utter sincerity because, to him, it’s the way real cops talk. Another breath already?

She blew through the mask’s one-way valve.

Was the lightheadedness getting worse, she asked herself, or were Mace’s compressions speeding up?

Another breath.

I can’t even straighten up to get a breath. Definitely too fast.

“Slow down, Mace. One per second.”

He nodded. “... and five.”

Breath.

“Count one thousand one,” she gasped.

Another nod. “...and three and one thousand four and one thousand five.”

Better, she thought. Not perfect but at least the heart’s got enough time to fill between compressions.

She sat up and took a deep breath. Her head cleared a little. Unhurried, hard-soled feet sounded in the hall outside the cell.

Paramedics? she asked herself. They’re sure taking their time.

Impeccably shined, black Corfam shoes stopped at the door. Paula looked up through the bars that formed the security barrier of this Disciplinary Isolation cell to confirm who filled the shoes, though there was little doubt. Sgt. Benjamin Harris was the only one in the jail who wore them. Every deputy with more than a week’s experience on the job reserved his Corfams for dress occasions because they just weren’t practical for regular work. Scuffs could not be buffed out. Worse, they didn’t breathe like real leather, so the deputy’s feet lived in a sauna. The one and only advantage these completely man-made shoes had was that they could be polished to a mirror shine unattainable with a leather shoe. This made them perfect at the academy where, for some inexplicable reason, the quality of one’s shoe shine dictated in large measure one’s level of success there.

Sgt. Harris, however felt that it was his duty to personally uphold the highest, brightest, and shiniest image of the department under all circumstances. In his pursuit of that goal he always managed to avoid having to do anything that might scuff, wrinkle, or ruffle the perfection of his uniform.

“Paramedics?” Paula gasped.

“Just coming through Reception. What’s your situation, Mrs. McKenzie?”

Paula ignored his question and huffed another breath through the mask. Mace started to answer, forgetting to restart his compressions.

“Five more and do a pulse check,” Paula said.

Mace grudgingly pumped five quick, mostly worthless compressions, and sat back on his heels to catch his breath and wipe his streaming brow. Paula forced another breath in and checked the man’s carotid pulse. Was there something there? She pressed a little deeper. Nope. Just hope. No pulse.

“Continue.”

“One thousand one and one thousand two and…”

Harris nodded and stepped back into the hall. While he could be quite dense at times, the situation here was obvious enough even for him to grasp. He decided that waiting at the elevator to escort the paramedics would be the most helpful thing he could do at the moment, even though they already had an escort. It didn’t occur to him that either of the rescuers might need relief, or that he should send another deputy or two to the scene to assist. Two people were all that were required to give CPR. And since one of them was a nurse, no one else was needed. Well, other than paramedics to transport the inmate to the hospital. It also never occurred to him that he should offer any assistance himself. He was the sergeant, second in command of the jail on this shift. The sergeant’s job was to guide and direct the efforts of his deputies, which he couldn’t do huddled over a dead inmate, soiling his uniform while giving CPR.

The pulse check had given Paula and Mace both a ten second break, but that was not enough to make much of a difference after a couple more series of compressions. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation is hard work. When it has to be continued for more than a few minutes, it is exhausting. Doing it in this small, overheated, airless, stench-filled, dingy space made it debilitating.

Mace’s compressions flagged, losing their depth and force despite his excellent physical conditioning. Paula was having trouble keeping track of Mace’s count. Each breath forced through the one way valve in the safety mask increased the floating feeling in her head and darkened her vision. She had passed the point where an extra breath for herself once or twice a minute was doing any good.

The rattle of the elevator’s door, echoing down the concrete hall signaled relief, she hoped, not another looky-loo. The first person through the door was a redheaded woman in a paramedic’s dark blue jumpsuit, carrying an Ambu-Bag. She dropped beside Paula and smoothly took over respirations. Squeezing the soft, blue football-like rubber bladder with its plastic mask on one end, she forced the next breath into the man immediately after Mace’s five count. A male paramedic knelt across from Mace and called for a pulse check after the current set of compressions. Mace rocked forward one last time, sat back on his heels, and tried to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. The redhead pumped two breaths in, checked the pulse, shook her head at the firefighter, and the two of them began the next series of compressions and breaths. Both silently noted the inmate’s pallor and the hint of cyanosis in his cheeks. His pupils, which the second paramedic had checked during the pulse check, still reacted to light, though sluggishly, indicating there was still some brain activity.

Paula scooted out of the way and stood up unsteadily. A paramedic bringing in the heart monitor/defibrillator grabbed her arm and helped her through the barred gate. She slid down the

wall next to the door, feet splayed in front of her like a carelessly discarded doll. She nodded vaguely to his, “You okay?” He left her to set up the monitor.

Mace stood up and walked into the hall where he leaned his buffed body against the wall. Harris came over to him and asked for a report. Wiping his streaming face again, Mace said, “Still dead.”

The Watch Commander, Lt. Robert Davies, who had brought the medics through the series of double gates and up the elevator, walked up behind Harris and asked, “You found him?”

Mace nodded.

“What’d he use to hang himself?”

“Towel. Torn in strips.”

“Tied to the bars?” Harris asked.

Mace shook his head. “Looped it over the top cross bar.” He paused, waving his hand in a give-me-a-minute gesture, and leaned over with his hands on his knees. After half a dozen deep breaths, he resumed. “He pulled on it just as I was looking in the window. It was like he was waiting for me. He looked right at me when he did it.”

“So how come he’s dead?” Harris asked, “You should have been able to get it off of him in a couple of seconds.”

“That’s what I thought, too. I opened the door and the gate and was in there in no more than five, ten seconds. But I couldn’t get the knot loose. He yanked it so hard that the towel cinched down real tight. Couldn’t get it loose at all. That towel stuff just binds up and won’t come loose. I called for Paula on the phone, then went back to untie the knot. No go. Just couldn’t get it. When she got here he was blue as my old Chevy and we had the worst time hacking through that stuff. All she had were these old, dull scissors. Next to worthless. Musta taken us three, four minutes to cut him free. ’Course by then he’s toast, but we gotta start doing CPR anyway, right? That’s when I called it in.”

“But you didn’t identify the emergency.” Harris said. “Central had no idea it was a Code Delta situation. He notified me there was some kind of problem in D.I. that required the medic and that was all.”

“Sorry. I was just too busy trying to get that noose off. I kept thinkin’ if I can get it off, he’ll be okay. But it just wouldn’t come loose and Paula wasn’t gettin’ anywhere cuttin’ through it. That’s when I came back out here and called in the Delta.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough, Mr. Mason,” Harris said. “That man is dead because—”

“—No, he’s not.”

All three men turned to look at Paula who stood in the doorway, drenched in sweat, one hand against the frame for support. She hoped her bra wasn’t showing through her soaked clothing, not that her eighty-seven pound frame had all that much to show, but she didn’t need any leering looks right now. That was the trouble with having to buy your shirts in the same department where ten year old boys got theirs. Besides being white, which accentuated her deeply tanned skin, the shirt material was considerably lighter than the men’s khaki shirts. When wet, it became gauzily transparent. She just hoped the thin, white t-shirts she got in the same department made as good a camisole when wet as they did when dry.

“They got a rhythm and he’s breathing,” she said. Her short, salt and pepper hair dripped sweat into her dark brown eyes. She swiped at her face with her free hand. It just created a clean path for the next wave to roll over her forehead and into her eyes. “Took four hits with the defibrillator and a bucket of epinephrine, but they got him back.”

“That’s great,” Mace said.

“I’m not so sure it is,” she said, walking over to Davies. “He was anoxic for a long time. Long enough for some brain damage. How bad I can’t say for sure, but he’s not responsive. Far as I can tell, he’s in a deep coma. We’ll have to wait for a complete neuro eval, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s permanent.”

“But he’s alive, right? So that’s good for us.” Harris said.

“I think it’s a little early to be passing out cigars,” Davies said, shifting the ever present one in his mouth from left to right. “He still managed to do a really good job of trying to kill himself, and we managed to do a fairly poor job of responding to it.” He looked at Mace.

“Understandable under the circumstances for most people, but we aren’t allowed the luxury of being most people. I don’t know that it would have made much difference, but Sgt. Harris is right, you should have called in a Code Delta when you first saw him pull the cord. Then you’d have had more help and the paramedics might have made it here sooner.”

“But the damage was already done, Bob,” Paula said. “That towel was so tight, and it took so long for us to cut through it, that by the time we were able to start CPR, he was quite likely brain damaged from anoxia. All we did was keep him perfused long enough for the paramedics to revive his heart function. I can’t see that Mace’s delay made any real difference in the outcome.”

“Excuse us, we’re ready to transport,” the redhead said. “You have our escort ready?”

“They’re downstairs waiting beside your unit, ready to roll,” Davies said.

Paula followed the paramedics down to the loading dock and watched them place the man in the ambulance. His neck still bore the dark red bruise of his noose. His respirations were still shallow and one of the paramedics hovered with the Ambu-Bag should they fail again. She had no doubt he would be placed on a ventilator within minutes of reaching the emergency room.

Chilled by the cold night air congealing the sweat on her skin, she turned around and hurried back into the building. Lt. Davies followed her inside.

“Good job, Paula.”

She turned around, looked up his six-foot-three frame from her four-foot-nine height, and rubbed her arms. “I don’t know about that, Bob. I’m not sure I did him any favors.”

He nodded his understanding. He wouldn’t want to live like that. And waking up might even be worse.

“Don’t bother pulling your own incident number. Use Mace’s, and start from when you were first notified. Write it as a supplemental to his report. No need to rush it. Get some dry clothes and do your rounds. We can go over it at breakfast. By the way, his name was Avery. Ring any bells?”

“No. And he isn’t a was. He’s still alive and, God willing, my prognosis is way too pessimistic.”

“Point taken. Doesn’t ring any bells with me either, but I thought you might know him. Help to explain why he did it.”

“Sorry. Can’t help you there. See you at breakfast.” She checked her watch. It was one o’clock which meant she had three hours to change, catch up on everything she would have routinely had done by now, and write the report. No problem. As long as nothing else happened.

Chapter Two

Silvered Clouds

Paula surveyed the body, repulsed, yet attracted. Repulsed by its washed-out blue irises in their field of stark, scleral white, and the pallid, translucent face violated only by the protruding dark purple tongue. Attracted in sympathy by the torment he must have gone through, not only after the noose had tightened inexorably around his neck, but by the hopelessness and despair that had motivated him to take a step he had immediately regretted, as the scratch marks on his throat testified.

Just below the knees, lividity painted his swollen legs a rainbow of mortal hues: pale red to deep lavender. It told her that she had failed this man as she had never failed any patient before. Resuscitation was out of the question. Except for the few milliliters trapped in his tongue, all the blood in his body had drained to his hands and feet.

She reached for his wrist, knowing it was pointless, but compelled by habit and the need to establish contact, even if he was beyond caring. His cold, clammy arm resisted her attempt to lift it. Rigor had set in. Even though no such confirmation was needed, it validated what she already knew. He was well past any help except God's.

Something's missing, she thought. She drew a deep breath as she tried to put her finger on it. That's it! She couldn't smell anything except stale cigarette smoke floating on an undercurrent of disinfectant, the normal smell of the jail. There was no smell of urine or excrement.

You were a tidy fellow weren't you? And I thank you for it. Must have used the toilet just before you did this.

Avery had not been anywhere near as tidy. That fact had contributed greatly to the feeling that there had been very little breathable air in his cell.

She found something else unusual about this death. Never in her twenty-five years of jailhouse nursing had she had two deaths in the same month, much less the same shift. The jail averaged only two a year, not counting those who died in custody at various ER's and hospitals before ever setting foot inside the jail. Even adding those only upped the total to half a dozen per year. And never once in the jail's history had this method of suicide been employed. Until tonight. Now she had encountered it twice in as many hours.

Just like the man in Disciplinary Isolation, the noose suspending this man's body was made from a towel. Even if he had been able to raise himself up by putting his feet on the lower crossbar, which she suspected he had, the towel had cinched down so tight that it had irreversibly cut off the blood to his brain. The longest he could have held himself up was thirty seconds, probably less, as he clawed at the thick, choking cloth with one hand and finally with both. The preponderance of scratches on the right side of his neck told that story convincingly.

Before Paula could pursue her line of thought any further, Deputy Thomas A. "Mace" Mason rendered his summary judgment. "Well, at least he was decent enough to save the county some money."

She spun around and glared at him, ready to vent the frustration and guilt she felt, but she caught herself just as the first words reached her throat.

What's the point? He's convinced of his own infallibility.

She drew a deep breath and said with the elaborate calm almost everyone recognizes as steam from a kettle near the boil, "So you think the settlement will be less than the cost of his trial would have been?"

"What settlement?" Mace replied as truly perplexed as he was deaf to the whistle of Paula's kettle.

"The county's settlement of the lawsuits that will be filed before the week is out."

"Oh, those settlements. I don't think there'll be any. I mean, who'd claim him? He was a baby banger. Know what I mean? And they got this guy dead bang." He chuckled at the cleverness of his joke, then went on. "None a this stuff where the kid is just gettin' back at the old man kinda thing. The kid's mother caught him right in the act. I mean, if he was related to me I wouldn't go around making a big noise about it."

"You two have got to stop meeting like this," Lt. Davies said from the door of the cell. "People will begin to talk."

Paula winced at the tired cliché and then smiled. He must have seen her fierce face. Silently, she thanked him for his attempt to dispel her anger. What attempt? He'd done it. He knew how much she despised clichés.

Davies shrugged, his face as innocent as a five year old with forbidden goodies in his hands behind his back. "What else can I say. Two suicides in less than," he looked at his watch, "two hours? People will talk."

"Enough," Paula said. "You've made your point, unfounded as it is."

Davies walked all the way into the cell. Superficially similar to the Disciplinary Isolation cell they had all been in earlier, this one had one significant difference. It was a Medical Isolation cell. Even though Paula had never met him nor even known of his existence until a few minutes ago, this man had been one of her patients.

The lieutenant took a careful look around the cell. Jail issue barren, the cell was a six by ten room with bars set three feet back from the front wall, making the cell six by seven with a nine foot ceiling. A narrow gate stood open opposite the two inch thick steel door. The walls and bars were painted the same cream color as the rest of the jail, a color that looked dingy before it had even had a chance to dry. The floor was concrete, shiny from repeated applications of sealer and polished by thousands of feet. Against the wall in the corner facing the door sat a porcelain toilet with a sink taking the place of its tank. A gray metal, hard pan bunk with regulation three-inch thick, plastic covered mattress angled away from the bars just beyond the reach of the inmate's feet. Sheets and an army-style wool blanket were strewn across it. His mustard yellow jumpsuit and flip-flops made a careless pile on the floor beside the bed.

"Who was he?" Davies asked.

"His ID band says his name was Foster," Paula said.

"Was he suicidal?"

"I don't know. He was booked early this evening according to the ID band. Dave didn't say anything in the log about him being admitted. Of course, I didn't get report from him because of Avery's attempt in D.I. I didn't even know he was back here till I saw the card on the door and looked in the window."

"Mason, you got anything on him?"

"He was a baby-banger. What I got so far is that it looks like they ran out of room up in P.C. and dumped him down here since Med Iso's light right now. But there's no log entry in the bubble on it. I had to call upstairs to track him down. Somebody screwed up big time last shift."

Davies nodded. This was not going to be a good day. He turned to Paula, "I've got the paramedics coming in just to make it official."

As if cued, the rattle of a gurney announced their arrival. Davies walked to the door just as the same woman and two men who had responded to their last call rounded the corner, dragging their ambulance gurney covered with bright orange boxes the size of an infant's coffin. Behind them Sgt. Harris quick marched to keep up.

All three of them exited the cell and Davies gestured at the door, "There he is. Try to disturb things as little as possible. I've got the M.E., detectives, and forensics coming over."

The woman poked her head in the door and took a look. "We won't have to do much. He's obviously dead and unresuscitatable."

The sergeant took Mace's arm and turned around to face him. "Mr. Mason, this is your area. You lock that door. Seal it off. No curiosity seekers. No voyeurs. Anyone gives you any static, you send them to me. I want this scene kept absolutely pristine. You keep a log of everyone who comes in, when they come in, when they leave, and what they did. I'll pull a case number for you and get someone down here to cover the deck while you're tied up with this. You get your report to me before the captain comes in."

"I think Mace is experienced enough to know what to do, Sgt. Harris," Davies said.

"I'm well aware of Mr. Mason's record," Harris said without taking his eyes off the deputy, "which is why I'm reviewing his duties with him. I just want to make sure he understands that he, and he alone, is responsible for seeing to it that this investigation is letter perfect."

"Then, if you have no objections, Sergeant, may Paula and I go back to the Dispensary and see if we can figure out how he got here without being put on her board?"

"I have no objections, sir," Harris said with no indication that he recognized Davies sarcasm, "but I can save you the time. While I was waiting for the paramedics, I learned that he was brought down here at 2330 hours because it was too crowded in Protective Custody and he seemed the lightest weight one to move. It would appear that everyone thought the other person had advised the medical staff and Guard Station of the move. I'll see to it the people involved are properly disciplined."

"I'm sure you would, but I think you've got enough to do, so, if it meets with your approval, I'll take care of that myself."

"As you wish, sir," Harris said with a trace of disappointment.

"Very well, then, advise me when you've finished up here."

Davies spun on his heel and walked rapidly down the hall towards the Dispensary, leaving Paula in his wake. She caught up with him halfway down the hall and said, "Slow down, Bob."

"I swear, some day I'm gonna smack that arrogant jackass right in the mouth."

"You're not close enough to retirement to do that yet. His day will come."

"Not anywhere near soon enough to suit me."

"Maybe, maybe not. But it seems to me that it will be all the sweeter when he does it to himself and you can just sit back and enjoy the show. So, why don't you keep me company while I wake up the boss?"

Davies stopped and removed his cigar from his mouth. A big grin spread across his face. "Every cloud has its silver lining."

Paula opened the Dispensary door and stepped into a ten by twelve foot room. Just to the right of the door stood a large, battered metal desk, a rolling secretary's chair docked in its knee-hole. A heavy metal chair sat beside it. Above the desk, locked metal cabinets lined the wall for most of its length. Along the opposite wall a chrome cart sat on casters, its three shelves filled

with bandages, cotton balls, adhesive tape, tongue depressors, and the other basic medical paraphernalia common to any doctor's office. Beside the cart a small oxygen tank sat strapped into a rolling carrier. An old wooden exam table took up the rest of the wall. The front wall held a pair of metal filing cabinets in chipped beige paint. A folded, army surplus canvas stretcher stood upright in the corner. The back wall, bare except for a big, red sign that said, 'NO SMOKING,' had a door that led to an office and a bathroom.

Paula pulled out her chair and opened a drawer while she sat down. She checked a list in it, dialed her new boss's home phone number, and looked at the time on the clock on the desk. Davies flopped into the patient chair beside the desk. His smile broadened as he visualized the Senior Correctional Nurse awakened by his bedside telephone at two in the morning. He leaned forward to listen. Paula obligingly turned the receiver so both could hear.

"Yes. What is it?" The voice matched Davies' expectation exactly.

"This is Mrs. McKenzie at the jail. I've got some bad news."

"Well, I wouldn't think you'd awaken me at this hour to tell me anything pleasant. What is it?"

"We've had two suicide attempts in the past couple of hours. Both by hanging. One in D.I. and—"

"What's D.I.? I haven't learned your alphabet soup yet."

"Disciplinary Isolation. The other one was in Medical Isolation. We managed to revive the one in D.I., though he remains comatose. The Med Iso one was too far gone."

"CPR was ineffectual?"

"Gross lividity was present and rigor had started. There was no point in trying."

"You're wrong. There was, but I wouldn't expect you to recognize that. What was he in Medical Isolation for?"

"He was put down here by security on the evening shift, due to overcrowding in Protective Custody. We were never notified."

"So, no suicide precautions were initiated?"

"That's right, sir. He wasn't here for medical or psychiatric reasons, just security reasons. As I said, we didn't even know he was there."

"Have your report ready for me when I get in. I think we'll be okay on not having him on suicide precautions since we weren't notified of his transfer. Of course," he added with unmistakable pleasure, "that's not going to help the Sheriff much. They really messed up on this one and there won't be any sweeping it under a rug in some dark corner. I am still disturbed that you didn't at least make some effort to revive him. That could have some very adverse repercussions for us. I can assume you at least took vital signs."

"I checked for a pulse, even though it was obvious there was no possibility of there being one."

"You took no blood pressure?"

"I found him on my rounds, sir. There were no respirations and I could find no pulse. I didn't have a BP cuff or stethoscope. Considering the advanced lividity and that you have to have a pulse to get a BP, I didn't consider it a priority. The paramedics took one for their report. It was zero over zero."

"You should have been the one to take it. Theirs should just have been a confirmation of yours, not the only one taken by anyone. Of course, I don't know why I expected better. Have your report ready for me at seven. And plan to stay over. We have a great deal to discuss."

Davies reached for the phone and said, “Mr. Browne, this is Lt. Davies, the Watch Commander. Mrs. McKenzie is not at fault here. She did a heroic job saving that man in D.I. The one down here couldn’t have been saved by anyone but God. The paramedics didn’t even give it a second thought when they saw him.”

“You’ll excuse me, Lieutenant, if I don’t bow to your knowledge of proper medical protocol. Not initiating CPR on a pulseless individual is inexcusable under any circumstances. Perhaps if you people recognized that, you wouldn’t be having the troubles you’re having right now. Your defense of her actions, or more correctly, inaction, is not unexpected, but I am her superior and I will deal with her upon my arrival in the way I believe is appropriate. Good night.”

Davies knuckles shone white against the phone’s black plastic. He set the receiver in its cradle with elaborate care and rolled his cigar to the other side of his mouth.

“Just what this place needs. Another arrogant jackass in a position of authority.”

“Getting mad won’t help, Bob. It’ll just convince him of his own righteousness.”

“Oh come on now, Paula, this is me you’re talking to. don’t go all Bahá’í on me and expect me to buy it. I ain’t one of those dogs in the back window of a car with its head bobbin’ up and down. I know you. I know your hackles are up.”

Paula sighed. “I’m not ’going all Bahá’í’ on you, okay? Truth?”

Davies nodded, but gave her the same look he gave a suspect who had just told him he was at a movie at the time that a security video plainly showed him sticking a gun in a Stop & Rob clerk’s face.

“It’s got nothing to do with being a Bahá’í. The simple fact is that when someone is scared or insecure they frequently start acting just like he is. And when they do, getting mad and jumping in their face doesn’t do any good. The whole discussion just becomes a shouting contest I can’t win. Sure I’m upset, though not as much as you seem to think. Honestly. And good as it might feel, blowing up at Red Browne won’t help the situation one bit. It’ll just convince he’s right and I’m wrong.”

“He’s not scared. He’s ignorant and arrogant and too stupid to know it.”

“Arrogant people are usually frightened people, Bob. Too frightened to admit, even to themselves, that they don’t know everything, or that they’ve taken on more than they can handle.”

“I’m afraid that’s a little too much psychobabble for me. I just know the guy’s a jackass.”

Davies stood up and patted her shoulder. “But if he tries to give you any serious grief over this....”

“Please, don’t say or do anything. It’ll just make him that much more difficult to work with.”

“Well, it’s your call, but I’m still going to keep a close eye on him. I just don’t know what Abbott was thinking,” he said, and walked out.

Paula knew exactly what Sheriff Abbott had been thinking, just as she was certain Bob Davies knew. When Owen Peterson, Chief Medical Deputy for nearly twenty-six years, had dropped dead while taking report from Paula last month, Abbott found himself with the answer to a political dilemma. Peterson was of the old school—politically incorrect and proud of it. He had been planning to retire on his sixty-fifth birthday, but his retirement would come too late to do the sheriff any good in the elections six weeks away. Abbott faced tremendous pressure to do something immediately about the jail division, especially the medical section. Firing Peterson was not an option he could exercise because Peterson had an unblemished record. Rumors that Abbott was considering offering a special early retirement package were floating around the week Peterson had died.

Seizing Peterson's death as a heaven-sent opportunity, Abbott had sought a replacement that would mollify his most vocal critics—the county's only newspaper, a libertarian attorney, and a former deputy running against him. His political advisers had settled on G. Russell Browne, Assistant Director of Mental Health Services. Abbott's personal choice was Paula, who had laughed when he asked her.

"I mean no disrespect, sir, but no way."

"You've earned it and you're the next in line. You'd be perfect."

"No, I wouldn't," she had argued. "I have absolutely no desire to be a political lightning rod which is what the job is now. Owen faced nothing but opposition and indifference from the county administration the last few years. What he went through certainly isn't worth the three percent pay increase to me and more importantly, I don't have the temperament for it. I'd wind up being a mean, angry old crone within a month. No, thank you. Who you ought to ask is Jenny. She'd be great."

Abbott mulled it over and was inclined to agree, but his political handlers felt that, while appointing a black woman might carry some political weight, it wouldn't overcome her being an insider. They insisted that an outsider was essential to winning the election, so Brown got the nod.

Abbott took the unprecedented step of waiving Browne's mandatory six-week background check before he could begin working in the jail so he would be in place before the election. It would be run while Browne worked.

In Browne's first week the swing shift nurse quit. He couldn't stand the new boss. Browne replaced him immediately with one of the staff nurses from the Mental Health Department, ignoring the short stack of highly qualified applicants Peterson had already screened and whose background checks had already been done. Browne had vouched for the new nurse and insisted that a background check was unnecessary. Abbott countered that it was required by state law, but that he would do the same for the nurse as he had for Browne—run it while he worked.

Paula pulled an incident form out as these memories ran through her mind. She poised her hand over the form, but no words flowed onto the page. Instead of seeing the form's neat boxes, she saw a long line of friends, all gone now, some retired, some who had quit, and of course, most of all, the one who had died.

They had handled medical emergencies without outside help in those early years. They had saved quite a few lives and improved the health of innumerable inmates for less pay than they would get almost anywhere else, little praise, no official recognition except amongst themselves, and no gratitude except a rare, "Thank's Doc," from an inmate. No greater challenge existed in nursing, and that was what had attracted and kept her here all these years.

A smile tickled the corners of her mouth as she remembered Owen's suggestion a couple of months ago that they retire together.

"You've put in your time, my dear," he had said when he'd told her of his plans. "Things will only get worse. Not because I'm going. No, I've got no illusions on that score. I'm leaving because I can't hold back the tide. The county's growing into a metropolis. It can't deal with the problems it's got now, much less the ones it refuses to consider. If you stay, you'll either get dragged down with it, or burn out trying to fight it. It's not worth it. You're old enough to take your pension right now. Go out with me."

She hadn't taken his idea seriously then. She had believed that she still enjoyed the challenge the job presented. But since Owen's death, she had to admit that her enjoyment had waned rapidly. In the two short weeks of his tenure, Browne's antagonistic and hostile manner had left

her with only one argument for staying. It would be like tucking her tail and running, and she had never done that in her life.

Chapter Three

The Drill Instructor

Captain Hollis Hill's hostile eyes drilled Davies where he stood. That the eyes under the iron gray, bootcamp haircut drilled into him was not necessarily unusual. That they were here at this hour, boring a hole through him, was.

Davies remained standing in front of the desk, not quite at attention, returning the glowering stare with his best guileless look. No one sat in Hill's office until bidden. The hard face betrayed nothing, as usual.

"What, Mr. Davies, is going on here?" The voice matched the face perfectly.

Davies straightened and said, "We've had two attempted suicides, sir. One made it, one didn't."

"I know that. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here at zero-dark-thirty trying to get a handle on the situation. What I'm asking is why didn't you consider this worthy of my immediate attention?"

"I intended to call you at five."

"Not that I am unappreciative of your efforts to allow me my beauty sleep, but didn't you consider two deaths which occurred within a couple of hours of each other unusual enough to disturb my rest?"

"If you'll pardon me, sir, there has only been one death. Avery was revived, though he's still in a coma. In the past you have only wanted to be disturbed for major incidents like murders, which, thank God, we've only had one of. Simple suicides have never been cause to disturb you before."

"But these are not simple suicides. These are two unusual and almost identical ones. Didn't you find that disturbing or at least suspicious?"

"Yes, sir, I did, but I saw nothing to be gained by calling you at two in the morning that could not be dealt with at least as effectively at five. Actually, I had hoped to have more information by that time and maybe even an idea as to how this all happened."

"Obviously you didn't take into consideration that I would, without a doubt, have been ambushed by those slaving wolves with minicams who are already beginning to howl on our doorstep."

"I'm sorry, I hadn't thought of that."

"As usual. Well, you'd better start thinking about it, and right now! It's time you realized that everything we do in here is in the public eye."

Davies said with credible ingenuousness, "I wondered what that guy was doing in our can. Now, I know. And all this time I thought he was just the official county pervert. That sure takes a load off my mind. Think I should invite him home for dinner with Ellen and me? We could all sit around the toilet at home just to make him feel more comfortable."

Hill gaped, open-mouthed, and then burst out laughing. Davies maintained, with considerable effort, his own composure.

"I hate it when you do that."

"Do what, sir?" Davies face expressed total and absolute innocence.

"You know quite well."

Davies' smile said he did. Hill struggled to bring the conversation back on point, but had to contend with the vivid image Davies had drawn. After a few more seconds he managed to push it aside and said, "I just want to make certain that you understand the situation. If someone dies in here, for any reason whatsoever, I am to be awakened, found, disturbed, whatever, and told about it immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, Bob. I'm tired of looking up at you."

Relieved to have weathered the worst of Hill's storm, Davies sat in the chair indicated by the stabbing finger. "If I may ask, Captain, how did you become aware of these deaths?"

"Abbott called me."

"I see. How did he know about it?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but someone called him and told him."

"Harris. He's the only one around here stupid enough to wake the sheriff up on his own initiative."

"Your surmise is correct. I will deal with Mr. Harris myself, but you should know that Abbott wants to be informed, by me, immediately when anything of this magnitude happens."

"Is this change in the standing orders permanent? I mean, can we expect him to be here this morning?"

"Yes," Hill said, leaving little doubt in Davies' mind that he had not missed the thinly veiled criticism. Without meaning to, Hill put the entire matter in perspective, "As you are no doubt aware, he's been taking a lot of heat in the *Reflector*."

"Has that rag taken over the operation of the department?"

"It may be a rag, but it's still the only paper in this county, and it definitely impacts public opinion, so in that respect, yes, it has influenced how this department operates, though it hasn't taken it over."

"Yet," Davies said, as he popped his cigar back in his mouth.

"Careful, Bob. I know you don't approve of Abbott's way of running things, but he's still the best we've got who's willing to do the job."

Davies didn't miss the point. Abbott had been the Old Man's second choice. He had come to Davies first, but Bob had refused the offer. He wanted to be a cop and had no patience for the political side of being sheriff. That left Ted Abbott as the only viable candidate in the department. Having the active support of the most popular sheriff in the county's history had all but guaranteed Abbott the election.

Now, the Old Man was gone, and his not inconsiderable political and personal support had gone with him. Abbott had suddenly found himself alone and unprepared for his reelection and he was scrabbling. That was why he had hired a couple of political advisors, even though it was obvious to those who knew him well that he didn't have much respect for them. Privately, he called them his trained sharks, which they, mistakenly, took as a compliment.

"Look. We've plowed that field and it still hasn't grown any wheat," Davies said. "Maybe some good will come out of this if it gets Abbott more involved in the actual, day-to-day operation of this department."

Hill said, "He says he wants to take a more hands-on role, like the Old Man did."

"Well, that's a step in the right direction," Davies nodded. "I just hope he realizes that it's gonna take more than photo ops. He's going to have to get his hands dirty once in awhile like the rest of us if he hopes to keep the support of the men. What he did for the medics was good, but that's not going to buy him anyone's undying love around here. He still took on that idiot

Browne, who by the way, has already done his best to foul things up this morning. Do you know that he's making noises like he's going to slam Paula for not doing CPR on a corpse?"

"Lay it all out for me, both cases. Then we'll see what we've really got. If we're lucky, maybe Browne will have hung himself."

Davies recounted the morning's activities.

"Well, it's not as bad as Abbott was led to believe," Hill said, "but it's still bad. We'll need to keep some things out of the news to preserve the integrity of the investigations. I think the use of towels torn into strips falls into that category. All we will release is that they hung themselves. There will be no mention of the material used. Hopefully, they'll just assume it was a sheet. Make sure everyone involved in this knows that, and I mean everyone. Clear?"

"I'll take care of it. We're lucky that both of these took place in isolation cells. Makes it a lot easier to keep a lid on it."

"Okay. Good. Now, as I see it, we've obviously got a problem with the fact that Foster wasn't found for a couple of hours because of Avery's attempt in D.I. But that might actually turn out to be a plus in the long run because it might move the commissioners off their dead butts and get them to approve adding some more nurses around here. Where we look really bad is the foul up on the notifications. I want you to personally check that business out. Everyone, and I mean every single person with any connection to this mess at all, is to be interviewed and everything they say verified. I don't want any questions about how this happened left unanswered. Clear?"

Davies nodded.

"A couple of other things really disturb me about these cases," Hill continued. "One, both of these guys were charged with child molesting in one form or another. Two, both of them were in isolation cells. Why weren't they in Protective Housing?"

"Well, first off, their cases aren't as similar as they look. The first guy, Avery, got in that new nurse's face, you know, Thompson, and insisted on being put in Med Iso."

"Did he give any reasons why he should be housed there?"

"No, he just insisted that he couldn't go upstairs."

"Well, I suppose he knew how child molesters are treated by inmates."

"I don't think it was just that. I talked with Richland PD and they said there were several things that were hinky about this guy. Right up there at the top is the fact that he seems to live a lot better than he should with the job he's got. Also he's new here and they ran into some trouble verifying his old address and workplace. But the thing that really zapped their radar is the way he acted when he was busted. It was like he thought he was untouchable, even though he was caught in the act of soliciting a ten-year old kid in a restroom at a mall."

"How so?"

"All afternoon he kept telling them that they were making a big mistake, that they were wasting their time and wouldn't be allowed to hold him."

"Allowed?"

"Yeah, I asked the same thing. Willy's the one I talked to and he said that was a direct quote. They wouldn't be 'allowed to hold him,' as in not permitted to, though he wouldn't say by whom. Willy figures he's in the Federal Witness Protection Program and thinks he can't get arrested. I'd say that's a good bet."

"Well, they'll never tell us whether he is or not, but we both know that witnesses are bounced out of the program all the time for screwing up. The only place they get a free ride is in the movies. That doesn't explain, though, how he wound up in D.I."

”Thompson saw him in the Dispensary. Apparently Avery came up with some kind of medical complaint on the way through the system and was sent there to be checked out. When Thompson told him that he wasn’t going to put him in Med Iso, Avery started screaming that no county quack was going to screw him around.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Yeah. No doubt about it at all. They heard him screaming clear as a bell in the Bubble and hit the panic button. By the time the troops arrived he’d knocked Thompson out of his chair and was standing over him yelling at him with his fists clenched and threatening to pound him into dog dirt if he didn’t put him back there.”

“Was Thompson injured?”

“No, nothing but his pride. The guys took him down before he could do any real damage.”

“How’d Thompson handle it?” Hill asked.

“How else could he handle it? I mean, he’s a scrawny little guy, and he’s got that limp and has to use that fancy cane of his to get around. As far as I know, he’s got no more idea of how to defend himself than a newborn baby, coming from mental health and all. I mean, all they do is talk you to death over there. It’s against their rules to lift a hand against a patient, even when he’s trying to kill you. When somebody goes off over there, they run and call the cops to bail them out, and then they squawk about how the cops didn’t handle the little darlings gently enough to preserve their self-esteem.” Davies shook his head in disgust. “Not that it matters much in this case. Avery must’ve stood at least half-a-foot taller than Thompson and he had to outweigh him by at least thirty or forty pounds. I will say this for the little guy, he did keep his cool while Avery was there. And it was pretty obvious he was steamed because he complimented the guys on the way they’d handled Avery, which wasn’t anywhere near gentle enough to let him keep his self-esteem.”

“Well, he was entitled,” Hill said. “The nurses aren’t paid to get knocked around. You’re sure Thompson didn’t say something to set this guy off? Even unintentionally? Did anyone hear what he said?”

“No, he was alone with the guy, so we don’t know for sure what was said, but Jackson was in D.I.—”

“—He’s in the Hole again? What is this? His sixth—no—must be seventh time this stay.”

“Yep. It’s become his regular home. He goes to Segregation for vacations now. Anyway, he said that Avery was yelling he was going to make the quack eat his words by faking something that would force him to put him in Med Iso.”

“And he chose a way to fake a suicide that was a lot more successful than he intended.” Hill shook his head and said, “Stupid idiot.”

“Not the sharpest boy to ever come through here, that’s for sure.”

“Agreed. Okay, so what about the one we lost? Foster.”

“The way I got it was that Foster was at a friend’s place and went to use the can. While he’s standing there, their three-year old daughter opens the door and walks in and just stands there watching him. He can’t shoo her out without dousing the place, not to mention her, and, before he recovers enough from the shock of it all to tell her to leave, her mother walks in and starts screaming that he’s a filthy, dirty despoiler of innocent children. His buddy tries to calm his wife down, but she isn’t having any of it. She’s totally freaked and out of control. She calls the cops and has the poor guy arrested. Nearly tried to get hubby arrested with him for defending his friend. His buddy even came down and tried to bail him out, but his wife refused to sign the bond surety on the house with him, so the guy is stuck in here with a felony flag-waving charge. At

first he was kind of hot about it, stomping around and arguing with everybody, but then, when they took him to P.C., he got shame-faced and curled up on his bunk. When they took him down to Med Iso, he refused to look anybody in the eye, just stared at his feet the whole time. Nobody thought anything about it at the time 'cause it was just what we see all the time with first-timers."

"Okay, so what went wrong?"

"Everyone thought the other guy had told Thompson, so no one told him. As far as I can tell he never knew the guy had been put back there. That might be understandable. Not acceptable, but understandable. But what really hurts us is that nobody told the Bubble either. Harris is working on finding out how they got him back there without Clancy seeing them."

Hill looked to heaven and said, "Well if anyone can ferret it out, he can, but you follow up on that and keep an especially close eye on Harris' investigation. That is also something that we don't need going out to the press right now. I'm not talking about a cover up. I'm saying that when we know exactly what happened and who was responsible, we'll discipline them. But if those clowns out there get ahold of this before we even know what really happened, we'll never get to the bottom of it, much less fix it so it won't happen again. Now, you're sure no one told the nurse?"

"Sure as I can be at this point. I tried to get him at home, but all I got was his machine. I figure I'll call him around seven."

Hill nodded. "It was the end of the shift, you think he might have let it slide for the next shift?"

"Not Thompson. He's meticulous about procedure. Nobody seems to like him very much, but they can't fault him for not knowing and following procedure. I think he's memorized the book."

"Okay, I want all the reports on my desk by six-thirty. Abbott will probably show up about seven and he won't be using the front entrance. He'll probably come over through the tunnel. You can advise the men."

"Yes, sir. You'll have your reports in time to brief him."

Chapter Four

Dragon Hunt

David Thompson struggled up through the deep layers of sleep that threatened to drown him. With a final, superhuman effort he tore himself free and surfaced, pulling in huge gulps of air. He opened his eyes and beheld familiar surroundings illuminated by a pair of night lights. He was in his bedroom.

His chest still heaved with the effort to breathe as the last vestiges of the nightmare reluctantly released their grip. The feeling of depression, of overwhelming helplessness lifted, though it didn't by any means dissipate. He still felt exhausted, as though he hadn't slept at all. The sleep that his body had craved had pulled him down into the bed like a lover long denied, but it hadn't helped. If anything he felt more tired now than when he had surrendered to its hypnotic call. Now, of course, he couldn't sleep. His mind ignored the clamoring of his exhausted body. It feared the return, once again, of the images and the sounds.

He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, feeling the clammy chill of the sweaty sheets invade his body. He turned to the nightstand and nudged the blanket control up another notch. Though he hadn't had that particular dream in a long time, it had lost none of its savagery. Its images lingered still in the periphery of his mind like a foul-smelling mist.

Chalk up another failure for the annals of psychiatry, he thought bitterly. At least it's consistent. I'm the patient, yet they expect me to do the curing.

The putrefying wound deep in his psyche still grew, its tenderness a memorial to their failure. For a while he thought it had been beaten. But now he could see that it had just been biding its time, growing slowly like an abscess that has walled itself off. And for the past week or so, it seemed as though he had been unable to do anything without tweaking it enough to give him a curt reminder of its existence.

What cure had these wise practitioners of the black art of psychiatry offered? To lance it. To spread its filth all over his mind. They wanted to get to the core and squeeze it, pop it free of its moorings, as if that alone would somehow expunge it. As if ripping it open would, all by itself, cause the lesion and all its spilled pus to magically disappear.

Well, he knew what the "core" was. It wasn't some boil on his butt caused by an unknown infectious agent. The problem was simple and plain to see, but that hadn't been what interested them. They had wanted to find the covert motivations, the shrouded psychiatric meanings behind his perfectly normal reaction to that original trauma. His problem had always seemed to be less interesting to them as something to cure than as a case for them to explore.

Did they offer him anything to kill the infection? Not really. Tranquilizers made lousy antibiotics. They were worse than useless. They masked the problem, covered it over, kept him from even cleaning up the poison they slopped all over while they messed around in there. Worse, the pills had allowed it to wall itself off again, to seal itself up and churn and grow in the dark until it had ruptured again tonight.

Why? Why can't they help me, he asked for the thousandth time. They're the experts. They're supposed to be able to cure me so I can grow and mature and enjoy life and not fear it.

Out of all those fools, George alone had shown the courage to give him an answer—they didn't know how. They had their own battles to fight, their own hang-ups, their own abscessed traumas. They tried out their failed schemes on their patients to see where they went wrong.

But George had helped. He had helped by going into that dark and vaporous territory with him. The others had merely toured it. He had gone with him to conquer it. Admitting that he didn't know how they were going to beat it, George had sworn to stand beside him and fight it, toe-to-toe. He had taught him the self-defensive moves of a mental judo that had allowed him to survive, to sidestep the pain, to achieve whatever limited peace he had known.

He remembered the confidence that face imparted to its witness. The bits of wisdom that had offhandedly ridden his caring voice when he had tucked him into bed, or held him in the middle of the night when he had awakened screaming.

“George,” he said quietly, “you helped me more than all the doctors, all the pills, and all the shots put together.”

Thinking of George relaxed him and soothed his aching psyche. He turned on his side. His last sight, the beautiful, carved talisman, a gift from George. He remembered George's disclosure of its hidden symbolism and drew comfort from it. He drifted off into a dream in which he and Sir George emerged victorious against the dragon.

Chapter Five

The Dawn's Early Dark

"All right, Ms. McKenzie, what do you have to say for yourself?" Browne asked as Paula sat down.

His barren office resembled an interrogation room. Eight by ten with bare walls and a steel desk on the same vinyl floor tile as the Dispensary. A pair of chairs faced each other across the desk. Browne's wardrobe did little to dispel the feeling of being interrogated by Joe Friday on a bad day. Except for the carrot red hair and complexion which had earned him the nickname "Red" before he had cleared the sally port at Central Control on his first day, he could have been Jack Webb in his most famous role. A part of Paula's mind wondered briefly if Browne was aware of the incongruity of his attire and his disdain for law enforcement types.

Another part wondered why he insisted upon calling her Ms. even though she had told him that she was married, and not ashamed of it, and much preferred being called Mrs. Like everything else she had said to him, which hadn't been much, she had to admit, he had ignored her and continued to refer to her as Ms. McKenzie as though she had never said a word. She had even tried getting him to use her first name instead. That, at least, had gotten a response. He didn't think it appropriate for management to become too familiar with staff. To which she had almost replied, "There's little chance of that happening," metaphorically choking on the blood released by her allegorically bitten tongue.

"Have you read the incident reports?"

"Not yet. I'll get to them later," he said, waving a dismissive hand at his otherwise empty desk.

"Is this a disciplinary hearing, then, Mr. Browne?"

"Not necessarily."

"Why should it be one at all? I haven't been accused of any wrongdoing, have I?"

"Out of your own mouth," Browne said with no attempt to conceal his self-satisfaction. "You told me you had let someone die last night. I want to know why."

"I did no such thing. I told you that we had had two suicide attempts. One made it, and one didn't. We did CPR on Mr. Avery, the first one, for over twelve minutes before the paramedics came. They managed to get a rhythm going and restore respirations after four defibrillations and three amps of epinephrine. As of this moment he is in a coma and his prognosis is poor at best. The second suicide, Foster, probably occurred before I even got through the main sally port to start my shift. It went undiscovered because I was giving CPR to Avery and was unable to make rounds in Med Iso for close to two hours. When I finally did discover him, he had gross lividity, and rigor had set in. There was absolutely no way he could be revived."

"So you say. I don't have any proof of that. It is just as possible that you decided that you couldn't have another permanently comatose person on your conscience, and convinced yourself it was too late."

"What?"

“Let me make myself clearer. I am suggesting that perhaps you exaggerated his condition. After all, you had just been involved in a very trying and difficult resuscitation with an outcome that was, in your mind I’m sure, disastrous. To face the possibility of another similar result must have been overwhelming. So you saw that he might have been hanging there longer than was optimal for resuscitation and you took the opportunity to avoid another disappointing and disheartening effort.”

“No sir, that is *not* possible,” Paula said, starting to rise out of her seat. She stopped herself and sat on the edge of the chair. She couldn’t let him get to her. She had promised herself that she would maintain a professional demeanor. “Those incident reports, if you will just read them, will support the facts as I have given them to you. For the record, Foster had to have been dead for at least two hours according to the medical examiner who came to the scene.”

“But the point is that you could not have known how long that poor man had been hanging in his cell. You are not a physician.”

“Gross lividity was present, sir. His legs were dark purple and swollen up like balloons. The rest of his body was translucent. It was obvious that he had been dead so long that almost all the blood in his body had settled in his legs. There wasn’t any blood near enough to his heart to be pumped.”

“So you keep saying. But that isn’t really the point. The real point is that you are a nurse, not a doctor, and you can’t make such a decision.”

“Since when? Surely you’re not suggesting that nurses are too stupid and too ignorant to know when someone’s been dead too long to resuscitate.”

“Actually, I am saying that very thing, and I am saying it without equivocation. Insulting to you as I’m sure it is, that is the official policy.”

“What? Where is the policy statement that says you and I and all the other nurses who work for this county are officially too stupid to do what nurses in the private sector do every day?”

“You’re still missing the point. The real issue here is that you failed to try to resuscitate a pulseless individual. That is all that is pertinent in this case.”

“Are you saying that it is this county’s policy that we are to start CPR on every pulseless individual we find without exception?”

“Yes, I am. At least, in here it is. The other county facilities in which nurses work, such as the hospital, all have doctors in attendance. We do not. Therefore, our policies must be more comprehensive.”

“And when did this change in policy take place? And don’t tell me that this isn’t important or pertinent. I helped Owen Peterson write our policy manual, and I know exactly what it says about discovery of pulseless individuals and CPR because I wrote that policy myself under his direction and approval.”

“I’m sure you did,” Browne said, his smug look reaching solar intensity. “However, Mr. Peterson isn’t here any longer. His policies have all been under review since my appointment as Senior Correctional Nurse. The new policy will be posted today. Sorry, but I haven’t had a chance to put it up before now.”

“May I see it?”

“Certainly.”

Browne opened a drawer and extracted a single sheet of paper which he handed to Paula. It was a policy statement in the standard county memo format dated one week ago. It stated that all pulseless individuals would be resuscitated without exception. She noted that it had been printed on a dot matrix printer, not the department’s laser printer, and that it bore only Browne’s

signature. Most telling of all was the fact that no place had been provided for either Dr. Martin or Sheriff Abbott to append their signatures as required by departmental policy. She would have loved to get a look at the computer file's origination date, but doubted that it would ever be possible. Nonetheless she was certain that this policy was no more than a couple of hours old, if that. She looked up to find Browne beaming in satisfaction.

"As you can see, you are in clear violation of this policy, he said."

"Excuse me," Paula said as she stood and walked rapidly out to the Dispensary desk. Browne yelled at her to come back and sit down. She grabbed the policy manual from its place on the desk next to the Physician's Desk Reference and opened it to the CPR policy. Browne came running up behind her sputtering about insubordination and disobedience.

Paula smiled at Jenny Rhoads, the day nurse, who stood stock still, eyes wide in her ebony face. Placing her finger on the page, Paula turned to Browne, whose face looked like a red balloon about to explode, and said, "This is the policy that is in effect, sir. The one you showed me cannot be in effect at this time because it must first be countersigned by both Dr. Martin and the sheriff, and then be posted for at least one week to allow all staff members time to read it before it can take effect. That is Sheriff's Department policy. Would you care to read this?"

Browne reached past her, brushing her forcefully enough to cause her to fall back a step, and ripped the offending page from the three-ring binder. "Sorry," he muttered, and walked back towards his office. At the door he stopped and told her to follow him.

Paula returned to Browne's office and took the chair she had vacated. She strove to keep her anger from erupting. She had come dangerously close to screaming something she knew she would regret when he had pushed her aside. In a strange way, she felt sorry for most arrogant people. But Red Browne, a name the departed swing shift nurse had learned never to utter in Browne's presence, had pushed several of her buttons this morning. The huge red one with a skull and crossbones on it that he had pushed a few moments ago was the flagrant deceit one.

She could tolerate stupidity, cowardice and arrogance, but she could not abide dishonesty or deceit. She never permitted inmates to practice either in her presence. She especially hated this blatant kind of deceit in which the perpetrator assumed she was so stupid she wouldn't catch on. Even worse, Browne's reaction suggested that even though she had caught on, he expected her to be so cowed by his august authority that she would let it pass without protest.

Browne looked up from the torn paper in his hand and said in a barely conciliatory tone, "I am sorry Ms. McKenzie. I was under the impression that I was given authority to set policy here, not merely propose it. This is a matter I will have to clear up with Dr. Martin and Sheriff Abbott. So, for the moment, if the facts are as you have indicated, you did act within the policy as you understood it. Just be aware that this policy is going to change, as are many others."

"Excuse me sir, but are you suggesting that I have lied to you?"

"Have you?"

"No. But you seem to believe that I might have."

Browne said nothing. He kept his expression blank, but his eyes twinkled with the delight of a predator who had spied easy prey.

"Why on earth would you believe that I would falsify my report? In the first place attempting to do such a thing would be utterly foolish. There's no way I could get away with it. There are several other people who were involved in this case. In the second place, this is the first time we have had a conversation longer than, 'Good Morning,' except when I asked you to call me Mrs. McKenzie. You don't know me. You don't know anything about me, so I don't understand how you can assume that I would be so stupid as to file a false report or cavalierly let someone die."

Browne folded his hands together, leaving the index fingers touching like the steeple of a church. He rocked the steeple back to touch his lips a couple of times. "While it is true that we've not talked a great deal, it is not entirely correct, Ms. McKenzie, that I don't know anything about you. Don't take this the wrong way, but I know that you are religious, and my experience with religious people is that they don't think clearly about certain issues, especially those surrounding death. It has also been my experience that they are capable of making themselves believe almost anything, no matter how foolish, or how much it is in conflict with the facts. Now, let me also say this," he held up his hand to stop Paula's retort, "I fully endorse the county's policy regarding religious beliefs. People can believe whatever they want as long as they don't let it interfere with their work. The problem here, as I see it, is that you have let it interfere. Put simply, I think you couldn't face having another man's trapped soul on your conscience, so you convinced yourself that it was too late to try CPR."

"That is utter and complete nonsense, Mr. Browne."

"You claim he had gross lividity when you found him. I don't have any evidence that that was, in fact, the case."

"It's in those incident reports right there in front of you, if you'll just take the time to read them. Deputy Mason's, the Watch Commander's, and mine."

"I can't accept those as hard evidence. They are nothing more than what you and your friends here say happened."

"Are you saying that we are all involved in some kind of conspiracy? That doesn't make sense. It especially doesn't make sense that you believe that a 'religious person', as you call it, would deliberately lie, much less be a willing participant in a criminal conspiracy."

"In my experience, religious people have had no trouble lying, or even committing the most heinous acts, as long as they can convince themselves that it is in some way a service to their deity. So, until I see the autopsy report and talk with the pathologist myself, I have to entertain the possibility that there is, in fact, something untoward going on here, especially when one considers certain facts that have recently come to light in the media. I am no fool, Ms. McKenzie. I know I was brought in here as political damage control, but that doesn't mean I have to accept or play that role."

Paula sat back in her chair stunned. She felt as though she had been punched in the gut. In all her years of jailhouse nursing she had never been accused of falsifying a report, much less being a willing participant in a cover up conspiracy. Not even the ambulance chasers who routinely filed suits against the jail every time someone scraped a knuckle had ever suggested such a thing. Her integrity had never been seriously questioned by anyone. Yet this man, who knew nothing about her, assumed that she had been purposefully, even calculatedly negligent, and then participated in what he seemed to believe was a routine cover up of that negligence.

Browne leaned back in his chair, his smug grin on full display, and said nothing. He just tapped his steepled index fingers together and rocked gently back and forth.

Questions flew around in Paula's head. Questions she knew would not be answered here this morning, least of all by Browne. She had dealt with enough real and jailhouse lawyers in her career to know that the worst thing she could do at this moment was to fill his silence. Sparring verbally with him would merely provide him with material which he would then twist to fit his own purposes. It seemed obvious to her that he intended to build a case to disgrace and dismiss her. How far he might be willing to go to accomplish that end she had no way of knowing, but he had already demonstrated that a little deceit wasn't out of bounds to him. The irony of his actions and accusations almost made her laugh, but she recognized immediately that this was one

situation where her sense of humor would definitely be misconstrued. She realized at that moment that if she wanted to keep her job and her reputation, she would have to proceed with extreme caution from this moment on.

She absorbed his smug gaze with as much serenity as she could muster. No mean feat since the threat he posed was very real, and the insult as infuriating as it was offensive. If he somehow managed to get her fired for cause, she would lose her pension. Worse, if he chose to pursue it, he could bring charges that could ultimately result in her being censured by the state. They could even revoke her license.

She had no doubt that she could defeat formal charges of negligence in court or before a board of review. But the damage to her professional and personal reputation would be irreparable, especially considering the hostility of the local media towards the Sheriff's Department and the jail staff.

Is that where this all comes from, she asked herself. Does he actually believe those ridiculous stories?

Still reeling from his hostility, which certainly seemed to have a personal edge to it, she tried to figure out what she could ever have done to him to provoke such a reaction. In all her life, she couldn't think of anyone she had offended or injured that would justify Browne's reaction. Indeed, she had never faced such malice.

The hostility inmates routinely showed towards the medical staff was rarely ever personal. It was just a manifestation of their intrinsic distrust of any figure who represented some kind of authority over them. Often it was compounded by their anger at being locked up. The nurses, like the deputies, were simply convenient targets.

Browne, though, acted like the simple fact of her existence offended him. Or did it threaten him? But why? She had never done anything to him, or even had any contact with him before his first day in the jail. It just didn't make any sense.

Well, Owen, she said to herself as she stood up, maybe I'll be retiring after all. Whatever else, it's going to be a long morning.

Paula squared her shoulders and said in as steady a voice as she could muster, "Mr. Browne, you appear to have made up your mind, before you even talked to me, that I have acted inappropriately. Discussing these incidents any further with you is pointless, especially in light of the fact that you have not read any of the reports or even looked into the facts of these cases. It is also obvious that you planned to initiate some kind of disciplinary action from the very beginning, despite denying it when I asked you. For those reasons, and the fact that you have admitted to some kind of problem regarding my having strong religious beliefs, I am refusing to discuss this with you any further, as is my right. I do feel it only fair to tell you that I will be advising the Watch Commander and the Captain of the course of this interview. I will also be discussing it with the employees union representative. Good day, sir."

Browne said nothing. The smug grin broadened into a smile that displayed his excellent orthodontia fully. He leaned forward, folded his hands together on the desk and nodded as Paula turned and left.

She went straight to Davies office across from Central Control, but found it locked. The deputy in Central told her he was in the captain's office.

Just as well, she thought as she turned in her keys and went out through the main gate, now I won't have to tell the story twice.

The flash of fear she had felt in Browne's office had dissolved into a smoldering anger. His smug grin—as though he had finally uncovered a dirty little secret that he had always known

about, but been able to prove—infuriated her. She wanted to scream, but she knew she had to hold on a little longer. She could not vent her anger yet, especially not here. She needed to channel it into something that would produce something constructive. That, she also knew, was precisely the kind of thing she had the most trouble doing. It felt so much better to just let it rip, to let her anger explode, to let it's fire purge her and leave her drained, ready to fill the void left in its wake with peaceful thoughts and happy feelings. Except, of course, it never worked that way.

Instead of peace and happiness, she was always filled with remorse and sorrow because, once she let the demon go, she had no control over it, and the damage it did was always bad. Not catastrophic, necessarily, but always bad enough to cause her to regret those few brief moments of unrestrained, joyfully expressed rage.

She walked up to Betsy, the captain's secretary for more years than anyone could remember, and told her she needed to see him urgently regarding the two suicides.

"The Sheriff is in there, right now. Want to wait till he's left?"

"No, he needs to hear this, too."

"Okay, just let me tell him you're here and see what he says."

Betsy picked up the phone, tapped in three digits, and spoke quietly, but emphatically. While she waited, Paula's anger cooled. It still burned, but the fire had been banked, conserving its heat for when it would be needed to rekindle a more controlled flame.

"Go on in, Paula. Good luck."

Paula might have taken that to mean something significant had anyone else said it, but that was Betsy's standard salutation to everyone entering the captain's office.

Paula had known Hill since he had been a sergeant. He was gruff, but he had always been forthright and fair, and, most importantly, he had always backed his staff when he believed they were being attacked without cause. If they screwed up, she knew any attack from outside the department would come as a welcome relief to the hapless miscreant. She knocked once and opened the door to his "Come in."

"Paula. Glad you're here," Hill said, with the briefest of smiles. "Saves me having to chase you down or roust you out of bed. Is there anything you can add to what's in the reports for Ted here?"

Paula remained standing and faced Abbott who was sitting on the couch. Davies had one of the chairs in front of Hill's desk. "All the essential information is in those reports. What I came down here for, though, is a lot more disturbing."

"What's that Mrs. McKenzie?" Abbott asked.

Paula smiled at his formality. She had known him since his first day on the job after graduating from the academy and he had never called her by any other name. It was a habit he had cultivated with everyone in the department except his closest friends. At this moment, she found it comforting because of what she believed she needed to say to him.

"I've just left Mr. Browne's office, sir. He appears to have made up his mind that I acted negligently in the Foster case because I didn't start CPR. Actually, his statements left me in little doubt that he believes I purposely let him die, that there was no lividity when I found him, that rigor had not set in, in short, that he was resuscitatable. Further he stated, quite bluntly, that he believed my reasons for doing so were based on my being 'religious,' as he put it."

"What?" Abbott snapped. "You're no fanatic. You're a Bahá'í. Doesn't he know what that means?"

“I have no idea, sir. I got the impression that he considered any strong religious affiliation suspect. But of even greater importance to you is the fact that he had not read any of the reports yet, and intimated his belief that they were probably false anyway. In short, sir, he all but accused Deputy Mason, Lt. Davies, and myself of a conspiracy to let the man die.”

“That pompous little toad,” Hill burst out. “I warned you, Ted. Didn’t I warn you?”

“Yes, you did. Mrs. McKenzie, did he say why he thought this?”

“No, sir, not specifically, though he did mention recent events reported in the media. When it became clear that he had his own idea of what happened and wasn’t going to listen to anything that might refute it, I decided I should leave because anything I said would most likely be misconstrued. I did inform him that I would be talking to the captain and Lt. Davies, as well as to the union.”

“You acted properly, as always, Mrs. McKenzie. Thank you.”

“If I may speak frankly, sir?”

“Yes, always. Your counsel is always appreciated.”

Paula, unlike her friend Bob Davies and many others in the department, had always seen Abbott as a careful, dispassionate man with a sure sense of his own destiny. While he might appear distant, he had never seemed arrogant to her. Quite the opposite, he cultivated many diverse people for their opinions. While she might not always have agreed with his decisions, she knew they were well-reasoned and never impulsive.

For his part, Theodore Abbott had been impressed by the fact that Paula had always proven to be impartial, objective, and utterly trustworthy. Her integrity had repeatedly proven unassailable under the most trying circumstances. He had learned to value such people, and their counsel, even when it hurt. In Paula’s case, he had investigated her faith a long time ago because she had intrigued him so much. He knew that whatever she had to say, it would not be motivated by self-interest precisely because she was a Bahá’í.

As if in confirmation of this, his small accolade caused Paula’s deep tan to redden. She dropped her eyes for a moment and let the the burning coal of her anger light her courage. Only the foolish relished telling the big boss he’s screwed up, but Ted Abbott had been a colleague, if not a friend, for very long time. He deserved, and needed, her best.

“Mr. Browne may be reacting in this way to accomplish the impossible task you assigned him. You brought him in here to resolve a political crisis which has no basis in reality. His unwritten mandate is, I’m told, to clean up the medical division and root out the incompetents. The problem is that, as you well know, there is nothing to clean up and there are no incompetents on the staff to get rid of. Worse, Mr. Browne’s appointment was given a great deal of publicity, and he may feel that his career is on the line if he doesn’t produce results. He indicated he knew he was brought in here as political damage control, but he also said he doesn’t feel any obligation to play that role. He left me with the definite impression that he is a man on a crusade.”

Paula’s lack of the usual preamble, begging forgiveness for being the bearer of bad news, went unnoticed by Abbott. Such directness had been a hallmark of their relationship through the years and had remained unchanged by his election.

“Are you saying that he might invent or exaggerate some things?”

“I would hope that he is a person of greater integrity than that, but I cannot say at this point if he is or not. What I think is that he might be blinded by both his personal beliefs and the pressures placed on him by this job to such an extent that he is looking at last night’s events with a very jaundiced eye. Certainly the article and subsequent editorials in the *Reflector* left little doubt that they believe the jail is staffed with thugs and incompetent medical personnel who

would not balk at falsifying a mere incident report or two. In the absence of any other information, he as much as stated that he has accepted the paper's allegations as true."

"How could he not, as you put it, have any other information?" Abbott asked. "How could he be so blind? He's been working with you people for the last couple of weeks, hasn't he?"

"No sir, he has not. He stays in his office. He hasn't talked or worked with us, or observed us as we carry out our duties. He's refused to take a tour of the jail except a brief walk around Medical Isolation. I'm sorry to have to say this, but it is quite possibly you who is the one who has blinded him. Your manipulation of the appointment process has certainly reinforced the impression that you believe there is something terribly wrong in the medical section. Simply put, in your rush to contain the damage you believed those articles posed to you politically, you have inadvertently confirmed their veracity, not only in the public's mind, but quite likely in Mr. Browne's mind as well."

Abbott sat back on the couch to mull this over. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hill open his mouth. With a wave of his hand, he quieted him. Davies, he saw, smiled at Mrs. McKenzie and gave her a wink which she had the good grace not to acknowledge.

Her analysis was, of course, more than plausible. All he could do now was try to salvage as much from the situation as possible. What he wouldn't give to have her as his re-election advisor. She was worth all the political sycophants who had attached themselves to him like leeches. But he knew her religion prevented her from taking an active role in political campaigns. In fact, it was that very restriction which made her so valuable to him.

"Thank you, Mrs. McKenzie. As always your perspective adds an entirely new dimension. I am certain the pathologist's findings will support your report, disproving his suppositions. In any case, I will speak to Mr. Browne this morning. Rest assured that you have nothing to fear from him."

"Thank you. I know that you will handle this with all your usual tact and understanding. Mr. Browne is a frightened man, I think, and we all know how unpredictably frightened people can react to adversity."

Abbott nodded. "Rest assured, I'll be gentle. I'll just try to redirect him a little. Suggest some other ways to look at things and maybe make our goals a little clearer. Don't worry, as I said, you'll have nothing to fear from him. Now, go home and get some sleep. That's an order."

"Yes, sir!" Paula came to attention, smiled broadly, and whipped off a sharp military salute. Abbott returned a general's careless one and laughed.

"If there is nothing else you need from me, sir," Davies asked, "I have to get some sleep as well so I can come back and play another game of hangman with Paula tonight."

Abbott grimaced at the joke and nodded.

Hill shook his head and said, "Get out of here, you two, and let us get some work done."

On the way down the hall, Davies said, "Whatever else you do today, Paula, be sure you see the union rep. Push comes to shove, you're still the one most likely to be out looking for work, not Red Browne."

Chapter Six

Hearth and Home

Paula dragged herself through her front door and headed straight for the bedroom, dropping purse, coat, and assorted clothes on the way. T.J., bless his loving heart, would quietly pick them up when he got home from teaching his class at the college. She fell into bed, barely managing to pull the t-shirt she used as a nightie over her head. The last thing she saw was the bedside clock's red numerals changing to 11:17.

What should have taken half an hour at most, had dragged on nearly two hours. She had walked across the street to the union headquarters and told the woman at the counter that she needed to talk to a representative. She had then had to give an account of her story to three different clerks before she was finally seated with the "right" representative. He had taped the interview, going over everything in great detail, and then explained what the union might be able to do in any of what seemed like a dozen scenarios. In the end, all the scenarios had boiled down to little more than much yelling and stamping of feet.

She said, "Thanks a lot," through gritted teeth and left. Cursing the bungling stupidity of bureaucrats everywhere, she wondered what she had done to deserve being forced to work with them. Then, like a schizophrenic whose voices had just told a good joke, she stopped beside her car in the middle of the parking lot and laughed. She was one of them! What could be more fitting?

The laughter released the tension her anger had built, but that anger had also been the only thing keeping her upright. She opened her car's door and dropped inside. Now, all she cared about was sleep and she didn't care too much where. The back seat tempted her, but two things prevented her from going there: One, the parking lot was open, unguarded, and near the city's least savory area. Cars were routinely stripped or stolen in this lot day and night. She had no desire to be ripped out of her car like a stereo. She would never get any sleep that way. Two, she lived just fifteen minutes away. She could make it that far. She hoped.

* * *

"Go 'way."

She brushed at the tickle on her cheek.

"Hon. It's six-thirty," T.J. said softly as he kissed her cheek again. "You have to get up. We have Assembly at eight."

"Fine," she snapped. "You go without me."

"It's here."

With a disgusted sigh, she rolled onto her back and peeked through her eyelids at the man leaning over her. Deep, soft brown eyes looked into hers from a craggy face under a silver-flecked brown thatch. "Sorry, I forgot." Folding her arms around his neck she pulled him down and kissed him.

"Must have been a bad night."

“And a worse morning. I need you to hold me for a minute. Then I’ll go and make myself decent.”

“You are always decent,” he said, pulling her into his arms as he stretched out beside her. “Maybe a little under dressed for a Spiritual Assembly meeting at the moment, but always decent.”

Paula snuggled in close and said, “God, I love you. You always know just what to say. Now, please just hold me close.”

T.J. pulled her in tight, and she tucked her head into the crook of his neck. He felt her tears soak through his shirt and made no move to stem their healing flow.

A few minutes later, she pulled her head back and murmured, “Thank you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’m honored to bear the stain of your tears, though I must confess, I’d prefer the stain of your lipstick.”

“I don’t wear lipstick, as you well know, so I guess you’re going to have to go through life feeling unfulfilled.”

He sighed dramatically and rolled onto his back. “How can I ever go on.”

“Oh, I suspect you’ll manage somehow,” she said, rising on her elbow to look down on him. “You’re a tough guy. You’ll make it. Speaking of tough guys, what’s for dinner?”

“You must be feeling better.”

She nodded. “Not completely healed, but definitely on the mend. I could use some physical therapy, though, if it won’t interfere with your dinner plans.”

“It’ll stay nice and warm in the oven and be ready whenever you are.”

* * *

Cutting into a lemon and herb grilled chicken breast, Paula recounted her night and the morning after, leaving out the patient’s names to preserve confidentiality even though it was, in reality, a futile exercise. The TV stations had already broadcast with their characteristic abandon the men’s names and charges and whatever intimate and salacious details they had unearthed.

“Well, it doesn’t sound like he can really do anything,” T.J. said. “As soon as the autopsy report comes out, he won’t have a leg to stand on.”

“The thing is, I’m not sure that will be enough. I think he believes that I should have tried CPR anyway.”

“What on earth for? He was dead, right? I mean really dead, as in the next step is beginning to smell really bad?”

“Doesn’t matter. At first, I thought he was just looking at how the paper would print the story. By the way, the au gratins are terrific, sweetheart. I can never get them to come out this good.”

“It’s that extra time in the oven.”

“I’ll have to see that they get that extra time more often. Anyway, as I’ve thought about it since then, I’m not so sure that he’s all that concerned about the media. I know he is a little, at least in terms of how his administration looks, but I’m beginning to wonder if he isn’t looking for any excuse he can find to fire all of us. If showing the media that the most senior nurse on staff is a negligent hack, it might give him the leverage he needs to accomplish that goal.”

“That sounds a little extreme to me. How could he hope to run the place with all brand new, inexperienced people?”

“That’s the scary part, I don’t think he cares. There’s an irrational inconsistency to him that’s very disturbing. In some ways he seems more bent on destroying us than in building a new department. It’s almost like he’s seeking vengeance. I don’t know. The only thing I know for sure is that he has an almost pathological hatred for us. The way he acted this morning really made me wonder what it was that’s caused him to hate cops so much. Whatever it was, it must have been monstrous, because his dislike goes way beyond a politically liberal person’s traditional dislike for law enforcement.”

“So, do you think he might try to make or create some excuse he can use to fire you?”

“That’s certainly the way it looked this morning. I’m glad I wasn’t there when Abbott had his little talk with him. Maybe we’ll have gotten lucky and he’ll have quit in a fit over having a mere sheriff tell him how to run his department. Not likely, though. The phone would have rung off the hook with the news.”

“He’s really that disliked?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s bad. The only one who likes him is the nurse he brought over from mental health, Dave Thompson. I’ve tried to stay out of all of this as much as possible and just keep my head down, but I can’t do that now. Not after this morning. The real problem is that I don’t know for sure what I should do?”

“Do you want to consult with the Assembly tonight? I can put it on the agenda.”

“I don’t know that it would do any good. At least not at this stage.”

“Actually, now would be the best time. You know how it is. Most people wait until the problem is already overwhelming or it’s too late to do anything but pick up the pieces. For once we’d have a head start.”

“You’re right, as usual. Go ahead. Put it on. I guess there are some advantages to having the secretary of the Spiritual Assembly as a husband.”

“That’s probably the only one.”

Paula looked thoughtful for a moment and said, “I think you’re right,” with a broad smile.

* * *

“...and that’s about it. I can’t think of anything else to say,” Paula said. She had taken what steps she could to preserve patient confidentiality, though she knew they all knew who she was talking about. The newspaper, as expected, had headlined both cases over the announcement of a landmark Supreme Court decision, which had netted three column inches in the lower right corner of the first page. The story read like it had been written by Browne, though toned down enough by their legal department to be just shy of libel.

The members of the Spiritual Assembly were seated around a huge antique oak dining table T.J. and Paula had been given by her parents as a housewarming gift. On many occasions twelve people had sat around it in splendid comfort on matching oak chairs to enjoy some of T.J.’s famed Chinese cuisine. Tonight, it served, as it did most Mondays, as a conference table for the nine members of the Assembly.

The dining room was actually one corner of a 700 square foot great room. A beamed cathedral ceiling supported by pale mauve walls cast a soft glow on the oak plank floor Paula had laid herself with the help of her friend, Jack Johnson, who now sat directly across from her. The floor tied the cherrywood kitchen in the adjacent corner to the seven-piece, muted floral tapestry sectional in the living space in front of the stone hearth at the other end of the room.

Paula looked at the Chair, Liz Garvey, a thin, elegant black woman in her early forties who managed a local research firm.

“Thank you, Paula. Are there any questions?” Liz said, looking in turn at each of the other members.

Manual Espinoza, twenty-one, a senior studying anthropology at the university, and newest member of the Assembly, raised his hand.

The Chair nodded and he asked, “How certain are you that Mr. Browne’s goal is to fire you?”

“I’m not absolutely certain that it is, Manny. All I am really certain of is what he’s said and the attitude he has taken with all of us who work there.”

“And that is that you are incompetent and can’t be trusted. Right?”

Paula nodded, “That pretty well sums it up.”

“What kinds of recourse do you have if he does try to fire you?” Jack Johnson asked.

The oldest Assembly member, a stout, silver-haired, retired plumber who had owned his own business, Jack understood hiring and firing from a boss’s perspective as few of the others did.

“A lot depends on what grounds he chooses,” Paula replied. “I can go to the union, but as I’ve told you, the only thing they seemed willing or able to do is scream ‘foul’ and make me some kind of icon for one of their causes. In terms of really helping me, I don’t think they’ll be of much use. If anything, they’ll probably poison the water so much that even if I were to be reinstated, it’d be impossible to work effectively.”

Jack nodded, he had dealt with unions all his professional life, both as a member and as a boss. They did some good, but they seemed to have a chip on their shoulder that too often got in the way of accomplishing any substantive improvement in the relationship between employer and employee. He had long found it interesting that, for a group whose name implied unity, they were so divisive.

“Can you reply to his charges yourself? By that I mean, are you allowed to respond on your own without the union representing you?”

“Yes, I can. Actually, for the union to do anything, I would have to do that anyway. They don’t really investigate anything themselves. They just take the employee’s statement and the county’s statement and start an action. But the county does not require us to go through the union.”

“What about other assistance, such as legal?” asked Stan Chung, Vice Chair and a third generation Chinese-American, fifty-year old high school teacher of history and English.

“Absolutely. But that usually means filing a suit. It still becomes an adversarial situation and can drag on for months or even years.”

“If it became necessary, could the Assembly stand with you, even represent you?” Mary Chapin asked.

A member of one Assembly or another for over thirty years, Mary had the most administrative experience of anyone on the Assembly. She served as the community’s Librarian, and would have the primary responsibility for researching the sacred Writings of the Bahá’í Faith for those passages that would provide guidance in this situation.

“I suppose so, though, frankly I hadn’t ever considered it. At this point, there’s nothing definite. Just indications of the direction things might go. I think it’s too early to be talking about representation. All I’m really after is a little moral support and some guidance on the best way to deal with this as a Bahá’í.”

“You know, in Iran, the assemblies routinely resolved these types of conflicts among the Bahá’ís; but it couldn’t intercede with the government at all, and only rarely with the privately owned businesses,” Anoosh Sanai said. “This could be a great opportunity to establish a broader relationship with the local government. We might even be able to establish an alternative conflict resolution system.”

A fifth generation Bahá’í, Anoosh’s great-great-grandfather had been killed in the first wave of persecutions against the Bahá’ís that had swept his native Persia in the 1860’s. He had been completing his masters in business administration in the United States when the Shah of Iran had been overthrown, initiating a fresh wave of persecution. His parents, having known that the fall of the government was inevitable, were prepared and emigrated to Italy, where his sister lived. They had since moved to South America, and then to Fiji, teaching the Bahá’í Faith to anyone who expressed an interest. He had chosen to stay in the U.S. to manage the family’s modest investment portfolio so they could travel and teach with minimal financial constraints. To support himself, he had opened Classic Interiors and developed it into a solid business.

“It might be a little early to begin establishing the Franklin County Conflict Resolution Center,” Sam Cohn observed, “but you’re right that it does present several opportunities.”

Short, powerfully built, and bald, Sam looked nothing like the creator of delicate gold filigree that one expected upon entering his jewelry shop. His practicality and business sense, also, no doubt, played a role in his being elected Treasurer year after year.

“Any other comments?” Liz asked. “We haven’t heard from you, T.J.”

“I’m afraid that I’m a little too emotionally involved to think clearly and dispassionately about this. That anyone could suggest that Paula’s incompetent and, even worse, a liar, just shows their ignorance and prejudice.”

“Why do you say prejudice?” Liz asked.

“Because of his slur about her being religious. Not just Bahá’í, which is something I might have expected, but religiously active in any faith from the sound of it. Because he thinks being religious somehow makes her unfit to even be a nurse, and that it therefore caused her to hesitate to try reviving someone because the last time she did it the person wound up in a coma. That’s so inconsistent as to call into question his own rationality. And finally, because he believes, without even knowing her, that she is so dishonest that she would write a phony report as though it was an everyday occurrence. That idea, in particular, is so inconsistent with her being religious that it is simply incomprehensible.”

“Do you agree with T.J. about this, Paula?” Liz asked.

“I was so shocked by his accusations that I wasn’t really thinking very straight. I was mad, and I just wanted to get out of there before I did something stupid. I do remember thinking that he seemed to have already made up his mind before he even talked to me. I’ve had to go over this whole thing several times today, and there’s no doubt in my mind that he walked into the jail already convinced that all of us are incompetent fools. I honestly doubt that if we routinely performed open heart surgery successfully in there it would change his mind one iota. As to his comment about being religious, I have to say that it surprised me. It sort of came out of left field. I have no idea where he heard it, or who told him. He hasn’t talked to any of us more than to growl ‘Good morning’ as far as I know. And it definitely isn’t a prejudice against my being a Bahá’í. He made it clear that any religious affiliation was suspect. The way he said it was so condescending. It was as though having any religious beliefs automatically disqualified me from consideration as a competent nurse or even as a rational person. I have no doubt that he’s an atheist, which, in and of itself, doesn’t bother me all that much. What bothers me is that there is a

militancy about his atheism, almost a fanaticism to it, that is kind of frightening. Frankly, as I look back on it now, I can't say for certain which bothered him more: my being religious or my working in the jail. But, if I had to put money on it, I'd bet on it being the religious thing."

"Very well, then," the Chair said. "Even though we don't have all the facts in the case yet, I think we have enough to begin identifying the principles involved." She looked around the room and each member nodded in agreement. "The question is, do we want to do that now, or at our next meeting?"

"I think we should give it a go tonight," Jack said. "Paula needs some help now. Next week may be too late."

"We also have the option of meeting earlier than that if necessary," Liz pointed out. "How do the rest of you feel?"

Each in turn said they would prefer to begin immediately while the information was fresh in their minds. Over the course of the next half-hour, they determined that the principles of honesty, trustworthiness, and obedience definitely applied as they related directly to Paula. In addition, prejudicial thinking and how to deal with it lay at the core of the entire situation. They also decided that they would meet in two days at Mary's.

Tuesday

Chapter Seven

They Always Come in Threes

Her foot slipped on the wet floor outside the Protective Custody cell. The sepulchral glow of the security lamps provided more shadow than light.

“Turn on the lights in here,” Paula called back over her shoulder. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

Cold, fluorescent light flooded the area in a few seconds and revealed a floor covered in congealing blood. At her feet lay the nearly naked body of the occupant of the cramped, one-man cell. His legs formed a “V” around the blood-caked toilet, his head at Paula’s feet.

She pulled on a pair of exam gloves, hunkered down, and felt for the carotid artery. A faint pulse greeted her fingertips through the thin latex and she counted it, noting the time as 4:19 AM for the report she would have to write later. She bent over and held her cheek half an inch above the man’s open mouth. A zephyr of breath tickled the hairs on her cheek. She straightened up to face the deputy returning from the console where he had turned on the lights.

“Paramedics are rolling, right?” Paula asked.

“Yeah, they’re on their way,” the deputy said petulantly.

Paula ignored it. She had a faint pulse and shallow respirations to track, and she couldn’t do it in the tiny cell. Handing him a pair of gloves, she said, “Good. Give me a hand pulling him out of here.”

The young man donned the gloves and gingerly took the inmate’s right arm by the wrist while she took his left. Fresh blood oozed out of both arms from the antecubitals. He dropped the arm as though he had been bit by a snake.

“Grab him under his shoulder. We just need to get him out where I can work on him.”

Taking care not to soil his uniform, The deputy reached down and grabbed the right upper arm as Paula had done. Together they dragged the man onto the runway outside the cell where Paula immediately dropped to her knees and check for a pulse. Thin, thready, but still there.

Retrieving her emergency bag, she took out some gauze pads and handed a couple to the deputy. “Put this on that wound, and then wrap it tightly with this,” she said, handing him a roll of gauze bandage.

Making the face of a child presented with a dinner of spinach, he followed her example. The collapsed veins produced just enough blood to stain the bandage, but not soak it. Still it was enough to make him back off two steps as soon as he had taped the bandage.

“He’s not going to bite,” Paula said. She pulled her stethoscope out of the bag with one hand, while keeping track of his carotid pulse with the other. She didn’t bother with the blood pressure cuff. There was no way to get a reading through the bandages on his arms. She could have gotten one from his leg if she had had a thigh cuff, but the department didn’t have one. Browne would probably deride her for not attempting to get one anyway, but it didn’t matter right now.

“Do you know who he is?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you know why I ain’t touching him anymore than I have to.”

The pulse in his neck stopped. She pressed deeper. Still no pulse. She fit the stethoscope to her ears and listened. She thought she heard a faint lub-dub. The pounding of her own heart in her ears made it difficult to hear the faint sounds made by the man’s heart. Another soft lub-dub, this time she felt the faintest movement pass under her fingers. And another, slightly stronger. And another, stronger again. She sat back and pulled the stethoscope down around her neck.

“Right now, none of that matters. Why don’t you check on the paramedics?”

Ripping his gloves off, he quick marched to a sentry phone ten feet away and called Central Control.

“Just coming through the sally port,” he reported on his return. “How can you say it doesn’t matter? This is Carter the Cutter. How many little kids did he do? Ten? Twelve? At least that we know about. And you want to save him? I just don’t understand it. He’s going to fry anyway.”

“That hasn’t been determined yet, Mr. Blake,” Lt. Davies said as he keyed the gate to the cellblock.

Blake spun around. The hand-in-the-cookie-jar look passed quickly as he attempted to bluff it out. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t do anything. I’m just saying we shouldn’t bust our butts is all. Especially with all this blood around. I mean, even dead he could kill us, right?”

Before he could reply, Davies saw Paula stiffen. She stuffed the stethoscope back in her ears, listened for a couple of seconds, rose up on her knees, and hammered the inmate’s chest once with her fist. She listened again through the stethoscope, shook her head, ripped it off, and found the tip of the sternum with her left hand. She measured two finger-widths up, put the heel of her right hand next to the fingers, moved her left hand on top of the right, laced the fingers together, and pressed down, leaning forward on straight arms like an oil derrick. She rocked back and forth, a little faster than once every second for fifteen compressions, and stopped. She checked his breathing by placing her cheek just above his mouth again.

Blake’s face wrinkled as though he was watching her kiss a rotting corpse. He started to say something, saw the look on Davies’ face, and kept quiet.

The zephyr remained. Straightening back up she gave fifteen more compressions and put her fingers on his carotid artery.

A pulse! Faint, but definite. She listened to his chest. The heartbeats continued, gathering strength with each slow beat.

A loud crash of metal against metal announced that help had arrived at last.

Chapter Eight

Surprise

"Sit down, Ms. McKenzie," Browne said.

Paula sank into the hard chair in his sterile office. It had been a wearying night and she just wanted to go home and get some sleep. The last thing she needed or wanted right now was another lecture about her incompetence and prevaricating ways.

A bar brawl in Richland had produced several cantankerous patients with assorted cuts and bruises just after one o'clock. Then her breakfast of vulcanized eggs had been interrupted by Carter's attempted suicide.

She still hadn't decided whether she should be thankful for that or not. Whatever else they did, they needed to assign a new inmate to cook for them. Bob had offered to have the kitchen prepare a tray from the breakfast line for her because the staff mess had closed by the time she had finished with Carter, but she couldn't stomach the thought of those eggs.

Just as well, because she had been called to the women's jail to see a woman who had gone berserk. She had just managed to get her sent off to the county psychiatric ward in time to come back and pass out the morning medications in Medical Isolation with the breakfast trays. Then there had been the reports to write up.

She had returned with the signed reports from Davies' office to find Jenny smoldering under Browne's appraisal of her habit of showing up early. He concluded by saying that it would take a great deal more than that to positively influence his opinion of her. Then he barked an order at Paula to see him in his office before she went home. She put her arm around Jenny's shoulder and patted it to let her know she wasn't alone.

Pausing a nanosecond for her to comply with his command to sit, he said, "First, I'm glad to hear that our little talk did some good. Your efforts to save Mr. Carter's life were commendable. However, that does not balance the scales. I have a subpoena here for you to appear before the Grand Jury today at two P.M. Among other things, they subpoenaed the chart of one Gary Pollack. I'm sure you remember him. I would think he'd be a very hard man to forget after all that's happened, yet this is all I could find in our records on his stay with us."

Browne held up a sheet of lined blue paper with Medical Record printed across the top. Gary Pollack's name and vital statistics were listed immediately below. The rest of the page was blank.

Paula kept her peace. On this subject she knew she was on rock solid ground with him, regardless of what he might think. Or wish. Or hope.

"Where's the real chart?"

"I believe you are holding it in your hand, sir."

"Are you trying to tell me that a man who was locked in a Medical Restraint cell after being beaten by no less than three deputies has no medical record? And please note that Medical Restraint is never to be referred to by the medical staff as the Rubber Room again. If I can ever get any cooperation around here, both those rooms will be converted into modern, appropriately equipped rooms for people who are out of control or suicidal."

“Good idea. What are your plans?”

“I’m surprised you agree. To bring you into the late twentieth century, we now use chemical restraint as much as possible. Physical restraint is used only until the chemical kind has taken hold. What I’m talking about is a proper hospital bed on which we can use either soft or hard restraints as needed. That filthy hole in the floor you call a toilet will be replaced by a standard one and the walls and floor stripped of that hideous rubber padding. In any case, I am at this time drawing up new guidelines which are far more in line with modern psychiatric protocols and which should cut back sharply on the use of those rooms.”

“Are you also going to ask for an increase in staff to monitor the restrained patients?”

“Am I to take it you don’t think you can work taking care of these patients into your busy schedule?”

“State law requires documented observation and inspection of the patient’s restraints and extremities every fifteen minutes. That means going into the cell and checking each restrained extremity for circulation and injury. Conservatively that leaves the nurse on duty about ten minutes of every fifteen to handle sick call, emergencies, hourly drunk tank checks and rounds in Med Iso, making up medicine envelopes, and taking care of incidentals like reports, the log, and phone calls.”

“I am surprised by your knowledge of these rules. It’s a shame you don’t follow them. But we are digressing. I asked you how you can sit there and tell me this is Mr. Pollack’s full, complete, and original medical record.”

“First, all of us know these rules and the reason we haven’t followed them here is that the patients are not any more physically restrained than they would be in a regular cell. Because of their unstable mental condition, we do have someone, either the deputy or the nurse, look in on them every fifteen minutes. Quite honestly, I find the Medical Restraint cells less debilitating and dangerous than four-point leather restraints with the staffing we currently have. If we are going to get rid of the padded cells, then I think it would be a good idea to set up the two closest Med Iso cells as restraint rooms. Even better would be to convert the storeroom around the corner into one and make the current padded cells into something else.

“Second, I am in complete agreement with you on the use of chemical restraint, but that requires a physician’s order. Standing orders cannot be used in this case. Getting those orders when we need them, which is usually at night and on weekends has been impossible.

“Third, Gary Pollack never made any requests for medical attention to my knowledge. As far as I know, he had no cause to ever request medical attention in here, and I know he was never in Medical Restraint because both cells were occupied before he was even booked. I did see him, though not as a patient, just before his release, as I was going home. He had no visible injuries and gave no indication that he needed or wanted any medical care.”

“Given the reputation of this department, that is no surprise. But I will concede that it is possible that he didn’t realize you were a nurse. He might easily have confused you with a deputy in that uniform. He might not even have seen you.”

“He saw me. He looked me straight in the eye with a smirk and nodded. And there is no way he could have confused this white shirt and its caduceus shoulder patches with a deputy’s all khaki uniform.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to try to brazen this out. Look at this!” he shouted, waving the empty medical record in her face. “This speaks volumes.”

“To you. To me it just says that he wasn’t seen by us.”

“So, you expect me to believe that this man is lying. That the things he swore happened to him while he was in here are all lies.”

“Mr. Browne. You seem to have made up your mind already that everyone on this staff is lying and incompetent or worse. You assume that we are lying to you whenever we answer a question, and that we routinely falsify reports and medical records. Under those circumstances it is foolish for me to continue this conversation. If you will excuse me, I have to go home and try to get a couple of hours sleep before I face the Grand Jury.” Paula stood up and held her hand out. “May I please have my subpoena?”

“Sit back down!” Browne yelled, leaping out of his chair again and leaning over the desk. “You will leave when I’m through with you and not a moment before!”

Browne’s face was bright red, his eyes bulged, and he looked on the verge of a stroke or murder. After yesterday’s marginally accidental assault, she dreaded remaining within his reach. Her first instinct was to keep on going right out that door, but that would just give him the excuse he needed to fire or suspend her. If she was going to leave this job, which was looking more and more attractive each day, she wanted it to be on her terms, not on his. She sat slowly on the edge of the chair, pushing it back out of his reach as she did so.

“I will not tolerate any further insubordination. Is that clear?” Browne said as she perched on the chair.

After he, in turn, sat down, Paula said, “I beg your pardon, Mr. Browne, but I do not believe I was being insubordinate. I am not required to sit here and be intimidated or abused and I will not allow it to occur again.”

“Again? When have I ever abused you?”

“Yesterday. In the Dispensary. It may have been accidental, but you pushed me aside rather roughly and unnecessarily to rip the CPR policy out of the book. And just now I felt quite certain that you were very close to striking me. You have been verbally abusive as well, not only to me, but to Mrs. Rhoads.”

“It’s a wonder you’ve survived in here as long as you have if a little accidental brush and a few pointed words can terrify you so. However, in deference to your need to feel more comfortable and secure, I offer my apologies and my assurance that at no time did I, or do I, intend any physical harm to come to you. I abhor violence.”

Paula nodded as the thought occurred to her that he had not ruled out other forms of violence. “Thank you.” She did not relax into her chair, but continued to sit on its edge, ready to flee at the first sign of his losing control again.

“There is one thing you should understand,” Browne continued, “I will not tolerate insubordination in any form. My predecessor appears to have been rather lax in that regard, judging from the way all of you have been acting. Chain of command is an inviolable essential in any organization. Lose it and we lose our ability to effectively accomplish our mission. This department cannot be all chiefs. Like it or not, I have been made your superior, your chief, your boss. Not you, not Ms. Rhoads, nor any of the rest of you. Your job is to do what I tell you to, when I tell you to do it. It is not to argue with me like a Philadelphia lawyer when I give you an order or make a decision or take some kind of action. And it most certainly is not your job to walk out on me because you don’t want to hear some constructive criticism that can help you keep your job. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir. It is quite clear. May I offer an apology and an explanation?” Sighing, Browne nodded. “First, none of us, to my knowledge, has been intentionally insubordinate. We have all been used to a more collegial working relationship. Mr. Peterson looked upon us as equals and

consulted us constantly. He said that in a department as small as ours, the chain of command was very short and therefore worked best when held with a relaxed hand. There was never any question of who was in charge, and there were very few times any of us needed to be reminded of it. From what you have said, and the way you have acted since taking over the department, I must conclude that you have a different opinion and we will have to adjust. I can promise you that I will make every effort to do that. I cannot speak for my colleagues, but I believe they will also. However, I must make one observation. It would be a lot easier for all of us to make this adjustment if we felt you had at least some respect for us.”

“Well, respect is something that must be earned, isn’t it, Ms. McKenzie?”

“And you have none for us. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I respect the fact that you all managed to get through an accredited nursing school. I have not seen a great deal of evidence that those lessons stayed with you, or even that they had been well learned to begin with. Prove to me that you are a good nurse and I will respect you for that.”

“And how can we do that when you never watch us work, never go with us on a man down call, never have any interaction with us except to chastise us?”

Browne held up the empty blue sheet. “Well, you can start right now by explaining to me the real reasons why there are no entries on this chart. Just being honest and truthful with me will increase my respect for you regardless of the level of your nursing skills.”

“I have been honest and truthful with you, Mr. Browne. In all things and in all matters. As regards this situation I can only repeat that there are no entries on Mr. Pollack’s medical record because he never requested medical attention while he was in here. Neither did any deputy or other staff member request that I evaluate or treat him, and, to the best of my knowledge, he never needed medical treatment during the few hours he spent with us.”

“And you expect me to believe that. You expect me to take what you say over what a man has sworn to in an affidavit just because you say it is the truth?”

“No. I would hope that you would not dismiss what I say out of hand simply because I am the one who said it. I would hope that you would dispassionately weigh both statements, consider them rationally, evaluate how well they both hold up to scrutiny, how consistent they are, both internally and externally, and then make up your mind.”

“And what makes you think that I haven’t done that already?”

“The fact that you have assumed that I am lying every time I open my mouth to speak. The fact that you assume, until proven otherwise, that I lied in my report on Foster’s suicide. That fact that you apparently have taken as absolute truth the statements made by Mr. Pollack with no corroboration of any kind on his part, other than the fact he was willing to legally swear his story is true. In short, the fact that we who work in the Sheriff’s Department must prove to you that we are not the lying scum of the earth, while you appear to accept as incontrovertible truth what everyone outside the Sheriff’s Department says. Where I come from, that is known as prejudice. I am asking you to step back and take an objective look at what you are doing, not just for my sake, but for your own as well.”

“What? So now you’re stooping to name-calling? Well, I can see this is getting us nowhere and has been a complete waste of time. Just be aware that you are skating on very thin ice, Ms. McKenzie, and it’s already started to crack. If I were you, I’d be heading for the shore as quickly as I could. Here, take these and get out of here. I will see you tomorrow morning.”

Paula took the subpoena and the certified copy of Pollack’s blank medical record and left his office. She tried not to appear as though she were in a hurry, but her steps quickened once she had left the Dispensary. She managed to keep from running down the halls, but only with a

supreme exercise of will. In the locker room she changed in record time. Her traverse of the parking lot would have made an Olympic marathon walker proud. Only when she was in her car, the doors locked, the windows rolled up tight, the keys in the ignition, but the engine not yet started, did she release the tremendous tension that bunched the muscles in her shoulders and neck by screaming and beating her fists on the steering wheel. Finally, she released a pent up cascade of tears as her taut body shuddered violently several times.

When the last shudder completed its run over her spine, and the torrent flowing down her cheeks had dwindled to a trickle, she let go of the life preserver she had made of the steering wheel and slumped back in the seat utterly spent and drained. Never had she faced such unreasoning and implacable hatred. It was the only way she could describe it. Hatred. What else could explain his attitude? For the first time she could really appreciate what Jenny had faced to some degree or other almost everyday of her life. How did she put up with it? How did she cope? To be hated merely for being what you were. For being black. For being a jail nurse. For believing in God. For simply existing.

And how much worse it must be for Jenny, she thought. At least I can change my place of employment, even my profession if I have to. Jenny can't change being black.

Now, as never before, she could appreciate the precious gift her parents had given her by rearing her in a Bahá'í home and in a Bahá'í community. Her parents had not merely told her she had to be honest, truthful, and without prejudice, they had set her the example of how to live that way every day. She had grown up following their example. She had grown up in a community where integrity and truthfulness and a lack of prejudice were the norm.

Working in the jail had been a breath-taking shock for her at first. While she had encountered people's flexible attitude towards the truth from the time she had entered kindergarten, and had come to terms with it fairly easily because, while widespread, it still wasn't the accepted standard, she had been quite unprepared for the extremely casual disregard almost everyone in the jail had for the truth. The second blow had been their complete lack of a sense of responsibility. Both had taken quite a bit of getting used to—and guarding against.

Not even in the early days of her career, when inmates and their attorneys assumed that she was like everyone else and was at least shading the truth a little, had she been confronted with as implacable an attitude as Browne's. Before, she had been able, quite easily, to demonstrate to these people that she could be relied upon to be honest and truthful just by being so. They seemed willing to admit that such people existed, even in the jail. The unassailability of Browne's attitude left her with one question to which she had yet to find an answer. How do you deal with someone who assumes you are always lying?

Chapter Nine

Grand Jury

The door opened punctually and a man who looked every bit the prosecutor—dark suit, white shirt, muted tie, and grave expression—ushered Paula into the Grand Jury Room. She had taken care with her appearance, dressing in a tailored navy gabardine suit with knee-length skirt, sheer nylons, simple white blouse, and geometric silk scarf in primary colors. Plain navy pumps elevated her height to four-foot-eleven. She had applied a little lipstick, more to lessen the fatigue she had seen in the mirror, than to accede to the convention that women were supposed to wear makeup for such occasions.

The few, fitful hours of sleep she had managed to achieve had done little to prepare her for the ordeal she expected this to be. She had testified in several trials over the years and it had never been a pleasant experience. She didn't expect this to be any different just because it was before the Grand Jury instead of a trial jury. As always, a butterfly fluttered in her stomach, not because she was afraid of what they might drag out of her, but because she had never been able to follow the serpentine logic the legal system used to arrive at what it called the truth. Facts never seemed to count for much except as a starting place for each side's twisted manipulations. As she had once remarked to Owen, Jesus Christ would fare badly before some of these lawyers. His reply had been that He had, hadn't He.

Inside the paneled chamber, a long, curved, mahogany table dominated the room. Eighteen people, mostly middle aged or older, sat behind the table, papers spread before them. In the center of the arc formed by the table stood an eight foot long mahogany conference table. Four chairs faced the Jury across this table. A man in a sportcoat and tie with a stenotype machine beside him occupied the one on the right end. A heavyset woman in a flowered dress with a yellow legal pad and several folders on the table before her filled the next chair. The prosecutor indicated that Paula should sit in an empty chair on the left end and then sat in the one between the two women.

Before Paula could sit, the woman rose and asked her to raise her right hand. Paula swore the familiar oath of truthfulness, gave her full name, acknowledged the admonishment concerning the secret nature of these proceedings and the penalty for violating that secrecy, and sat in the chair.

The prosecutor turned to her and said, "You are Paula Rose McKenzie, a registered nurse, currently in the employ of the Sheriff's Department as a Medical Deputy?"

"Yes, though the title is now Correctional Nurse."

"Welcome. My name is Harold Jameson. I am the Deputy District Attorney assigned to this year's Grand Jury. You were asked to come here to help the Jury in its investigation of conditions at the jail. In addition we will be asking you about the sudden rise of suicides. Three attempts, two of which resulted in deaths and one of which resulted in a coma, all of which occurred in the last two days."

"So Carter died. When?"

"I assumed you knew."

"No one told me. I left work about eight-thirty."

“I see. It was about nine this morning. He never regained consciousness. Now, as you may know, the Grand Jury is required by state law to conduct an investigation into all deaths of those in custody. This is usually done as a matter of routine by reviewing the pertinent documents and reports. In view of the recent allegations made in the press the Jury decided to conduct a more intensive investigation, which now seems fortuitous in light of the incidents these past two days. You are entitled to counsel, if you desire, before we begin.”

“Do I need one? Am I under investigation?”

“No, you are not. However, I am required to admonish you that your testimony can be used to form an indictment, if the Jury decides one is indicated, and to remind you of your rights.”

“So far as I know, I have done nothing illegal, so I don’t think I need one. Ask your questions.”

“All right. Since we are already looking at the issue of the suicides, lets begin with those. I have here the reports you wrote on each of them. We now realize the you were unaware of the last death, but your part in the incident is outlined in the report, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then please look at these reports and first verify that they are copies of your reports.”

Paula took a few minutes to look over each one. They were photocopies of the reports she had filed, each one countersigned by the watch commander. “Yes, these are my reports.”

“They are unaltered copies?”

“You mean are there any changes I didn’t make?”

“Yes.”

“So far as I can tell, they are unchanged.”

“Are there any things that you wish to add or change in them at this time?”

Paula almost laughed, but caught herself and contented the urge with a broad smile.

“Did I say something humorous, Ms. McKenzie?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that my integrity has been questioned these past couple of days by someone who harbors a vehement prejudice against those of us who work in the jail, and the thought crossed my mind that he might not be the only one. An old friend of mine used to say, ‘Being paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you,’ and it seemed to apply just now.”

“Well, Ms. McKenzie, I can assure you that we are proceeding without prejudice. Are there any changes you wish to make in these reports?”

“Thank you. And, if you don’t mind, I prefer Mrs. McKenzie. Are you asking me if I might have falsified something and you are now giving me the chance to clean it up?”

“That is, of course, one option you are free to exercise at this time. But what we are mostly interested in is if you have any new information you wish to add to them. Information that you might have learned since these reports were written.”

“I can’t think of anything to add to any of them, except, of course, the fact that Carter died. What’s in them is accurate as far as I know, so I guess I’ll have to stand by them.”

“All right. Let’s begin with the first suicide attempt by John Avery early Monday morning. Even though he remains in a coma for the time being, we are going to consider it with the other two suicides because of how it seems tied to them by several factors.”

Jameson took Paula through the event, eliciting small details she had forgotten or overlooked as insignificant. Most, in fact, were insignificant. His careful questioning impressed her, not only for its thoroughness, but because its obvious aim was to get at the facts, not support any particular point of view. It was an entirely different experience from her trial court appearances and she rather enjoyed it.

Drawing to a close, Jameson said, “All right, now that we have established the facts as you remember them, do you have any comments to make regarding any aspect of this case? For instance, have you drawn any conclusions or made any suppositions regarding this case that you couldn’t put in the report?”

“Only one, really. The use of the towel was unusual. Most people use a torn up or twisted sheet when they attempt to hang themselves in jail. Tearing a towel into strips is much more difficult than tearing a sheet. In fact, hanging itself, as a method for committing suicide, has not been all that common in this jail. I can only think of one other time it’s been tried. Cutting your wrists seems to be the preferred method.”

“A fortunate thing, since you indicated that removing the towel was extremely difficult and was a direct cause of your lack of success in fully reviving him. It also makes the second suicide case more curious.”

“Exactly my thought as well. That two men who had, to my knowledge, no contact with each other at all would independently and almost at the same time choose an uncommon means of committing suicide is stretching the idea of coincidence.”

“Are we to take it that you are not a believer in coincidences?”

“No, not at all. They happen all the time. I just have trouble accepting coincidence in this case.”

“Are you suggesting some kind of conspiracy?”

“Nothing that dramatic. I think it’s probably much more simple, like someone making an off-hand remark that towels are stronger and make better ropes. They might have been talking about ways to escape or tie somebody up, nothing at all to do with suicide. Then it just gets repeated and both of these guys heard it and decided to do it that way. What seems certain is that neither realized that once the toweling cinched up, it would lock up tight and wouldn’t loosen the way sheets and ropes do when the weight is taken off.”

“So it is your theory that this is just the result of the overhearing of an innocent discussion by...who? Deputies? Inmates? Nurses?”

“Could’ve been anyone, though I think that nurses would be unlikely simply because there’s only one on at a time, except for change of shift, and none of us has been talking about this subject. Well, not before this happened anyway. Now, of course, we all have. And yes, I think it was entirely innocent. I find it hard to believe that someone deliberately went to the two of them and told them that using a towel was the best way to fake a suicide attempt.”

“Why do you say fake one? Is it your contention that neither of these men wanted to die?”

“In Avery’s case, there is little doubt in my mind that he planned this as fake attempt in order to get out of Disciplinary Isolation. Look at Deputy Mason’s report. Doesn’t it say that the man looked right at him when he pulled the towel strip?”

Jameson sorted through the file and pulled a report out. He scanned it quickly and said, “Yes. He says, ‘When I looked through the observation window in the door, I saw the subject standing next to the bars, facing me. He looked at me for a couple of seconds, smiled, and pulled the rope which ran from the noose around his neck over the top cross bar to his right hand.’ It goes on to say that in the few seconds it took Deputy Mason to get his key out and open the door, the victim continued to look at him till he lapsed into unconsciousness and fell to the floor, which was about the same time that Deputy Mason was able to unlock and open the gate through the bars into the cell.”

“Does that sound like the way a deeply depressed person would hang himself?”

“I don’t have any expertise in that area. However, I will concede that his behavior does not strike me as what I would expect of someone who was really trying to kill himself.”

“Do you have Lt. Davies’ report?”

“Yes, and I am aware of the claim of the other inmate in Disciplinary Isolation that Mr. Avery intended to get into Medical Isolation by faking some kind of illness.”

“I think it’s fairly obvious that he chose the suicide attempt because it’s easy to fake and it couldn’t be denied, like a bellyache or a sore back.”

“And Robert Foster?”

“I’m not sure if his intention was to fake a suicide attempt or if he really thought he wanted to die. I do believe that he regretted it and tried to undo the noose which was, of course, too tight to loosen.”

“All right then, let’s get into his case.”

With the same care, he took Paula through her discovery of Hiram Foster in Medical Isolation and everything she did afterwards.

“...and that’s when I left to call Mr. Browne to advise him of the death.”

“Which is standard procedure, is it not?”

“Yes. Any death which takes place in the jail must be reported to the Senior Correctional Nurse, as he is now called, as soon as possible.”

“What about inmates who die in the hospital?”

“The deputy on guard at the hospital is supposed to notify the watch commander who then takes care of all the other notifications. I’m not sure what their current protocol is regarding telling the Senior Nurse, so many things have changed with Mr. Browne’s appointment; but I know that they used to advise him at the beginning of his next duty shift, if he wasn’t on duty, or within twenty-four hours in any case.”

“Did Mr. Browne approve of the way you handled this case?”

“No, he did not.”

“Did he say why?”

“Yes. Mr. Browne is the person I was referring to before who seems to think that there is some kind of massive conspiracy in the jail. He refused to believe what I told him and what I put in those reports until he had verified them independently. He even refused to accept the other deputies’ reports.” Paula took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. “Excuse me, this is very difficult. I have been a nurse for over thirty years. It’s the only thing I have ever wanted to do, and I have never once been accused of incompetence or negligence, much less falsifying reports and medical chart entries.”

“Are we to understand that Mr. Browne is accusing you of these things?”

“Not formally, yet. He does contend, however, that I should have started CPR immediately upon discovering Mr. Foster in Medical Isolation. He has refused to accept my explanation that gross lividity and rigor were present, and that there was therefore nothing to be gained by starting CPR on what was essentially a corpse. He claims that nurses in the jail are not competent to make such a determination. In fact, he has written a policy that all pulseless individuals are to have CPR started immediately upon discovery without exception. He even tried to make that policy retroactive to cover this case by backdating it.”

“Your certain he backdated it?”

“Fairly certain. The date on the copy he showed me was one week before Mr. Foster’s suicide and it was not written on the medical department’s computer. There was no such file in our computer until after he showed me the printout, which was made on a printer other than our

own. Mrs. Rhoads, the day nurse, checked that morning immediately after he showed it to us. I checked when I came on that night, and it had been added. It should also be noted that his policy had not been reviewed or countersigned by either Dr. Martin or Sheriff Abbott as required by departmental regulations. He hadn't even provided a place for them to sign. As of this morning it still has not been countersigned and I doubt seriously that it will. The current policy is more than adequate."

"I see. And what is your current policy?"

"It's very simple. We follow the guidelines established by the American Heart Association."

"And those are?"

"CPR should be started in all cases of discovery of a pulseless individual, except in cases of decapitation, putrefaction, gross and obvious lividity, or obvious and pronounced rigor mortis. In other words in cases where it is obvious, even to lay people with no medical training, that the person has been dead so long that resuscitation is impossible, or their injuries are so severe that CPR can accomplish nothing."

"Such as decapitation. It's obvious that there is no way to breath for the patient, much reestablish brain function. Are there other reason's not to start CPR?"

"Quite a number, probably. Some of them might even be medically based. What one should know is that, with the exception of medical and nursing professionals working in a patient care setting or similar institution with established guidelines of its own, there is no legal obligation to start CPR. In other words, if someone comes upon a person on the street who has no pulse, they have no legal obligation to begin CPR. There is an assumption that the person would want to start it, so the guidelines state that if you are in doubt as to whether it will work, you should go ahead and try. Of course, once you start, you are obligated to continue until you are relieved, too exhausted to keep going, a physician has declared the person unrevivable and halts CPR, or the person has been revived. The basic idea is, as I understand it, that CPR can't hurt. The person's already dead, so why not try, except in cases where there is no doubt that CPR would be futile."

"And you, obviously, were not in doubt."

"That is correct. When I discovered Mr. Foster, he was hanging a good foot off the floor. His skin was nearly translucent, except for his lower legs and feet which were swollen and purple. It was obvious that he'd been dead long enough for all the blood in his body to have drained to the lowest point, which was his feet. In addition, when I checked for a pulse, I found that rigor had begun to set in, though it had not yet fully advanced to complete rigidity."

"Had you ever encountered someone in this condition before?"

"No. Never."

"And you were disturbed by this?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Especially coming, as it did, so quickly after your last suicide. Very understandable."

Paula looked at him, trying to discern if he was expressing a genuine understanding or something else. "Let me make one thing very clear. I was disturbed by Foster's condition. But that doesn't mean I was incapacitated by it. I started out in the emergency room of the county hospital. I saw a lot of hopelessly mutilated people, and I did everything I knew how to keep them alive or resuscitate them. All of them disturbed me. Some of them shocked me. And that is good. Because it kept me from becoming an unfeeling automaton. When I stop being disturbed and shocked by people in conditions like Foster's, I'll know it's time for me to quit being a nurse. His condition was very disturbing, not only for the obvious reason's, but because I felt I had failed him."

“How so? You said it was too late to do anything.”

“I failed to be there when he needed me. I know there was no way I could have been in two places at once and I accept that. But it doesn’t change the fact that someone in my care needed my skills as a nurse and I wasn’t available. That is what disturbed me even more than the condition of his body when I found it. We have tried for several years to increase staffing and run into a brick wall. No one wants to spend any money on inmate medical care. Of course Mr. Browne’s apparent belief that Foster was revivable when I first found him, and that I did nothing because I’m religious, as he puts it, and couldn’t face the thought of condemning another person to an irreversible coma, doesn’t help much.”

“He actually said that?”

“Not word for word, but he made it clear that was what he thought. He also made it clear that he didn’t believe much of anything I had to say. When I asked him if he had read the incident reports, he dismissed them with a wave of his hand, saying that until he had read the Medical Examiner’s report, he couldn’t accept them as anything more than a story we had all concocted.”

Jameson flipped through the pages in the file he had placed on top, stopping at the autopsy report. He read for half a minute and then said, “The autopsy confirmed that the time of death would have produced the lividity and rigor you reported. In fact he places the time of death at or just before the time you come on duty. The question then is, did you see him earlier?”

“No. I couldn’t have. I was paged to Disciplinary Isolation before I could even get report from the swing shift nurse. I never made it back to Medical Isolation until just before I discovered him.”

“And this can all be verified?”

“Yes. Mr. Thompson, the swing shift nurse, walked with me to the elevator and saw me onto it. From that time on I was with one deputy or another until my return to the Dispensary.”

“Which was when?”

“A couple of minutes before I began my rounds in Med Iso,” Paula said.”

“And Mr. Browne is unwilling to accept your account of these events. Is that what you are saying?”

“Yes. As I said, he seems to be of the opinion that all of us who work there are engaged in some kind of conspiracy. He acts as though writing phony reports and letting inmates die is just routine for us.”

“And you have no idea why he has adopted this attitude.”

“Actually I think I do. When I saw him this morning he gave me the subpoena for this hearing. He—”

“—Excuse me,” Jameson said. “He didn’t give you the subpoena until this morning? It was served, let me see.... Yes. Here it is. It was served a week ago Monday. Are you saying you didn’t know about it until this morning?”

“Yes, sir. He gave it to me this morning. I didn’t bother to look at the date. Getting a subpoena the day of an appearance isn’t that unusual for us. Especially for me since I work nights. It’s usually served the day before, taken by the Senior Nurse, and given to me the next morning, unless I’m off, in which case they call me at home and tell me about it.”

“Well we don’t operate that way. The Grand Jury is an investigative body and issues its summons in such a way as to allow the party to gather the required documents and prepare for their testimony. This certainly explains a great deal. I must ask once again, in light of this information, do you wish to postpone this interview?”

“No. I don’t see how I could be any more prepared than I am right now. Let’s get on with it.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Jameson said, “All right. If you’re certain.” Paula nodded. “Very well, then. You were about to say, I think, that you might know the reason for Mr. Browne’s attitude. Is that correct?”

“Yes. When he gave me the subpoena, he also showed me Gary Pollack’s medical record, demanding to know where the real record was. As you can see by this certified copy called for in the subpoena, the medical record is blank. He seems to have accepted the allegations Mr. Pollack made in the newspaper as absolute truth, and therefore concluded that we, the medical staff and the deputies, are lying and covering up our alleged mistreatment of him.”

“We’ll get into this later, but for the record right now, you deny that the things Mr. Pollack alleges happened to him while he was incarcerated in the jail actually occurred. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct. Well, most of them. He was arrested and booked into the jail, but to my knowledge he was never beaten, and he never requested, nor was he ever refused, medical attention.”

“Well then, getting back to Mr. Foster’s case, the facts tend to support your story. The Medical Examiner’s report makes it obvious that there was nothing that could have been done by the time you found him, unless, of course,” Jameson said with a smile, “Mr. Browne’s conspiracy theory is correct.”

“I assure you it is not. Such a conspiracy would require the participation of just about every person in the jail. Conspiracies that large are unsustainable. They always fall apart.”

“Perhaps he believes that is just what’s happening.”

“Perhaps, but one thing should be born in mind. It is almost impossible to keep anything secret in a jail for very long. Yes, there have been conspiracies of abuse and murder in prisons that have gone on for years, but there are two factors that make such a thing nearly impossible in a jail. One is that jails have a constant flow of people in and out. The average length of stay is less than twenty-four hours. Many, if not most, of those people will have no further jail contact, so telling their story of witnessing abuse or being abused carries little or no risk, unlike prison inmates who stay for long periods of time and learn to shut up and take it if they want to live. The question I would ask myself in evaluating Mr. Pollack’s claims is, why hasn’t anyone else come forward, either to corroborate Pollack’s story, or tell one of their own. By his own admission, the beating he alleges he was given was not carried out in some deserted part of the jail. It stands to reason that at least one inmate witnessed it. The second reason is that jails have been under intense scrutiny by state, federal, and non-governmental bodies for the last twenty years. This jail has been under a microscope for at least ten or twelve years, with surprise inspections and every other form of scrutiny imaginable. How, I ask you, could a conspiracy on the scale suggested by Mr. Pollack survive that level of scrutiny?”

“I have no answer to that question, though I will admit you present a strong case. That leaves just one other question with regard to Foster’s death, how did he remain undiscovered for such a long time? Do you have any knowledge about that?”

“Not directly. What I know is what others have said.”

“And that is?”

“Very simply, that none of us seemed to know he was there.”

“When you say, us, who do you mean?”

“Myself, Mr. Thompson, Deputy Mason, Deputy Clancy in the guard station, just about everyone on the shift. Swing shift moved him down there and forgot to tell anyone that they had done so.”

“How can that happen? I would assume that there are procedures for moving inmates that would prevent that from occurring.”

“There are, and I can’t account for the lapse in them. I’m not involved in that part of the jail’s operation, though I do know some of the basic procedures used. As far as I can tell everyone thought the other guy had made the proper notifications, though I will admit to wondering how they got him back there without the guard station deputy knowing about it. The only way to get back there is past his station. Maybe he was in the bathroom. I don’t know. At any rate, none of us knew he was there until I found him.”

“So you weren’t expecting to find anyone in that cell, were you?”

“That’s correct.”

“So how did you come to check his cell? Do you normally look in every cell?”

“No, I don’t, though I will certainly be doing so from now on. You have to understand that this has never happened before.”

“What hasn’t. Someone hanging himself and going undiscovered or someone being lost, so to speak?”

“Both.”

“So why did you check his cell?”

“There was a name card on the door.”

“And that is standard procedure.”

“Yes. We put the inmate’s name and booking number on the door.”

“So if that part of the procedure had not been followed, you would have passed right by the cell without looking in it. Is that right?”

“Before last night, yes, that is right. As I said, I will look in every cell from now on. In fact, I expect that it will become standard procedure.”

“And the deputy whose job it is to patrol that area. Where was he?”

“With me in Disciplinary Isolation, giving CPR. His job is to check Med Iso and D.I. every half-hour.”

“Which he couldn’t do that night, of course. Was anyone else assigned to cover his patrol area while he was busy giving CPR?”

“I doubt it. If there is an emergency, patrol duties take second place.”

“So, as far as you know, no one made any patrol rounds in Medical Isolation until you started yours.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Okay,” Jameson said, laying that file aside and taking up another one. “Now, this last case seems fairly straight-forward.”

Jameson took her through the final case as thoroughly as he had the others, covering her rescue efforts in detail.

“I am curious about one thing. You didn’t seem surprised that he had died. Why?”

“He had nearly exsanguinated himself. Frankly, I was surprised that I’d been able to keep him alive long enough to get to the hospital.”

“I see. Well, since we don’t have the full report on his death as yet, we’ll move on. But bear in mind that we may need you to return once all the reports are in.”

“You know where to reach me.”

“All right then, let’s move on to conditions in the jail. As we have already observed, there have been several very serious allegations lodged about the treatment of inmates in the jail.”

Paula nodded.

“Now you’ve already alluded to Mr. Pollack’s medical record, which is, as you noted, blank. Can you explain why that is?”

“Certainly. He was never seen by the medical staff.”

“And you deny his allegation that he was denied medical attention?”

“Yes, as I said before, he never asked for it as far as I know. At least no request was relayed to me and I was the only nurse on duty while Mr. Pollack was with us.”

“Yet he claims to have been beaten by deputies and then thrown into a room with rubber walls.”

“I am well aware of his claims. He also claimed to have been detained for almost two days, yet, as you’ve no doubt seen from his booking record, he was actually in the jail less than seven hours.”

“He claims the records were faked.”

“Yes, I know. It’s obvious, though, that he has no idea how those records are made or maintained. As I’m sure you’re aware, the Reception Log is a bound volume that is handwritten in ink. Erasures are not possible because the paper is designed to show any such attempt. The time written in that log is the time the person is brought into the jail and accepted by the Reception deputy. There is a matching time stamp on the arrest/booking record that is kept by the officer who brings the person to the jail. The time that charges are formally made and entered into a permanent record is the booking time. Those two time notations, The Reception time and the Booking time, are used to show how long it takes for someone to be booked after being accepted in Reception. If you will check the Reception log, you will find the actual time he was accepted at Reception and I will bet you that not more than an hour elapsed until he was booked. The booking process, by the way, is computerized and as tamper proof as possible. The records are saved to laser disk immediately upon entry. The times when one is booked and released are entered automatically by the computer, not the person entering the data. There is no way to change a record once it has been recorded on the disk because it becomes a read only entry like on a CD ROM.”

“And I would assume that there are security measures in place to prevent someone from substituting a new disk for an old one.”

“Each disk can hold about half a million records. We’re still on the first one and don’t expect to go to another one for two to three years at the current level of bookings which means it’s about half-filled. Access to the drive is extremely limited. It doesn’t sit out on someone’s desktop. In addition, to make the substitution undetectable, all the records on the disk would have to be reproduced accurately, except the one you’ve changed. Finally there is the release record. Not only is the release time handled by the computer in the same way as the booking time, but the inmate’s copy of his booking record is time stamped and given to him. I think it would be interesting to get a close look at Mr. Pollack’s booking slip and see what the time stamps say. As I think you can see, it would be very difficult for someone, or even a group of someones, to falsify all four time records and leave no trace that they had done so. You would have to be talking about an inter-agency conspiracy of unbelievable proportions.”

“Yes, it certainly would seem so. How is it you know all these procedures?”

“I have taken the time to learn many of the basic procedures used in the jail so that I could accomplish my goals without unduly interfering with the deputies. Also, I’m just plain curious about how things get done, so I ask questions. In this case, though, I had an extra reason, my husband wrote the manual for the jail system computer. He asked me to look it over to make sure it was in terms clear enough for non-computer people to be able to use easily.”

“I see. How is it that you are so certain that Mr. Pollack spent no more than an hour in the Reception area before being booked?”

“I was in Reception, making a routine check of the drunk tank, shortly after he was brought in. I saw him looking in the mirror in a holding cell, combing his hair. I don’t know if he saw me or not. I make those drunk tank checks hourly. The next check, he was in the booking room, loudly refusing to sign the acknowledgement on his booking form that he had been given the opportunity to make his phone calls. I haven’t seen his booking sheet, but I would bet that the signature line says ‘Refuses to sign’ with the deputy’s signature below it.”

“It does indeed. You may be happy to know that Sheriff Abbott presented all these records to us when we opened this investigation. You have corroborated everything he told us, including the time stamps. But it would help us to know if you have some other independent knowledge to substantiate your assertion that Mr. Pollack’s claims are false?”

“Other than the simple suspension of rational thought that believing him requires?”

Jameson smiled and nodded. Paula noticed a couple of Jury members grinning as well.

“Yes, I also know when he was released because I was going home and saw him in Release Hold.”

“Do you know if he was actually released at that time?”

“I walked past him outside the jail on my way to my car in the parking lot after changing clothes in the locker room.”

“And you’re certain it was him.”

“Absolutely.”

“How can you be so sure? Did you know him before his incarceration?”

“No. In fact I had no idea who he was until I saw his picture with the article in the newspaper.”

“So he was a complete stranger to you.”

“Yes.”

“Yet, you can positively identify him as the same man in all these encounters.”

“Yes.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“His scar.”

“His scar?”

“Yes. He has a small scar that curves around his left eye like a reversed letter C.”

“So there is no doubt in your mind that he is the same man you saw being booked and later saw in Release Hold and subsequently passed in the parking lot that same day. It couldn’t have been a day later?”

“No. I was off the next two days and his story came out in the evening edition of the paper on my second day off.”

“Are you aware that, so far, you are the only one who claims to have seen him outside the jail before the time he claims he was released?”

“No. I didn’t know that.”

“What about his claim of being beaten while a male nurse stood by and watched?”

“I was the only nurse on duty that night. In fact, as I’ve already explained, the only time there are two nurses in the jail at the same time is at shift change. We work alone.”

“What about his injuries? Surely you aren’t suggesting they were faked.”

“I didn’t see them. I saw the pictures in the paper which showed bruises on his upper body and arms. I can only assert that he had no visible injuries when I saw him.”

“You saw no bruises on his arms.”

“Yes. He was wearing a short sleeve shirt and there were no visible injuries of any kind.”

“Do you have any theories on how he might have acquired those injuries? Assuming of course that you accept that he did have them when he spoke to the reporter.”

“Oh, I believe he had them. Aside from the photos that accompanied the article, I doubt seriously that a reporter would dare risk manufacturing such a wild tale and faking those photographs. As to speculating on how or where or when he got them, I see no point in doing that.”

“So it is your contention that these claims of ill treatment are all fabrications. Is that not correct?”

“It is my contention that he never, to the best of my knowledge, requested medical attention. It is also my contention that I never saw him for any medical reason or complaint, and that on the occasions that I did see him, he gave no indication that he needed or wanted medical attention, that he gave no indication of experiencing any pain or discomfort, and that he had no signs of injury or trauma, other than an old scar near his eye. In fact when I saw him in Release Hold he smiled at me. I don’t know if he noticed me in the parking lot or not. He gave no indication of it.”

“And you have no idea why he might be tempted to make up this story?”

“Beyond the obvious, no.”

“Beyond what obvious reason?”

“He’s filed a suit for ten million dollars, hasn’t he? I should think that would be a pretty good reason.”

“Yes. That is a pretty obvious one,” Jameson said with a smile. “Very well, then. I have no other questions, but I believe some of the Jury members have some questions. Is that right, Mr. Pressman?” The Jury Foreman nodded. “He will direct the questioning now,” Jameson said, sitting back in his chair.

Paula turned her attention to the distinguished looking gentleman on the left end of the curved desk. His silver hair and trim mustache made him appear to be at least sixty, despite his tanned and unlined face. Paula figured him to be in his fifties and prematurely gray. His posture suggested a military career. His businesslike manner left Paula with no doubt that she faced a man used to being in charge of a group.

“I have a question or two myself, then we’ll start around the room,” he said, pointing with a wave of his hand to the woman at the other end of the desk. “You have refused to offer any theories or speculations as to how Mr. Pollack might have acquired his injuries, which you don’t doubt are real. Why? It seems to me that advancing some theory in support of your contentions would be in your best interest.”

“Mr. Jameson here said that your primary purpose is finding the facts. Theories are not facts and it is my experience that speculating on them before you have all the facts tends to cloud or color one’s thinking.”

“And what experience do you have in this regard? You’re a nurse are you not? Not a detective or a lawyer.”

“That is correct. However nurses and doctors have to use the same rational processes in their work as detectives do.”

“I suppose there is some similarity and one could think of you as medical detectives chasing down marauding microbes or errant cancer cells. But that strikes me as more TV fiction than fact.”

“The way you put it, it is. But it is also true that we have to use deductive reasoning and the same basic process that any good detective uses. Gather all the facts available and then construct a diagnosis that fits.”

“But I’ve been to the doctor several times and he doesn’t seem to do that. He sees me for five minutes, if that, tells me what’s wrong, hands me a prescription, and sends me on my way. I don’t see much detection going on there.”

“Actually there probably was a lot more than you thought, it’s just that he can do it so quickly because of his experience. Most cases are simple and straight-forward. If you were to present with an unusual problem, you would see him take more time, ask more questions, probably do some lab tests, maybe an x-ray, that sort of thing.”

“Okay, I can go along with that. But our experience here has been that people love to play detective and advance theories about how or why someone else screwed up. You show remarkable self-discipline and, if you don’t mind my saying so, trust in the justice system. Why is that? After all, you could be indicted as a result of this inquiry, and my experience is that people who face that possibility can’t say enough to cast suspicion on someone else.”

Paula smiled and turned to Jameson. “Should I take you up on your offer now?”

“You are still not a suspect in any crime, Mrs. McKenzie. We’re not even sure any crime has been committed. But you are free to exercise that right at any time.”

“Thank you,.” Paula said. She turned back to the Foreman. “I’m not sure that I have that much faith in the justice system, at least the part of it I have seen up till now. This hearing, though, has impressed me because you seem to actually be trying to get at the facts and the truth, not prove a particular point of view, so I am willing to trust that this Jury will find the truth.”

“Thank you. Which brings up my next question. You said that your boss, Mr. Browne, believes that you failed to attempt reviving Mr. Foster because you are ‘religious,’ I think was the term you used. Is that correct?”

“Essentially.”

“I don’t understand that. It seems to me that a religious person would make every attempt to save someone. And further, I would not think that a religious person would falsify anything, much less official documents. Can you explain this seeming inconsistency?”

“No, I cannot explain his thinking, and yes, I agree that it does appear inconsistent.”

“Is it perhaps that he doesn’t think your religion is the true one? By the way, what is your religion, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“No, I don’t mind. I am a Bahá’í.”

“I’m not familiar with that one. And you don’t think it’s that he’s prejudiced against you because you’re a Bahá’í?”

“No. I don’t think he even knows that I’m a Bahá’í. I got the definite feeling from the way he said it, that he has some kind of bias against all religions. He indicated that he considers religious beliefs as little more than superstitious nonsense that get in the way of rational thought.”

“I see. Thank you.” The Foreman nodded across the room to the woman he had indicated previously.

“Ms. McKenzie,” the sixty-ish, expensively dressed matron said, “Oh, that’s right, you prefer Mrs. don’t you?”

“Yes. Mrs.,” Paula said firmly.

“I see. You seem to be of the opinion that there is nothing wrong with the medical delivery system at the jail. Are there no improvements that might be made?”

Paula smiled broadly and stifled a chuckle. Seeing the matron's miffed expression, she said quickly, "I'm sorry. I meant no offense. It's just that calling five nurses and a doctor a medical delivery system sounds to me like the bureaucratic hyperbole that organizations everywhere seem so fond of using to sound like they're doing more than they are. But to answer your question, yes, I do think there are several improvements that could be made."

"Would you please share them with us?"

"Gladly. Foremost, I think the staffing should be increased. We have the same number of staff now as we had when I started working in the jail twenty-five years ago, yet the jail's population has nearly quadrupled. Had there been two nurses on Monday night, Mr. Foster probably would have been found in time to resuscitate. What I'm talking about is two nurses on all shifts around the clock. That level of staffing would allow us to take care of several other problems, not the least of which is our current method of passing medications. Also there are several pieces of equipment that would help us do our jobs more effectively, and would probably save the county some money in the long run. I'm sorry I didn't come prepared to answer this question in detail."

"And have you made your superiors aware of these needs?"

"Mr. Peterson and I discussed them regularly, and he submitted them with every budget and was as frustrated as I was by the almost complete lack of response by the Board of Commissioners except to cut them from the Sheriff's budget. Mr. Browne, as I've already said, doesn't listen to the staff."

"Did you agree with Mr. Browne on the change of the medical department to a civilian division?"

"Absolutely. It should have been done a long time ago."

"Yet you and most of the medical staff are still sworn deputies are you not? Why is that?"

"All four of us left from the old setup are within a few years of retirement under the retirement plan for safety personnel. A couple of us could retire today. If we were shifted to the non-safety, civilian retirement system, we would lose a lot of our eligibility and our pensions would be cut by as much as a third. To regain even a portion of that would mean working an additional ten to fifteen years. That is a lot to ask of someone who has put in twenty or more years in a highly stressful environment. Sheriff Abbott knows that and so he allowed us to remain sworn. All new hires will be civilians."

"Thank you. Nothing else."

"Mr. Bendix?" the Foreman said. The next man looked to be about sixty and somewhat uncomfortable in his suit, as though he wore only it for church and other similarly formal occasions. Beefy and plain with a nose that had obviously been broken more than once, he gave her the impression of having once been a boxer or a football player.

"I'm still a little confused about why you didn't start CPR on Mr. Foster."

Paula explained lividity and rigor mortis and what it meant again. "Do you have any of the M.E.'s pictures showing the state of the body?"

Jameson said he did and pulled them from a file in the pile on the table. After showing them to Paula, he passed them to Bendix.

"I think you'll be able to see that what I mean when I say that lividity was obvious and complete. There was no way that compressing the heart could have pumped the blood in his body anywhere because there wasn't any blood anywhere near the heart."

"I see your point. Thank you. Now what can you tell us about Deputy Mason?"

"In what regard?" Paula asked.

“In any regard.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not at all clear what it is that you want me to tell you.”

“Neither am I, Mr. Bendix,” The Foreman said. “Perhaps you could explain for all of us.”

Paula noted a sharpness to the Foreman’s voice. Several of the Jurors exchanged looks that clearly said, “not again.”

“Gladly,” Bendix replied, obviously aware that he was not popular with his fellow Jurors. “Deputy Mason was with you at both hangings. He is your primary alibi, if you will, for not finding Foster in time to even attempt to revive him. You, of course, are his primary alibi that every attempt was made to free Mr. Avery from his unusual noose, which, coincidentally, is the same kind Foster used. And he was the guard assigned to Carter at the hospital. In short, he seems to have been involved in all of these cases. I find that convenient and surprising.”

Paula decided not to respond to the innuendo until it became necessary. Instead, she focused on the facts. “I wasn’t aware that he had been assigned to Mr. Carter.”

“Well, he was. So what can you tell us about him?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I need you to be more specific.”

“All right, then. Is Deputy Mason’s presence in all of these cases unusual?”

“Not in the first two. They occurred in his assigned areas. His being assigned guard duty at the hospital is surprising because last night was his day off, though it is not at all unusual for deputies to take on overtime shifts.”

“Is it the norm for them to be called at home in the middle of the night to take an extra shift?”

“If they need someone for a special task, it’s not unusual for them to call someone and either offer them the chance to pick up some overtime, or assign them the task.”

“Do deputies ever volunteer for such assignments?”

“All the time, when they know about them. Overtime is something that just about every deputy tries to get regularly.”

“So it’s possible, then, that Deputy Mason might have asked for the assignment.”

“It’s possible, but I wouldn’t consider it likely. I would have thought he’d be asleep when the need for a special guard arose. I doubt that he called in asking for it.”

“But he might have made himself available by asking to be called first.”

“I suppose. May I ask where this is going. You are asking me things that I really don’t have much, if any, knowledge about.”

“Then let me ask this. Are you aware of Deputy Mason’s service record?”

“Nothing specific.”

“Could you please tell us what you do know.”

“I know that he’s been with the department something like ten years. That he’s done tours as a bailiff and in patrol before coming to the jail.”

“Where he’s been for the last six years. And it’s twelve years, not ten. Isn’t that unusual?”

“What?”

“Returning to the jail after being on patrol. I understand that the jail serves as a kind of on-the-job training division.”

“Deputies come back to the jail all the time.”

“But usually only for disciplinary reasons or when they’ve been promoted to a supervisory level. Is that not so?”

“That does seem to be the pattern, but there have been times when one will come back for some other reason.”

“Such as what?”

“Mr. Bendix,” The Foreman said, “I’m having a lot of trouble seeing where this is going. It is getting late and I think all of us would like to make it home in time for dinner without having to extend Mrs. McKenzie’s testimony another day to satisfy your curiosity.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Foreman. I’m just trying not to feed her any answers in my questions.”

“I have not seen any evidence that that is much of a concern here. Do you not agree, Mr. Jameson?”

“Yes, I do.” Jameson said. “Get to the point, Mr. Bendix.”

“I am sorry to have taken up so much of our precious time. I’m just trying to do a careful and thorough job,” Bendix said, his face flushed and eyes glaring.

He had something specific in mind but for some reason was loathe to reveal it. He seemed bent on making Paula reveal it for him, as though that would validate an opinion he had already formed.

“All right, then. I have before me Deputy Mason’s personnel record. It contains several disciplinary reports for such things as excessive use of force, questionable patrol practices, and ignoring proper procedures. In short, he’s been a bad cop, yet he’s still there, and I’m wondering why?”

“I have no idea. Why would I?”

“Yes, indeed,” the Foreman said. “why would she? While I think that you may have a legitimate concern and that it may be worth looking into, I think you are looking in the wrong place.”

“On the contrary, sir, I think it is the right place. When we talk to him and his buddies in the Sheriff’s Department, we will just get whatever story they’ve put together to protect one of their own. She isn’t part of their circle. She can give us the real story on this deputy whose record clearly suggests a renegade and a cover up of his rogue activities.”

“Am I to understand,” Paula asked, “that you think Deputy Mason is in some way responsible for these deaths?”

“That is a distinct possibility. He had the opportunity to either assist their suicide, delay your response, or in some way hasten their deaths.”

“I find that very hard to believe.”

“Would you find it any easier to believe if I told you that Mr. Mason, or as I understand he prefers to be called, Mace, was abused as a child?”

“Not necessarily. Abused people are not automatically abusers themselves.”

“That may be true, but not in Mace’s case. He beat his wife, who had the good sense to leave him. Is it still so hard to believe?”

“No, but he didn’t have the opportunity to do anything in Foster’s case, because he wasn’t there, and I know that he doesn’t have the medical knowledge to have hastened or caused Carter’s death without leaving a trace.”

“Well, you’re wrong about Foster. Mace works a lot of overtime. Seems he has quite a lot of alimony to pay, not surprisingly. He worked an overtime shift in the booking area the night of his death. The swing shift. It’s possible that he might have had an opportunity to go up to the Medical Isolation area, find Foster, even quite by accident, and do or say nothing. As for Carter, the Medical Examiner has yet to release his findings, so it is certainly possible that he may have been able to do something, even if it was nothing more than interfering with his treatment in some way.”

“I still have trouble believing that Deputy Mason could be responsible for these incidents.”

“Why is that? Why do you insist on protecting him?”

“I am not protecting him. Deputy Mason has a reputation for being a rough and angry cop. And I will agree that he is not what I would call the ideal cop. But what you’re suggesting is simply too cunning for him.”

“You don’t think he’s intelligent enough to have planned these things?”

“I didn’t say that. I said it would require a cunning that I have never seen Mason use. He is impulsive. He doesn’t plan things out. He reacts. Even if he were that cunning, leaving the booking area unnoticed at the end of the swing shift when Foster had to have hung himself is highly unlikely because that is when Booking is busiest and he would be missed immediately. In Carter’s case, assuming that the M.E.’s report confirms exsanguination, there is nothing Deputy Mason needed to do or could have done to hasten his passing. It was inevitable.”

“Interesting. And how would you characterize your working relationship?”

“Hard as this may be for you to believe, we’ve actually had very little contact until this shift rotation began because we’ve never worked together before. In the past four months, however, I have learned that Mr. Mason and I disagree about a great many things, so it would be hard for us to become close friends. But I make it a practice to find something likable in everyone and try to concentrate on that as much as possible. One of the things that I like about Mr. Mason is his honesty. You are never in doubt about where you stand with him or what he thinks. For that reason, I believe I can rely upon him, and I have never had any reason to distrust him.”

“But it’s possible that his impulsiveness, as you call it, might get him into serious trouble and he might try to cover it up or keep silent.”

“I can’t really say. I’ve not had any such experience with him. As I said, he’s always been very forthright with me.”

“Thank you. I am done with this witness.”

“Then let’s move on.” the Foreman said with relief. “Ms. Haverstrom, do you have any questions for the witness?”

Her trendy attire made her look like someone trying to remain sixteen forever. Her hands, though, made it obvious that she had lived at least four times that number of years despite the earnest ministrations of a first class plastic surgeon.

“I’m a little concerned about something, Ms. McKenzie. Sorry, you prefer Mrs., don’t you,” she said with a false smile in a rich, cultured voice which only served to exaggerate the incongruity of age and appearance. “No one seems to have mentioned that all these poor men were accused of one form or another of child sexual abuse. Were you aware of that, Mrs. McKenzie?”

“I knew that Mr. Carter had been convicted of several murders involving the abuse of children. I could hardly have missed that fact since his trial was front page news. I still have no idea what the charges were against Mr. Avery. Deputy Mason informed me of the charges against Mr. Foster while we were waiting for the paramedics.”

“So that was after you made the decision not to resuscitate him?”

“Yes. As I said earlier, I knew as soon as I saw him that there was no way to resuscitate him.”

“You’re certain of that? The timing I mean.”

“Absolutely. Deputy Mason wasn’t with me when I found Foster. He arrived after I called it in.”

“So it would seem, according to this report.” She flipped open a folder, and looked through a couple of pages. “But you have to admit it is curious.”

“What is?”

“That all three were child molesters of one type or another.”

“I suppose. I’m not sure that I would lump a person who tortured and killed pre-pubescent boys and girls to make pornography videos in with someone who was caught exposing himself to a little girl. In fact, as I understand it, the exposure may well have been accidental and the arrest the result of the overreaction of the little girl’s mother.”

“Well, to fill in the gaps in your knowledge, Mr. Avery was arrested for soliciting a young boy in a men’s room. There’s strong evidence that he was homosexual and favored pre-pubescent boys.” She paused, staring at Paula.

Paula made no response, waiting for the question. When none seemed forthcoming, the Foreman said, “Do you have a question, Ms. Haverstrom, or are you through with the witness?”

“Sorry, I thought I’d asked it. I want to know how Mrs. McKenzie feels about this.”

“I’m not sure I understand the question,” Paula said. “Feel about what?”

“Child molesters. How do you feel about them. How do you feel about treating them, saving their lives?”

Paula took a moment to think about her response. This woman obviously had an ax to grind, too. Perhaps she had been hasty in her evaluation of the Grand Jury process. So far it seemed more like a witch hunt than an objective, unbiased investigation. She had to deal with the questions honestly, though, and not let her suspicions about the questioner’s not so hidden agenda color her answers. She couldn’t answer the agenda, she had to answer the questions, and couch those answers in terms that would not be misunderstood.

“You asked several questions. Let me take take them separately. How do I feel about child molesters? The simple answer is I don’t like them. I have an instinctive dislike for people who prey on the innocent, who betray the trust children have in adults. I know the arguments that most abusers were abused, and that we should therefore forgive them, try to help them, and not condemn them for what they have done because they’re as much victims as their victims. To a certain extent that might be true, but I cannot accept the inevitability that attitude assumes. Regardless of what happens to us, we still have a choice in how we respond to it. Not every child of an abusive parent, becomes an abuser. It is not inevitable. It’s just the path of least resistance. Whatever a person’s background, he or she still bears the responsibility for his or her choices and actions. We are not Pavlov’s dogs who can’t help but snarl when someone rings our abuse bell. Certainly, there are all kinds of reasons for why we might do something, right or wrong. What I cannot accept is the idea that because we were somehow wronged, and our upbringing was not perfect, we therefore have no responsibility for what we do, or even worse, we have somehow earned the right to do that which was done unto us.

“Which, I think, brings us to your question about how I feel about treating these people and trying to save their lives. I was brought up in a Bahá’í household and in my Faith we are taught that we must strive to consider our own faults and not anyone else’s. Out of a true and deep internalization of that principle, we work to develop an attitude that condemns anti-social, unlawful behavior, but not the person who misbehaves. It is our belief that it is the responsibility of the judicial institutions of our society, not individual people, to find fault when it is necessary. In short we are taught to look upon others with a sin-covering eye. I try very hard to ignore what a person is in jail for when I’m treating them. Sometimes that’s not possible because it directly affects their medical condition, as is the case with drug addiction. What they’re charged with isn’t on their medical record, so, most of the time, I don’t know what it is unless I’m told.”

“So what you’re saying is that it doesn’t affect your treatment in any way. They may be the scum of the earth, but you’ll treat them as if they were the President of the United States.”

Paula laughed. “From what I read in the paper, there are a lot of people who don’t see the difference between the two.”

The sixty-year-old teenybopper smiled, a genuine one this time. “Perhaps I could have picked better examples, but I do understand what you’re saying, don’t I? You treat everyone the same.”

“No, that is not entirely correct. I try to treat each person according to his needs, not according to what he’s supposed to have done or some other irrelevant standard, like his race or social standing. People’s needs vary, so they are treated differently. What I do try to do is treat them all fairly.”

“Very laudable, but I still have to wonder if sometimes you don’t think that maybe justice wasn’t done, and so, in very special cases, when the circumstances are just right, you have the chance to see that a little justice gets done. I mean, there are some people that just get under your skin, that just cry out to be punished and when they aren’t, as seems to be happening more often than not anymore, and you have the perfect opportunity, aren’t you tempted to right the scales? I’m not talking about anything major here. Just giving a shot a little bit harder than is actually necessary, or taking a little longer to see a particularly nasty character. Perfectly understandable under the circumstances, wouldn’t you agree?”

Paula said nothing, just looked at the woman. Her expression gave nothing away as to what she was thinking.

“Mrs. McKenzie. You’re not answering. Why is that?” she smiled in supreme self-satisfaction.

“I was thinking about what you’re suggesting and wondering if you would pose the same question to any of the nurses at the county hospital who take care of our prisoners.”

“No. It doesn’t seem relevant.”

“But it does in my case because I work in the jail.”

She started to nod her agreement then stopped mid-nod and frowned. Not lingering on the moment, Paula moved on quickly to save the woman further embarrassment and herself more antagonism.

“In answer to your question, though, yes, sometimes the temptation to right a wrong occurs to me. I wouldn’t be human if it didn’t. But I would be less than human if I gave in to the temptation. The few times such thoughts have occurred, I haven’t liked myself very much for thinking them.”

After a long silence, the woman said, “Thank you,” and nodded to the Foreman. He motioned for the next Juror to ask his question, which proved to be a minor point of clarification. The next two had no questions.

The next Juror was, to Paula’s mind, the most interesting person in the group. With this one exception, all the Grand Jurors were in their fifties or sixties. This didn’t surprise her. Grand Jurors were chosen from the same lists as regular trial jurors—registered voters and licensed drivers. They came from all backgrounds and walks of life, at least in theory. In reality, most potential jurors had livelihoods to earn which didn’t allow for serving on juries unless their employers paid them for their time off.

Grand Jurors served twelve months and sat for hearings at least twice a week. In addition they might meet to go over the information gathered in those hearings another one or two days a week. In effect, it was a full-time job.

Very few employers were willing or able to support an employee for a year at full salary and benefits and actually have him or her for only one or two days a week. Consequently, the people who served as Grand Jurors tended to be retirees or self-employed business people who were successful enough that they could take that much time off without hurting their business.

Some complained that this loaded the Grand Jury with upper crust types and was therefore unfair. What was often ignored in these arguments was the task of the Grand Jury. Unlike trial juries, who sat passively while two lawyers verbally duked it out and presented a carefully screened set of information to convince them of someone's innocence or guilt, Grand Juries actively investigated alleged crimes. The unintentional winnowing process of Grand Jury selection produced Grand Juries with people who were more prepared to successfully carry out the task assigned to it than a cross section of the general population would be.

Paula knew all of this, having been a tangential member of the criminal justice system for a quarter of a century. And that was why this Juror was so interesting. He couldn't be more than thirty, probably more like twenty-five. Dressed in turtleneck and Harris tweed coat, he was also the most casually dressed and relaxed member of the group.

She had been aware of him almost from the moment she had taken her seat. Dressed in shades of gray, he had leaned back and studied her from under thick, blond, carefully cut hair while all the others had leaned forward. His gaze never seemed to leave her, yet she didn't feel particularly discomfited by his scrutiny, perhaps because it didn't feel hostile. It felt more curious than anything.

Now he leaned forward, folded his hands together on the table and said, "Mrs. McKenzie, you said that there were several things you would like to see changed in the jail's medical department. You mentioned some, which I gathered were your top priorities. You also said there were others, and I'd be interested in hearing them, including your list of needed equipment."

She took a moment to gather her thoughts. When she had been asked the question before, she had just spoken off the top of her head because she had figured it had been one Juror's idle curiosity. Now, here was a second, much more serious inquiry. This deserved a thoughtful answer. She knew the Grand Jury could make recommendations for changes in the jail's operation and that they had to be given serious consideration. While the Sheriff wasn't obligated to implement any of them, he was required to give sound reasons for not doing so; and, if the Jury found those reasons inadequate, they could bring more legal pressure to bear for those changes, including forcing a lethargic Board of Commissioners to give them careful and thoughtful consideration.

"I mentioned the most important one which is the need for more staff, which probably would have resulted in Foster being found in time to resuscitate. A second reason I gave was the need to change the way we give out medication. Right now, we make up an envelope for each inmate on medication with all his meds for the day. It's up to him or her to take them properly. The envelopes are handed out by the deputies at morning roll call. It's a terrible system. We know that. We've always known that, but it's the only way we have to dispense medication without completely disrupting not only the jail's routine, but the court's as well. The only other option we have at the moment is to have everyone taking medication remain in the jail all the time they are taking it, preferably in a special housing area. That means, at a minimum, that many inmate workers would lose their jobs, and massive changes in housing assignments would have to take place daily. With additional staff we could have a nurse dispense meds four times a day in the housing areas. Those going to court would be given their noon dose by the deputy who gives them their sack lunch. We still can't do anything about those on the outside work crews, but we

generally don't give medical clearance to them if they require medication anyway. Those guys have to be in good physical shape for those jobs."

"Why is that?"

"They aren't executive positions. In fact, just about all the inmate jobs are basic laborer or semi-skilled at the most. There are a couple of 'executive' type assignments like recreation assistant and library assistant which require that the inmate be literate and reasonably intelligent, qualities we don't find in abundance among inmates, by the way."

"You'll excuse me, but that sounds rather contemptuous."

"I know that. Sometimes the truth sounds that way, but that is due more to our attitude toward that truth than to any innate property that truth possesses. In this case, it is the reality I work with every day. The simple fact of the matter is that most of the people who wind up doing time in jail are habitual, petty criminals. Many of them, if they were tested, would be classified as having some form of developmental disability."

"Why is that do you think?"

"The justice system doesn't serve everyone equally. I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you. Those who can afford good lawyers spend less time in jail and are punished less severely. They get bail. They get probation or they get off. As a general rule, they all do less time or no time at all. Like it or not, the reality is that in our justice system money talks and then walks."

The young man nodded his head. Paula notice a few others nodding with him. They knew. They had sat here watching an endless parade of high-priced legal talent defend wealthy clients. They had also seen the quality of defense the overburdened Public Defender's Office provided its usually pathetic clients.

"What about your equipment list?"

"That's an easy one. We have almost no equipment. Our emergency kit is an old black bag, the kind doctor's get on graduation from medical school. It has a stethoscope, a blood pressure cuff, a one-way breathing mask, which all jail staff are now required to carry, some bandages and tape, and an old pair of bandage scissors. The same ones that I tried to cut through Avery's towel with. It would be nice if we had a real emergency set up, not to mention the kind of scissors the paramedics carry that can cut through heavy cloth. A gurney would be helpful. All we have right now is an old canvas army stretcher. An EKG machine would save us having to send someone to the hospital to have one done. And while we're at it, having suture supplies and a small surgical lamp would let Dr. Martin take care of minor lacerations and save the cost of hospital visits too. It wouldn't hurt either if he had some help. Just part-time. Right now he's all there is. When he's not there, everyone gets sent to the ER and I know that's got to cost more than a part-time MD would. That's all I can think of right now, though I'm sure there are several other things that would just make it easier to do our jobs."

"Thank you. it's been very illuminating."

"Yes," the Foreman said, "I can promise you that we will give your suggestions very careful consideration. Any more questions, Mr. Wycliffe?" He shook his head. "Then we'll move on."

The next round of the questions showed that these jury members had paid close attention and wanted to establish the facts. They finally came around to the last Juror next to the Foreman. Bald with just a fringe of trimmed white hair, he appeared to be in his late sixties. He smiled at her like a grandfather to his favorite grandchild.

"Mrs. McKenzie. You've told us what's wrong and what you think needs improving with remarkable frankness. But I'm curious as to why, if things are as bad as they seem, you still work there. You obviously are well qualified to work somewhere else and probably for more money."

“That’s a question I was asking myself just this past Monday morning.” Everyone laughed. “The fact is, there are more nurses in this state than there are jobs for them, so my options are more limited than you might think, unless I moved out of state, which I have no desire to do. Besides that, things in the jail haven’t been so bad that I couldn’t, in good conscience, work there. They need to be improved, but we are a long way from total disaster. The medical care the inmates get, while not the best in the world, is equivalent to what they would get at any of the walk-in clinics in this county. Dr. Martin is a good, competent physician. The nurses on our staff are uniformly excellent, including the new one, Mr. Thompson, who was brought over by Mr. Browne from the Mental Health Department. I can’t speak to Mr. Browne’s skills as a nurse because he has chosen to restrict himself to purely administrative matters and does not see patients.”

“Do you approve of that?”

“I’m not in a position to approve or disapprove. It is a fact.”

“I see. But I still get a feeling that you think he should spend some time in the trenches.”

“I think it would help him gain a better understanding of the job, yes.”

“You said the care was equivalent to that of a walk-in clinic. Do you think that is adequate?”

“In most cases, more than so. For the most part, these people have to be in reasonably good health to get arrested. It’s really hard to rob, rape, and pillage when you’re so sick you can’t get out of bed. Those who need more care than we can provide are sent to the hospital.”

“But do you think they deserve better?”

“In an ideal world, everyone would get the best care. The question of getting the care they deserve wouldn’t even come up. This, though, is a far from ideal world, and the reality is that you get what you can pay for. Frankly I doubt that we’ll ever reach a state where there are no variations in the quality of medical care because that depends so much on the individual talents and skills of the practitioner and those will always vary. The most gifted cannot treat everyone. It would be nice if access to the quality of care were not determined primarily by monetary means, but it is, and, to some extent, probably always will be. That said, everyone deserves solid, competent medical care, even criminals. Beyond that, I think that you would find it a hard sell politically, to suggest that those who have chosen to live by preying on others deserve better care than the majority of their victims can afford.”

“No doubt,” the man smiled. “So it is your belief that the inmates are getting generally adequate medical care to maintain their health.”

“Yes. Actually, just being locked up and away from their drugs and the life they live on the street improves their general health. The suggestions I have made are primarily intended to allow us to make it possible for us to improve their care.”

“Thank you. I’m done, Mr. Foreman.”

The Foreman looked at Paula a moment before speaking, “I must say first that I have been impressed, and pleasantly surprised, by your professionalism. I know this cannot have been easy, especially in light of the lack of notice you were given. Rest assured, that we will address that issue. On a different tack, during our questioning I noticed a... I don’t know quite how to put this, not so much a lack of respect, maybe, as a concern for our justice system. You are, of course, by no means alone in your concerns. But I have to ask myself, despite your protestations to the contrary, if your concern is great enough to allow you to take advantage of any opportunities you might have to see that justice is served more completely. I guess what I’m asking is if you can demonstrate to me that such is not the case. Can you?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. All I can do is talk to you. I can’t invite you to spend a shift with me, though I think it might be very instructive. But I’d be on my best behavior, so that wouldn’t help. It might help if you had a greater understanding of my attitudes and where they come from, but that’s no guarantee that I wouldn’t go against them if just the right set of circumstances arose. Besides which, I can only speak for myself. If you have questions about me, you’ll certainly have them about the rest of the nursing staff, and I can’t speak for them.”

“I appreciate your candor. And you are, of course, correct. But I would appreciate knowing more about your attitude. I think that might reassure me. You mentioned this Bahá’í religion that you’re a part of. I don’t know anything about it, but from your answers, I gather it very much affects your attitudes. Could you explain that a little more for us and how it impacts your attitudes?”

“I can try. The Founder of the Bahá’í Faith was Bahá’u’lláh which means the Glory of God in English. He claimed that he was sent by God to fulfill the prophecies of all the world’s revealed religions and to unite all the peoples of the earth. To accomplish that goal, He revealed a set of laws and established an administrative order. In just over 150 years, the Bahá’í Faith has become the most widely spread religion in the world. This was possible in large part because, for the first time in religious history, the succession of leadership was established in writing which avoided a repetition of the schisms that have plagued past religions. Bahá’u’lláh appointed His Son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who in turn, appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who died in 1957. The authority now resides in an elected body called the Universal House of Justice, which was established by Bahá’u’lláh in His laws. Its seat and the World Center of the Faith are on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel. Now, in the simplest terms as it relates to this discussion, my being a Bahá’í means that I am required to live my life by a standard of conduct established in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings. We are forbidden to drink alcohol or use habituating and mind-altering drugs except under the supervision of a physician. We are required to be loyal to our government and obedient to its laws. We must also be honest, trustworthy, truthful, chaste and faithful. If I should fail to uphold these standards, I can be sanctioned by having my right to participate in Bahá’í community affairs restricted. The process whereby that can happen is not arbitrary, but clearly defined. Given that standard and those requirements, and the fact that I was raised from birth to look upon the violation of them as a punishment in and of itself, I could in no way justify taking matters into my own hands and punishing someone because I didn’t think they’d gotten their just deserts from the system. And, yes, I do think the justice system is seriously flawed. But it is not my job to fix it. I don’t have the knowledge or the skills for that, and I certainly wouldn’t want the responsibility for it.”

“But surely not every Bahá’í is a saint.”

Paula smiled broadly. “Absolutely not. We all have different capacities and levels of understanding, just like everyone else. The vast majority of Bahá’ís are adults when they enter the Faith. My case is actually fairly unusual, especially in the United States. All of us have, though, in accepting and declaring our belief in Bahá’u’lláh, also accepted the obligation to live by his laws to the best of our ability.”

“But you said you were born a Bahá’í.”

“I said I was raised in a Bahá’í family. No one is born a Bahá’í. The earliest age at which one can be enrolled as a member of the Faith is fifteen and it is not an automatic process. Children are included in community activities and can even declare their belief in Bahá’u’lláh, but they cannot assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership until they have reached the age at which we believe they are spiritually mature enough to make such a decision.”

“But you do have people who misbehave.”

“Yes. We’re all human.

“And you did say that you are taught to look upon others with a...what did you call it?... a ‘sin-covering eye.’ Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if that’s true, then how does someone who breaks one of your laws ever get put on trial and punished? Can you explain that?”

“I will try, but you must realize that there is no formal trial system or civil law code as yet. What we do have is a method of applying justice, relative to the Bahá’í laws, which is entirely different from any currently in use by any government in the world. First, the infraction must be flagrant and public, like being arrested for drunk driving. We do not run around spying on each other to make sure we are all being good little Bahá’ís. In every community where there are nine or more adult Bahá’ís, a Local Spiritual Assembly is formed by secret ballot in a free election. This is the basis of our entire global administrative order which culminates in the Universal House of Justice I mentioned earlier. One of an Assembly’s functions is to investigate allegations of prohibited behavior when they come to its attention. If, through a process of consultation with all the parties involved, it determines that a law has been broken, it then decides upon an appropriate course of action to assist the one who has disobeyed the law to change his or her behavior. Another of the Assembly’s roles is assisting individuals to grow and mature as both spiritual and material beings. The primary purpose, both of the laws and their enforcement, is to preserve the unity of all humanity, but the local Assembly has the special responsibility of preserving the unity of its own community so that its individual members can be supported in their growth by it. As I’m sure you recognize, few things are more disunifying than the breaking of a society’s laws. Does that help your understanding?”

“For the most part, thank you. I can see that this could go on for quite some time, but we have other business, so I will thank you on behalf of the Jury. Your testimony has been more enlightening than I could ever have expected. Unless there are any more questions, we are done.” He looked around the room. No one raised their hand. “Mr. Jameson?” The Deputy District Attorney shook his head. “Then you are excused with our thanks. I remind you again of the confidentiality of your testimony. You may not reveal any of what you have said here today until the Grand Jury has deliberated and reached a decision, which will be communicated to you. Do you understand this?”

“Yes, but I do have a question. I am, as I indicated earlier, facing possible disciplinary sanctions by Mr. Browne regarding my handling of these cases. I have already discussed them not only with the employee union’s representative, but also with my Spiritual Assembly and expect that I will need to do so again. What I’m unclear about is the extent to which I can do that now.”

“The restriction applies to discussing your testimony itself. You are permitted to talk about the cases as they relate to your disciplinary hearing or your consultation, so long as you do not reveal in any specific way what your testimony here was. It goes without saying, of course, that you may not talk to the media about this at all.”

“Thank you. That will not be a problem. I’ve never had to talk to the media before and I have even less of a desire to do so now.”

Jameson stood up with Paula and escorted her to the door. As he opened it, he said quietly, “What you had to say today was quite interesting. I’d like to hear more about this Bahá’í Faith of yours. Where can I go? Do you have church services?”

“We have informal gatherings every Thursday evening where people can get their questions answered.” She dug in her purse and handed him a card with a picture of the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois on the front. She turned it over to show him a phone number. “Call that number and they’ll give you directions and the time. It’s usually seven-thirty or eight o’clock.”

“Thanks. Hopefully, I’ll see you there.”

“There’s a good chance of it,” Paula said and let the door close behind her.

Wednesday

Chapter Ten

Gettin' Down

"Yo, Miz Paula," the black inmate called out as she came through the Dispensary door to start her shift. "Thought you'd be long gone by now, girl."

"Richie! Where you been you sly devil," Paula replied as she attempted a complicated handshake routine with him. "Sorry, I never seem to be able to get that right."

"You always be the wrong color, girl. Don' matter how much you try. But I glad to see you still be workin' on it."

Paula broke up laughing.

"Mr. Richards." Thompson said severely, "Staff members are to be addressed by their last names and with the proper respect due their position."

"It's all right, Dave," Paula said. "Richie and I go way back. He used to be my floor trusty. One of the best I ever had, though I always made sure I counted my fingers after shaking hands with him. Did you?"

Thompson involuntarily looked at his hands with a puzzled expression. "And you don't mind his unseemly familiarity?"

"Yo, man. I ain't never been outta line with her. She be a fine lady and I treat her with respect."

"Yes, Richie, you always have, and I thank you for that."

Thompson sat back in his chair and stared at them in utter confusion. Both of them looked at him and smiled at each other as though sharing a secret.

"Think we ought to enlighten him, Richie?"

"He so uptight, I think it goin' be like gettin' the Klan to elect me Grand Dragon."

"If ever there was someone who could do that, you're the one." Paula turned to Thompson. "You see, Dave, Richie here is a con man. He's also a pretty good pickpocket. Though if he were really as good as he thinks he is, he wouldn't spend so much time in here."

"Ouch!" Richie said, grabbing his chest. "That's cold, girl."

"I thought you didn't believe in backbiting," Thompson said.

"This is not backbiting. You need to know what kind of person you are dealing with, not only for your sake, but for his. Richie has a fluid relationship with honesty and the truth. He can be the most truthful and honest person that you'll ever meet, when it suits his purpose; or he can lie with the ease of a five term senator and be utterly convincing while he robs you blind. Frankly, I've always thought you missed your calling, Richie, ever see *The Distinguished Gentleman*?"

"Yeah. He had some nice moves, but he wasn't believable."

"And why was that,?" Paula asked, genuinely curious.

"He sold out. No righteous con woulda done that. There was a dozen ways he coulda got 'round that cracker and shucked him outta his shorts without givin' it up."

"I bow to your unquestioned expertise."

“Now, if I may, Mrs. McKenzie,” Thompson said, trying to reassert an authority he strongly suspected he no longer had, “I’d like to finish this interview and then I’ll give you report.”

“Yo, man, if it’s all the same wit you, I’d rather she took care a me. See, she know me and I know she be righteous. But, hey, if you can’t deal wi’ that, then that be cool, too.”

Thompson looked at Paula for support, not expecting to get it, but she surprised him. “Richie, I’d prefer it if you talked with Mr. Thompson. He’s an excellent nurse and likely to be here long after I’m gone. I’ll go over your history with him if it’ll make you feel better. Just remember one thing.”

Richie looked at her for a long moment, then finally said, “What that be.”

“He needs to know the truth. So be honest with him, just like you learned to be with me.”

“That’s cool. I be as cold wit him as you be wit me.”

“Thank you. Now, I need to take care of something. I’ll be back in time to say good night.”

She left for the bathroom, though she didn’t really need to use it. She looked in the mirror, seeing the shadows under her eyes. It had been a long, dispiriting day with a short sleep. Even though she had gone to bed immediately after dinner, the most she had managed to sleep was a couple of restless hours. She couldn’t turn her mind off. Browne’s diatribe and the Grand Jury hearing kept running in her head like a video tape loop along with a host of questions. What had they thought? Was she a suspect? What about this thing with Mace? What were they going to do now? What was Browne going to do next?

She checked her watch to give Thompson an extra couple of minutes to finish the interview, then returned to find him alone, finishing his entry on Richie’s medical record. Looking through the door she saw her old trusty on the bench in the waiting area.

“This’ll just take a moment, Dave.” She went out to Richie and said, “I am sorry to see you in here, but it is good to see you again. I’ll see you at five, as usual.”

“Five it be, Miz Paula. Good to see you, too. And, hey girl, that was a righteous thing you did for Carter. The folks are sayin’ they be glad you here.”

“Why Richie, you surprise me. I would have thought you’d be mad at me for trying to save him.”

“It ain’t like that. It about you bein’ willin’ to go the distance for him. Tells us you be willin’ to go the distance for any of us. Not many we can say that ’bout. Know?”

“Thank you, Richie. I needed to hear that, especially today.”

“Jury get down on you?”

“I won’t even ask how you know about that, but to answer your question, no they didn’t. It’s just been a very long day.”

Richie stood up and put his hand out. She started to attempt the ritual handshake, but he just took her hand and gave it a firm, professional handshake, then held it a moment as she drew it away. Quietly, with an accent as plain vanilla as hers, he said, “Be careful with that new nurse. There’s something that’s out of kilter about him. I can’t put my finger on it, but I know something’s not right.”

“Richie! He’s an excellent nurse. Better than the one we lost.”

“I’m not talking about his nursing skills. I’m talking about him. You know how they say some people aren’t too tightly wrapped? Well, he’s wrapped way too tight. He’s going to lose it and when he does it will be bad. Just don’t be around him when it happens.”

He looked over her shoulder and smiled brightly at Thompson, who had been watching them the whole time, shuffled off, back in his street-wise persona.

“Later, Miz Paula,” he called back over his shoulder.

Paula returned to the Dispensary, disturbed by Richie's warning. He had delivered it in exactly the same way he had delivered the one and only other warning he had ever given her.

Thompson handed her the chart as she came through the door. She read it quickly and nodded. "Good, he kept his word. Don't worry about setting up his insulin card. I'll do that when I do the meds. So, how's it been tonight?"

Thompson gave her a quick rundown on the inmates in Medical Isolation and what to expect from the few bookings who might be coming through, if they weren't released first.

"What's the story with this Richards guy?" he asked.

"He's someone I think you'd find very interesting, considering your professional background. He's as pure a sociopath as I've ever known. No conscience at all that I could ever find. Very charming, as most of them are, and utterly without scruples."

"But why did you encourage his outrageous behavior? It was entirely improper and out of bounds."

"Richie is special, Dave. He's the only one, as I'm sure you've noticed, that I let get away with that kind of familiarity."

"Fine. But what's so special about him? He seems like just another street person."

"He saved my life once."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing heroic. He didn't jump in and kung fu me out of a gang of inmates. He just let me know that a couple of homies had plans to use me as a hostage for a very poorly conceived escape. His evaluation, not mine. Their plan included dumping my body by the side of the road on their way out of town. He had no part in it, just heard about it and thought it would make his life miserable in here if the fools tried it, so he let something slip while he was polishing the floors in here. He was too subtle about it because I didn't get the message the first time he gave it to me. He had to all but spell it out for me before I understood what he was trying to say. He took a fairly significant risk doing that. Matter of fact, you're the first person in here I've told, other than Lt. Davies, and I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself."

"No problem. I can understand how you'd feel grateful to him, but doesn't that make you vulnerable to him?"

"Oh, he thought so too, but I disabused him of that notion right away. I may cut him some slack on how I let him interact with me, but never in front of another inmate. That would be bad for both of us. And I don't let him get away with anything else. Of course, that doesn't mean he won't try to put something over on me. He wouldn't be Richie if he didn't. He just doesn't push it when I let him know I'm onto him."

"How do you know he hasn't put something over on you?"

"I don't. Truth to tell, he probably has gotten some things past me. I'm not omniscient. But I know he hasn't pulled anything major. He knows I don't trust him enough for that and won't let him get close enough to really do any damage. That, by the way, is how a con man works. He gets close to you. They are probably the most intuitively observant people in the world. Any therapist worth his salt would love to develop the skills of reading people at a glance that they seem to have been born with. They find the chinks in your armor and worm their way in before you even know it."

"Well, he certainly looked like he'd penetrated your armor tonight. All that hand slapping and stuff."

"I suppose so, from your perspective. The truth is, I like Richie. I don't trust him, but I do like him. If you stay here long enough, the same thing will happen to you. No matter how many

barriers you put up, no matter how much distance you try to keep between yourself and these people, one of them will get through. It's inevitable. That's one of the risks you take as a jailhouse nurse. All you can do about it is accept it and not let it get out of hand. Most of the time, it's not that bad of a thing to have happen to you."

"Sounds bad enough to me."

"I thought so, too, once, back when I first started in here. Owen used to say that the most dangerous thing for a nurse in a jail was to be compassionate. He always warned me, and every other nurse here, that you couldn't let your compassion show with these people or they'd destroy you. Trouble is, you can't do your job very well if you don't allow yourself to feel some compassion. But you do have to harness it and find acceptable ways of expressing it. It takes time and experience, and you'll make some mistakes while you're learning what works for you and what doesn't. Hopefully they won't be huge ones. The alternative, though, is worse—becoming an unfeeling robot and burning out."

"Isn't that what happened to Peterson?"

"No. Is that what you heard?"

Thompson nodded. "I heard he was the worst kind of burnout case there is."

"And what kind is that?"

"The kind that hates what he's doing, but can't admit it. The kind that's quit caring and turns mean. The kind who's just hanging on till he can take a walk, but when the time comes to take that walk, he can't because he's got nothing else left except the job he hates with the people he hates."

Paula shook her head sadly. She was fairly certain where Thompson had heard this bilious crock, but knew it wouldn't do her any good to mention her suspicion. She thought it interesting, but not necessarily surprising, that it might describe the purveyor more than the subject purveyed.

"Owen might have chanted the non-compassion mantra, but he never behaved that way. He was, in fact, one of the most compassionate nurses I've ever known. He was gruff, and yes, he could be cynical at times, but when someone was hurt, he did everything he could to heal them. And God forbid you should ever point it out to him. He liked his crusty image, but he was a lot more like good, fresh sourdough bread than a stale loaf of whole wheat. Hard on the outside and soft and warm inside with that incredible tang that's like nothing else in the world."

"If you say so," Thompson said doubtfully, "but it still seems to me that you take a terrible risk letting these people get close to you."

"That's true of life in general, Dave. But in this case, it's specifically true. Knowing what little you do about Richie, do you think he would have taken the risk of a shank in the belly for a nurse that treated him with indifference?"

"Probably not. But that doesn't change the fact that you took, still take, as a matter of fact, quite a risk by letting some of these people get close to you."

"If we're not willing to take a few well-considered risks, we may as well pull the covers up over our heads and take that long, final nap. God put us here to grow and to learn as much as we can, and the only way we can do that is to risk screwing up once in a while. Our mistakes usually teach us a great deal more than our successes. That's one of the reason's we keep seeing the same people over and over again in here. They never make any mistakes, so they never learn anything."

Thompson chuckled. "That is definitely the truest thing I've heard since I came here. These are, without a doubt, some of the most resolutely stupid people I've ever met."

Chapter Eleven

Vacation Days

"Mrs. McKenzie, see me in my office before you leave," Browne said as he hurried through the Dispensary to his sanctum. Paula nodded her acknowledgement of the command and returned to giving report to Jenny.

Jenny smiled knowingly, her gleaming white teeth in sharp contrast to her coal black skin. Her round, open face went very well with both her body and her disposition. Paula liked the way she handled the racist bias of the inmates, both black and white. She especially liked the way Jenny had been able to garner the respect of the deputies. No less prejudiced in many ways than the inmates, the deputies had nevertheless accepted and even come to like and trust her.

Paula considered Jenny Rhoads a personal success. She had argued for her to be hired over Owen's choice—another white male. Paula had wanted to see a well qualified black on the staff for some time because fully a third of the inmates were black. Towards that end she had kept an eye out for someone and, six months before the swing shift nurse quit, found Jenny. The fact that the nurse she found was a woman was an added bonus. Paula would no longer be the lone female in this testosterone bastion. Jenny had a fistful of qualifications, not the least of which was her general attitude, which was open and gentle, based on a firm set of convictions which included being absolutely honest with everyone. But, while tact wasn't Jenny's strongest suit, she did know when to hold her tongue. Another plus was that she had no objections to starting out on the swing shift. That was the hardest shift to keep filled and they went through nurses every two or three years on it.

Normally nights would have been the most difficult to keep filled, but Paula had that sewn up. She loved night shift and Owen was more than happy to let her stay on it.

When she had put Jenny's name forward, Owen had rejected it out of hand because he didn't believe they needed another woman. He had always felt that the men's jail should be staffed with men. The fact that he had made an exception in Paula's case had more to do with availability, than anything else.

Owen had never regretted hiring Paula. He considered her a kind of treasure, a term that made her cringe whenever he had said it. As she walked back to Browne's office she remembered Owen's reaction to finding out she was a Bahá'í.

"What?" he had said. "You can't be one of those. You wear regular clothes and you haven't shaved your head, unless that's a wig. It's not, is it?"

Paula had shaken her head no, showing that the raven locks brushing her collar were her own.

"Well, okay. Not that it matters to me, of course, what a person believes, as long as they can get the job done. But tell me something, is what they say true, that you guys really coin it down at the airport, pushing those little paper flowers on people?"

For the briefest moment, Paula had considered leading him on, but the absurdity of the supposition behind his question caused her to burst out laughing, ruining the chance. Instead, she gave him a thumbnail sketch of the Bahá'í Faith and its principle of not accepting donations from non-Bahá'ís.

Paula walked into her current boss's bleak office with a warm smile from the memory. Browne greeted her with his usual grace. "Good of you to respond so promptly. Sit down and give me your report."

"What report?"

"Don't insult my intelligence by playing dumb. You may be sloppy and lax, especially in regard to maintaining a proper professional attitude around these people, but I do know that you are not stupid. What did you tell the Grand Jury?"

I wonder if that wee hours call was as warmly received as mine was Monday, she mused. Aloud she said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't discuss my testimony. I'm sworn to to secrecy, as is usual in Grand Jury hearings."

"So you are refusing to obey a direct order from your superior?"

"I am obeying the law. To comply with you would mean I'd have to break the law. I can't do that."

"You're refusing to follow my direct order? Yes or no."

"Yes," Paula said with a sigh.

"That's it. You're suspended as of this moment." The triumph in Browne's face told her that he had known this would be the outcome, unless she had been willing to break her oath, in which case he would have advised the Grand Jury and suspended her pending the outcome of the hearing and/or trial. Either way, he had what he wanted. There was no point in arguing with him now about the legality of the suspension. The best thing to do was get out of there and enjoy a few days off.

"Very well, sir. I have two days off. I'll be happy to extend them. A vacation right now would be most welcome. It has been a very trying week."

"This is no vacation. This is leave without pay. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. If there's nothing else?"

"Just one more thing. The medical examiner's report seems to back up your story on the Foster death, but I'm still not convinced that you bear no responsibility for his death. I will admit that you did try harder on Carter, but I don't think you had any choice what with all those people watching. Just be aware that it isn't going to get you off the hook. That's all. You are dismissed."

Paula bid Jenny goodbye and walked out to the Captain's office wondering how Richie would read G. Russell Browne, not that such a thing was ever likely to happen. Browne had thus far taken extreme precautions to avoid contact with inmates. Jenny had made the mistake of asking for his assistance during a particularly busy sick call only once. She had said the phone almost melted in her hand.

Paula couldn't decide, though, if he was afraid of the inmates, or just felt that contact with them soiled him in some way. For all she knew it could be both. Whatever it was, like so many other things about him, it was inconsistent with his liberal image. He despised and detested cops, but didn't have the reflexive liberal solicitude for inmates as downtrodden or oppressed people. Maybe he wasn't so much a liberal as someone who didn't think much of people period.

Whatever it was, she thought as she opened the door to the Captain's office, it just goes to show that these labels don't really mean much.

Betsy looked up from her desk. "What is it, Paula?"

"I need to inform the captain that I have been suspended by Mr. Browne."

"Suspended? You? He really has lost his mind. What on earth for, Paula?"

"Refusing to discuss my Grand Jury testimony with him."

"You can't be suspended for that."

“But I have been.” Paula’s effort to keep a straight face failed. A grin spread across her face, lighting his eyes with a private merriment that Betsy could not fathom.

“I’ll go tell him right now,” Betsy said, “Stay right here, while I go talk to him. I’m sure he’ll want to see you right away.”

Paula didn’t notice that Betsy hadn’t used the phone as usual, because the thought had just occurred to her that she had only eleven days till her anniversary date. She could retire today on fifty-nine percent salary, which T.J. had assured her they could manage financially. If she made the effective date eleven days from now, it would be sixty-three percent.

I could really handle some vacation right now, she told herself, even if it is unpaid.

Betsy returned with a genuinely perplexed expression at seeing Paula’s delighted face and told her to go on in.

“Now, what’s all this crap about being suspended?” Hill asked as Paula crossed the threshold.

“It’s true, sir” Paula said, closing the door behind her in response to the captain’s gesture. “Mr. Browne has suspended me for refusing to tell him what I said to the Grand Jury.”

“Doesn’t he know that testimony is secret? You’d be violating state law.”

“I told him that, but it didn’t seem to make any difference to him. I didn’t stay to argue, I just got out of there.”

“You did the right thing, of course. He sure frosts my Popsicle. I can’t believe he’s that much of an idiot. Go home, I’ll take care of this. Your suspension never happened.”

Disappointed by the Captain’s promise, she said, “Yes, sir. If you can, Captain, I’d appreciate it if you could take care of this as diplomatically as possible. I still might have to work with him, and I don’t need to be the object of a vendetta.”

“What do you mean, ‘might’?”

“Well, I am only eleven days away from my twenty-sixth anniversary. I’m considering taking my retirement.”

“And do what? Burn your skin darker than Rhoads’ swimming in your pool and gardening?”

“I haven’t decided, yet. In any case, I would appreciate it if you handled this with your customary grace and charm.”

“My what? If I go in there there’s gonna be some blood spilled. And I can absolutely guarantee that none of it will be mine. No, I think this is a job for the man who brought that idiot in here. Now, you go on home and enjoy your days off, but I expect to hear on Monday that you were back here Friday night. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter Twelve

And Do What?

All the way home Paula wrestled with the question of what to do. All she had been able to decide by the time she had fixed herself a hot cocoa was that she was dispirited, confused, and extremely tired. She took her drink into T.J.'s office.

He turned from a computer screen filled with text, to smile at her, and then turned back to save his work. She came up behind him and gently grazed the side of his neck with her lips.

“Difficult night?”

“Difficult morning. The night went just fine.”

“What happened this morning?”

“Browne suspended me.”

“What?”

She put up her hand to stop the stream of questions she knew was coming. “It won’t hold up. He suspended me for refusing to reveal my testimony to the Grand Jury. It’s secret. I can’t even talk with you about it.”

“So, you’re not really suspended then. Will he be?”

“I don’t know, and right now, I don’t care. All I care about right now is getting some sleep. I’m too tired to think clearly about anything. Can we talk about it this afternoon?”

“Sure.”

“Wake me at one, will you?”

“Sure you don’t want to sleep later?”

“No. That should be enough. If I bite when you wake me, it’s nothing personal. It just means go away.”

T.J. feigned disappointment with a lower lip a bird could perch on and then smiled. “What do you want for lunch?”

“I don’t know. Surprise me.”

* * *

Over pastrami on fresh rye bread, which T.J. had baked while she had slept, they plumbed the possibility of her retirement and what they could do with it. Until the last couple of days, retirement had been little more than a concept. T.J. kept track of their finances because Paula hated paying the bills and reconciling the checkbook. Even the advent of computer checkbook programs had not enticed her to take over that chore, though she had learned to enjoy using the computer for other things. T.J. had routinely tracked her projected pension income along with their other investments as soon as the software to do that had become available.

They had talked in general terms about traveling but hadn’t formed any firm plans. T.J. had always held to the idea of keeping their options open and not locking themselves into any particular plan until they were sure it was the direction they should go. Paula wanted the security of a well-defined plan before taking any major step. One major factor in their planning, though, had been taken care of by their children. They had moved out of the house and were doing quite

well on their own. Helen was married and working at Intel in Portland, Oregon while she finished her masters degree in computer design. Chip was serving his year of service at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel. He had completed his nursing degree before going to Israel, and would be going to England in July to work with the World Health Organization.

In every other area of their life together, Paula and T.J. were usually in agreement, or at least in harmony. On the few occasions when they had argued, it had been over their different ways of approaching major decisions. The decision itself had wound up being a non-issue. For this reason, as well as the fact that it had seemed comfortably far enough off in the future to ignore, they had not really sat down and discussed Paula's retirement.

"Okay," T.J. said, wiping mustard from the corner of his mouth with an unbitten hand, "just to be sure we're not wasting our time, how certain are you about retiring from the jail?"

"That's just it. I'm not that certain. It's an increasingly attractive alternative to continuing to work in a place that has lost its charm for me, especially after these last couple of days."

T.J. chuckled, "I've never considered the jail charming."

"You know what I mean. Please. Let's not get distracted here. The real questions, to me anyway, are: Is it worth all the grief I can see coming if I stay on, and, if I leave, what will I do?"

T.J. chewed on the last bite of his sandwich and the questions in silence. Paula nibbled on his potato chips, having already finished her own.

After a couple of minutes and a swig of Diet Dr. Pepper, he said, "I'm not sure I can help you answer either of those questions except by asking a couple of my own. Are you sure this grief, as you call it, won't pass fairly quickly? How tightly is your decision to leave tied to what you'll do afterwards? In other words, do you have to have a solid plan before you call it quits?"

"Last one first—"

"—As usual," they said in unison with a giggle.

"No, I don't absolutely have to have something solid planned out. I'd just be a whole lot more comfortable if I had some kind of plan. And secondly—firstly?—I don't have any real hope that things will improve. This is the government we're talking about."

"So maybe you should take the money and run."

"But I don't want to do that under a cloud of suspicion. It'll just make me look guilty."

"So you want to restore your reputation and then quit. What if you can't do that? Not that I think your reputation's been ruined or even sullied. The only one who seems to have a low opinion of you is Browne. I don't see how his very biased opinion matters, unless you're planning to work somewhere else and want a good reference from him. Are you?"

"No. If I leave the jail, I'll probably leave nursing. Besides which there's not that much out there for a nurse who hasn't stepped inside a hospital in twenty-five years except to have a baby."

"Well, you'd have a lot more time to swim and putter in the garden, though I can't picture you making either of those a full-time occupation."

"Don't think I can make the Senior Olympics Swim Team? Thank you very much. It's funny though, Captain Hill thought pretty much the same thing, only he put it as burning my skin blacker than Jenny's."

T.J. laughed. "Your United Nations genetic heritage may allow you to consistently place first in the George Hamilton Bronzing Competition, but I don't see it producing that depth of color without some charring."

Paula snickered. "You always do that to me. When I get too serious, you say something that brings me back to center. Small wonder I love you so much. But this time you're not going to

distract me entirely. There's something I need to know. You've talked about selling the house and getting a motorhome so we could travel, but it's always been just a kind of if-it-happens-that'd-be-great kind of thing. Or has it. Just how important is this idea of yours?"

T.J. didn't respond right away. He took a moment to evaluate how important it really was to him. Finally he said, "It's something I've thought about doing for a long, long time."

"But is it really important to you?"

"I'm not sure. I just have a really strong feeling that we need to get out of the city. If that means being on the road or living somewhere in the country, I don't know for sure. I just look around us and see the changes that have taken place in the last ten or twelve years here and know that I don't want to stay around here much longer. This used to be a very nice neighborhood in a city that used to be a pretty decent place to live. Now, it's a big and impersonal city and larger and larger parts of it are downright scary. I guess I just don't want to be trapped here when things fall apart. I think the biggest part of it, though, is that if we wait too long, we won't ever have a chance to go to the places we've always wanted to go. I look at the people who wait until they're sixty, sixty-five to retire and die in three or four years. I know a lot of them couldn't afford to retire any earlier, but those that could have, like Owen, waited anyway because they thought they were supposed to, or were afraid to quit working or whatever, and wound up never getting to do the things they'd planned. I don't want that to happen to us. We have an incredible opportunity that I don't want us to waste. And we don't have to be rootless. We could find someplace to use as a home base for our RV where you could have your garden. Maybe in one of those private, own-your-own-lot parks. Or maybe we can find an acre or two out in the country. How would that be?"

"Could we afford that?"

"I think so. If we can find the right place. We should clear enough on the house and what's in it to pay for a fairly nice motorhome and an RV lot down payment. If we're really lucky and hunt around some, we might be able to find the right deals that'll allow us to pay cash for both. The point is, if we want it, and it's the right thing to do, I'm sure we'll find a way. If it's not, that will become obvious very quickly. It's really just a matter of whether we want to give it try or not. Whether or not we're willing to risk this much of a change in our lives."

Paula nodded. "I think I could live without the house and even the pool, but a place to plant things? I need that. It's not just looking at the flowers, or picking the fruits and vegetables. It's being a part of the whole cycle, knowing you've made it possible for something beautiful to grow to its fullest potential. Getting down in the dirt, smelling it, rolling it between your fingers, planting the seeds, and keeping the weeds out is all part of it. That's what it's all about."

"So, I guess if we do this, I'll just have to find some way for you to satisfy your need to grub around in the dirt," he said with a smile.

"If you want me with you, happy and fulfilled, you will."

"Oh, so now I'm responsible for your happiness and sense of fulfillment, too. Big job."

"For a man with big shoulders."

"Then we're in trouble."

"Are you suggesting I look elsewhere?"

"No. Not at all. It's all a matter of defining big."

She held her hands out to the approximate width of T.J.'s shoulders. "I think this is all the Arnold I need."

"Then maybe I better go pump some keys, just to keep in shape."

“And I’ll be in the greenhouse if you need me. Is it okay with you if we get the Assembly’s input on this?”

“Yes. Definitely. By the way, Stan called and won’t be able to make it, but everyone else should be there.”

“Okay, you go back to work and I’ll grub around in the dirt,” she said, leaning over for a kiss. It lingered gently on her lips, placed there with the utmost tenderness, and she savored every morsel of it. “I love you. You always know just how to do that to fit my need.”

* * *

Browne walked out of Abbott’s office insulted and angry. He had been assured that he would have a free hand in cleaning up the medical department, but he should have known better than to take the word of a politician who was a cop to boot. Twice in two days he had been told to back off. Both times over this night nurse, McKenzie.

What kind of hold did she have over the sheriff, he wondered. Must be something pretty good.

Now, he was going to have to call her and tell her she was reinstated. No. Not reinstated. Abbott had made that absolutely clear. She had never been suspended. There would be no record of it in her file. He had to tell her that it had never happened.

But, things do have a way of working out.

Just before he had left for Abbott’s reaming out, Brannigan, the relief shift nurse, had called, asking if there was any way he could have Thursday night off. Some kind of family emergency. Sure, he had said to himself, I’ve heard that story before. He had told him he doubted it, but would look into it. Then Abbott had called, summoning him to his office like one of his stupid deputies.

He hurried through the Dispensary to the serenity of his orderly office and sat behind his austere desk. He picked up the phone and smiled, picturing Paula being jarred out of a sound sleep, as he punched in her number. It rang three times before it was picked up by the phone answerer. This was even better. He left his message and hung up. Now, with any luck, he’d have her leathery hide nailed to the jailhouse door.

* * *

Paula came in from the greenhouse no more certain of the course she wanted to take than when she had gone out there. Usually when she was vexed by some problem, working in the garden served to help her mull things over. An hour or two of pulling weeds, tilling the flower beds, or in this case, potting seeds, rarely failed to allow her to come to a decision. In the rare cases when it didn’t, swimming laps did. A quick rinse to get rid of the dirt and she would try that solution.

There were just too many imponderables. Too little information. The idea of being free spirits, as it were, certainly had its appeal. But what would she do? T.J. would still have his writing. It wasn’t work, it was who he was, and as natural to him as breathing.

She had always been a nurse or wanted to be one. Other than gardening and swimming, her only interest was in visiting every National Park and Monument. At least they would be able to meet that goal in all likelihood. But would that be enough? She doubted it. She needed a purpose. Something more than just pleasure-seeking diversions. Something specific and practical.

Something she could point at and say, “I did this.” Like the floor in the great room that she had laid with Jack Johnson’s help, or a good job on a difficult case, or a garden full of beautiful flowers in full bloom. Just running around to look at pretty places would never satisfy her.

The message light flashing on the phone caught her attention. She hit the playback button and heard Browne’s gloating voice tell her she was working Thursday night. Somehow, in that brief message, he had also managed to convey, without apologizing, that her suspension had never happened.

“That slimy little toad!” she yelled, pounding her fist on the counter.

“What happened, Hon?” T.J. said, hurrying into the kitchen.

“Of all the gall!” she screamed as she shook and then massaged her hand. “That pompous, arrogant, little toad just left a message ordering me to work Thursday night and made me hurt my hand. He can’t do that!”

“Are you sure of that?” T.J. said taking her injured hand and rubbing it gently.

“Of course, I’m sure. He can ask, but he can’t order me around like I’m one of those deputies he despises.

“Aren’t you still sworn?”

“Yeah, but... Oh... I guess I am one those deputies, aren’t I. Well, it still makes me mad. You know he’s just doing this to get back at me. Abbott must have talked to him, and this is his way of getting back at me for him making a fool of himself. It’s so childish! And you know how I hate that.”

“So, get back at him like an adult. Take the joy out of it for him. Call him up and thank him for the overtime and tell him how nice it was of him to think of you instead of someone else.”

Paula smiled up at him. “No wonder I love you so much, you sly, sneaky devil. And I also know just how you’re going to spend some of that overtime money.”

“Oh? How?”

“You’re going to take me out to the Salty Dawg tonight.”

“But you haven’t been paid for that overtime yet. You haven’t even earned it yet.”

“So what? If we wait till then, something might happen that’ll keep me from getting my reward for being such a sweet, obedient, little employee.”

“Well, one out of three ain’t bad.”

“What do you mean one? Which one?”

T.J. backed up a step and let her hand drop, a mischievous smile teasing at the corners of his mouth as he surveyed her diminutive form. “Which do you think?”

“Give me a minute to ruin Mr. G. Russell Browne’s day, and I’ll show you that all three are undeniably true.”

Chapter Thirteen

Assembly

Pub owners, Gracie and Rupert McLeod, had met T.J. at the produce market a couple of years ago. When T.J. learned they were the owners of the Salty Dawg, he explained that Bahá'ís don't drink alcohol, and therefore they weren't likely to be customers. Gracie explained in turn, that an English pub is not just a bar. It's the village's public meeting place where families enjoy the best traditional meals in England and any number of non-alcoholic beverages are readily available.

Dinner at the Salty Dog didn't necessarily help Paula resolve anything, but its genuine old English pub atmosphere always warmed her with its charm and put her at ease. Tummy content with shepherd's pie and a bite or two of T.J.'s fish and chips, she felt ready to consult with the Assembly.

Paula sat on the loveseat next to T.J. and looked at Liz Garvey who called them to order following the opening prayer. The other members were arranged around Mary Chapin's small living room on the couch and some dining room chairs. The walls were covered by bookshelves which gave the room the feeling of being a branch of the city's public library.

It was a place in which both Paula and T.J. felt utterly at home. T.J.'s mother had been a school librarian. He had grown up with a love of literature, reading, and surrounded by books. Paula's parents were both avid readers and belonged to several books clubs. The search for more shelf space in their home never ended.

"If there is no other urgent business, T.J., I think we should suspend the reading of the minutes and get right to work on Paula's consultation which is, after all, the primary reason we're meeting tonight."

T.J. nodded his assent, as did the others.

"Very well, then. Paula, I understand from T.J. that things have progressed rather rapidly at work and that your situation has changed. Could you please bring us up to date?"

"I wouldn't use the term progress, necessarily, but things have definitely changed. First, while I'm not under any official suspicion, I still face a very hostile supervisor who seems bent on destroying my reputation and drumming me out of county service. The Sheriff's Department has no complaint against me and has, in fact, cleared me of any wrong-doing or negligence. Mr. Browne, however has not. Frankly, I doubt that he will ever be satisfied until I have been fired.

"I testified before the Grand Jury yesterday. While I am not allowed to discuss my testimony, they did make it clear that I could discuss the issues that prompted this consultation with you, so long as I don't indicate in any way what my testimony was. This sworn secrecy is normal in all Grand Jury testimony. Mr. Browne suspended me this morning for refusing to break that oath. He left a message this afternoon ordering me to work on my day off tomorrow, which I'm sure is the result of his having been told by Sheriff Abbott that he had acted inappropriately. I don't mind telling you that it really made me angry, but T.J. suggested a superb way to take the sting out of it. He suggested I thank him for the overtime hours. Mr. Browne's response was a strangely satisfying grunt."

Liz chuckled and that others smiled at this news.

Jack said, "I'm glad you weren't around when I was running my shop, T.J. You could get to be really irritating."

Everyone nodded and laughed, agreeing that T.J.'s suggestion had been ideal.

Liz said, "Please continue, Paula."

"The last thing is that I am now about ten days from my twenty-sixth anniversary with the county. While I've been eligible to retire for several years, it's an option I've pretty much ignored until the last couple of days. Today's events kind of crystallized this possibility in my mind, but I'm not sure what I'd do with it if I took it. What I would like is some advice about how to deal with a hostile boss, salvage my professional reputation, and whether or not I should retire, and if I do, what I might do with my time."

"Sounds simple enough," Liz said with a wry smile. "Do you have any preference about the order in which we should take these subjects?"

"It may seem strange, but I think I'd like to deal with the retirement issue first. It seems to me that if I can get that one resolved, the others are going to be much easier to work with because I will know what my ultimate goal is. It'll give me some perspective."

"Sounds reasonable to me. Any problems with that?" she asked the others. All shook their heads. "Then let's proceed. First, Paula, I think we need to know the particulars of your retirement. How it would affect you financially, what plans, if any, you've made or discussed. I think we also need to hear T.J.'s thoughts and feelings on the subject."

In quick succession she related the things she and T.J. had discussed that afternoon. T.J. added the financial information and concluded with his thoughts:

"To be utterly honest, I'm in favor of her leaving the jail. I've thought about this all afternoon. Even if we stayed right here, which would be very easy because I've discovered that her sick leave paydown would more than pay off our mortgage, I think it's the best thing for her. It's time to climb out of that sewer, honey, and take a long hot shower. What you do with your time isn't as important to me as your being able to wake up with a smile, happy to face the day ahead. You haven't been doing that much for the last few months, even before Owen died."

"I just hate the idea of sitting around wasting my time, fiddling in the garden, shopping, and watching TV. I really feel I should have some kind of idea of what I'm going to do. And it needs to be something worthwhile."

Jack Johnson said, "I know what you mean, Paula. I had the same doubts about selling my business and retiring. Sylvia had plans. Lots of them. But I wasn't sure, because I didn't have any idea how I'd fill up my day. Neither of the boys wanted to be plumbers, but our little surprise package, Rose, started showing a real interest in it. She went out with me on jobs and really picked it up quick. So when she asked if she could take over, I thought, why not? It took a couple of years, but it worked out great. And I have less time now than when I was running the shop. And none of it's wasted unless I decide it is. The difference now is that I can choose what I want to do. I can pursue something that interests me without having to worry about how much it's cutting into my business. And I know you've got more interests than just gardening. My advice: Don't worry about how you're gonna fill your day. That'll take care of itself. The difficult part will be choosing from all the possibilities that will suddenly be there in front of you."

Mary Chapin asked, "I get the feeling that this retirement idea is as much an escape as it is anything else. Is that true?"

Paula thought about it for a moment. "I don't know that you could say it's equal to any of the things T.J. and I have kicked around, but it has certainly been increasingly difficult for me to

walk through those gates every night. Especially since Owen died. The work isn't the same. It's a lot less gratifying than it used to be. Now, with Mr. Browne's hostility, it's lost any attraction it ever had, so yes, I guess you could say that I'm looking at it as an escape. I just don't want it to be an escape to something worse."

"From what you've related about your job, I think that is highly unlikely. I can't imagine doing what you do for twenty-six minutes, let alone twenty-six years. I guess where I'm going with this is that maybe it's the kind of nursing you practice that is the problem. Have you considered going into some other area, like hospital work, or public health?"

"No. There are a lot more nurses than there are jobs. The whole health business is a mess and nurses are taking a beating while it's being sorted out. In the rush to contain costs, hospitals are using fewer and fewer RN's and paying them less by removing the perks and bonuses they used to use to recruit and keep them. Someone like me, with no experience outside the jail for the last twenty-five years, would be viewed as less desirable than a new grad with no experience at all."

"Have you considered volunteering at a hospital?"

"I know you do two days a week at Franklin, but I can't see myself as a Pink Lady. No, I've already decided that if I leave the jail, I will leave nursing as well."

"From what you've said so far," Sam Cohn said, "you are very fortunate in that money isn't the primary issue. You'll have a good, solid income, and an extremely manageable debt load. My hat's off to you both. Very few people can say that, even the ones who've planned for it. You have the freedom to go in whatever direction you want because T.J.'s income is not tied to his being in any particular place for a set number of hours. If I was in your position, I would be devoting myself to studying the history of the Faith. Not with any particular purpose in mind other than to learn as much about it as possible. And this is my point. Too often we think only in terms of what we can produce with our time. If we do something, then some product or service must come out of it or we think it's wasted. But I don't believe that everything we do has to be, or should be, evaluated that way. In my case, studying the history of the Faith would be mostly for my own entertainment. Yes, I would expect to share it at different functions, like summer schools and the like, but I wouldn't be studying with the idea of writing a book or teaching classes. There must be some things that you're interested in that you have probably rejected because they seemed to have no value except as personal entertainment." He paused, waiting for a response.

Paula nodded slowly. "There are a couple of things."

"Such as?"

"Well, I've always had an interest in photography, but I could never figure out what to do with a thousand snapshots, or even worse a thousand slides of our travels. You take them, get them back from the lab, look at them, and put them away. If they're slides, and you're a really sadistic, you show them to your friends. I can't do that."

"But do you really like taking pictures?"

"When I'm taking them, I enjoy it quite a bit. Setting up the shot, getting the right angle, the right light, framing it. It's quite a challenge, and even if I do say so myself, the results haven't been all that bad."

"They've been a lot better than that," T.J. said. "I think the only bad shots you've taken have been the typical snap shots everyone takes. Me and the kids in front of whatever place we've gone to. The ones you've taken of the place itself were very good."

"He's prejudiced," Paula said.

“He may be,” Anoosh Sanai said, “but he is right nonetheless. I was quite impressed with the quality of your pictures from your pilgrimage. Far and away the best I’ve ever seen from the many people I know who have been to the Holy Land. And I especially liked the ones you took of the flowers in your garden last spring.”

“Oh, those were just to finish off the roll.”

“Nonetheless, they were quite good, professional in every respect except the finishing. With high quality finishing and proper framing, I would be honored to sell them in my store.”

“Okay, maybe they were nice, but good enough to sell in Classic Interiors? I don’t believe that.”

“I think maybe we’re missing the point here,” Sam said. “The point is that you like taking pictures of beautiful places and the results please you. You said the only real goal you had identified so far was to visit all National Parks and Monuments in the U.S. Would you want to take pictures of those places?”

“Of course. A few anyway.” Casting a sly glance at T.J., she added, “With better equipment, I might try taking some professional quality ones.”

Sam caught T.J.’s nod, as did everyone else. “Well, then you have something to do that will also give you a record of your odyssey through some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. What you do with the pictures isn’t important. You’ll increase your expertise, and develop one of the capacities God has given you. And, trust me, He will also show you a way to use the results.”

“Okay, Sam, I get the point. I’m just not sure I should toss it all in God’s lap and expect Him to take care of it.”

“But isn’t that what the Writings tell us to do?” Mary said. “In passage after passage aren’t we told to trust in God, to rely on Him to show us the way? The Writings make it very clear, at least to me, that we are to prepare ourselves by developing whatever capacities we have to the fullest extent that we can in order to serve Him. But there is also an unmistakable mandate to be open to His guidance and a responsibility to follow it to the best of our understanding. The history of our Faith, indeed of all religious history, is filled with accounts which show that God’s idea of what we should do is rarely the same as our own. None of us here can tell you what you should do. We can give you the benefit of our experience, our knowledge, and our love, but we can’t decide for you. That doesn’t mean you have to go it completely alone, though, in deciphering the directions God gives us. God gave us the Spiritual Assembly as a means of discovering His will through its consultations. Accepting and following its counsel and decisions is left up to you.”

“I couldn’t have put it more succinctly, Mary,” Liz said. “Thank you. Now, if you have nothing to add, we need to hear from you Manny.”

“Well, I mean, retirement is a really long way off for me to even be thinking about,” Manny said. “It’s like foreign territory, but I can see where Paula could be getting burned out, and maybe taking this chance now is the thing to do. As to what she ought to do with it, I was thinking back to my first Fireside. There was this couple who’d traveled all over the world, been on pilgrimage, been to the dedications of the Panama, Indian, and Samoan temples, and taken thousands of slides of all these places. Then they’d taken selections from the Writings and he read them over a musical background while they showed slides that related in some way or another to what he was reading. They were unbelievably beautiful pictures. And the music was perfect. It seemed to have been written just for the passages he read, but it hadn’t been. One was something from Mozart, I don’t remember what, and another was from a movie soundtrack.

Anyway, the point is, He said they had the same problem you have—what to do with the slides. They got the idea from a summer school project. I'm not saying you should do the same thing, but you see what I mean. There's a lot of possibilities on how to use your pictures. Things you haven't even thought of. If it was me, I'd take the money and go out there and take all the pictures I could. Besides, running around like that, you'll still have plenty of opportunities to teach the Faith, so there's no way you can call the trips a waste of time."

"I'm sorry Stan's not here," Liz said. "His views would be invaluable and I suggest we ask him at our next meeting. So, then I guess it's my turn. Retirement is not an option for me any time soon. I'm taking the usual steps financially, but I still like what I do too much to leave it. So, I too have some difficulty relating to your situation. I had a teacher—English of all things—who used to say you can't afford to work at something you can't stand. It doesn't matter how much money you make at it, if you hate it, you can't afford it. He was just trying to get us to look seriously at our career choices. He'd seen far too many kids go through his classes who were pursuing someone else's goal and were totally unsuited to the career they'd chosen. Most of the ones he'd had a chance to follow up on were miserable, some them had died at an early age. Of course, we all know about this now, and it's pretty well accepted as common sense. What is just beginning to be accepted is that people can have a series of careers. That they can start out doing one thing, wear it out, so to speak, and go on to something else. Well, my point is, that there is no point in sticking with something just because you have always done it. I get the feeling that this area of nursing doesn't really challenge you anymore, or perhaps the challenge it now poses is not as rewarding."

"I think you hit it the second time," Paula said. "It's always a challenge to figure out what's really going on with an inmate who's complaint and symptoms don't match. Sometimes it's an even greater challenge when they do match. But the bureaucratic challenge has become primary. Trying to figure out how to take care of this patient's problem in a system designed to keep you from doing anything for him. If you do, you get called on the carpet. If you don't, you get sued."

"Then making a change makes sense, even if you're not exactly sure what direction it will take you. Who of us ever is? Did you know that you would wind up spending twenty-six years in jail when you started nursing school?"

Paula laughed, "No way. I was going to make people well, healing them in a hospital."

"Well," Liz said, "when I get a lot of unsolicited messages that point me in a new direction, I've learned to pay attention to them. I can't say you should retire, and I can't tell you to stay put. I can only tell you to pay attention to the signs around you. I know I've told you how I wound up being manager of Huebler Research and what a surprise it was to be asked to take over for my boss. What I haven't told you was that I never started out to be anything but a temp secretary till I could snag my man. I didn't take any science courses, nothing more challenging than stenography. I didn't even go to college, just secretarial school. Well, I got my man, lost him, and had to rely on the only skills I'd learned to feed my children and keep a roof over our heads. Do you know that I'd never taken a managerial course till after they made me a manager? Secretaries didn't need that. They took dictation and fetched coffee. But all the time I worked there, I learned things. Fascinating things. I learned what they were doing, not because I had to, but because it was interesting. I surprised myself at how easily I understood it. Sometimes I even had an idea that solved a particular problem for them. As time went on, the boss kept giving me more and more projects to organize and keep tabs on for him. Most of the other clerical people told me to be careful or I would wind up doing everything, but not getting paid for it while the boss got all the credit for my hard work. And I suppose it could easily have worked out that way,

but Dempsey wasn't that kind of man. He'd always seen to it that I was credited for the things I did. When he retired, he told the president of the company that I was the only one who could do the job. I knew none of this. When I was offered the job, I almost refused, after I got my breath back. It took me all weekend to decide. I only wish that I'd had the opportunity to consult with an Assembly, but I hadn't even heard of the Faith then.

"So, my point is this. None of us knows where we'll wind up. Perhaps it is time you hung a left. Watch the signs. Sometimes, I think, God loses patience with us and he puts a wreck in our path that makes us take what looks like a detour. Like I said before, we can't make this decision for you, but the consensus of opinion here tonight seems to be that retirement is a very viable and even attractive option for you. What you do with your retirement is less important, perhaps, than that you explore the multiplicity of opportunities it offers."

Paula looked at T.J. He gave no indication of what he was thinking except that he loved her, which was always on his face when he looked at her. "Thank you. All of you. I'm still not sure of what I'm going to do, but I'm definitely leaning in the direction of taking it on the lam. I guess I'd just feel more secure if I had a firm idea of what I'd be doing with my time. Now, can we take a look at how I can deal with this other stuff, even if it's only for a few more days?"

"Certainly," Liz said. "How about we take a break first. Mary's German chocolate cake has been calling to me since I got here and my resistance is just about exhausted."

* * *

Thompson awakened deeply chilled, bathed in the rank sweat of unremitting fear, his clothes soaked and as icy as the night. The last vestiges of the nightmare's visit were still clear in his mind. He was certain that this time those images would not fade the way they had before. No, this time he had to take some kind of action. He just didn't know what it would be yet.

He had swapped shifts with Brannigan to let him catch the red eye flight to be with his father before he went in for surgery. Thompson had hoped that working through the night would stop the nightmares by breaking up his sleep cycle. Like everything else he had tried, that, too, had been a complete failure. He had slept so fitfully in preparation for the upcoming shift that it had proved worse than no sleep at all, so he had gotten up to watch some TV. Rising from the recliner, he shivered as he had that night when it had all started. The TV's manic laugh pattern burbled quietly and he shut it off.

The sitcoms must be getting really banal, he mused, if the only way I can fall asleep is during one.

Hoping a shower would warm him, he stripped off the hospital scrub suit he habitually wore at home, and plunged his gooseflesh under the scalding spray. He screamed as the liquid fire scorched his skin, but held himself under its course, adding just enough cold water to make it bearable. Finally, the water's heat seeped into his bones, but it couldn't wash away the images in his mind, couldn't cleanse his soul of the unspeakable filth that he thought he had scraped off and buried years ago.

It's as still as a tomb and nearly as dark. The only light in the hallway down which he's creeping is spilling from the tiny nightlight in his room. He reaches her door. It's closed, just as Duane left it when he slammed it ages ago tonight.

His hand touches the knob. It's as cold as he feels. He turns it slowly, hears the snick of the bolt slipping free of the jam, and pushes it open with infinite care. He doesn't really want to see what's in here, but he has to. He can't just leave her.

With one part of his mind, he knows what he'll find. But he's nearly convinced himself that it was all really just a bad dream and that everything will be all right despite the fact that he's still dripping from his sojourn in the river's cave. He just has to prove it to himself so he can go back to bed and get some sleep. He's got school tomorrow and a test in history, his worst subject.

It's too dark to see anything. The light from his room doesn't reach into her room. He touches the light switch, but isn't sure he wants to turn it on. That's when the smell hits him. He can almost taste it in the back of his throat. He flips the switch up reflexively. The cheap, twin bulb fixture floods the small room with light. Though not a blinding glare, like a flashbulb going off, it's stark enough to permanently etch the image in his mind.

She's a ragdoll. Melissa is hanging over the foot of the bed. Everything is red—the sheets, the floor, her body. Except her face. That's white as the snowman they made last Christmas.

He screams and runs for his mother's room. Pounding down the hall in bare feet, he flails his arms to rid his mind of what he's just seen. Mother will fix it. She always fixes it. Whatever it is, she can fix it. Cuts, bruises, even a broken arm, she's fixed them all.

He slams through her door. The light is on. The scene he's just left reappears before him, but this time, his mother's face is on the ragdoll. No! It can't be. How could she do this to him? How can she fix it now?

In a blink he's running down a dark road. He can feel his bare feet grinding over the aged asphalt, the tiny, ground down gravel working up between his toes, shredding the skin. His feet hurt. He knows they're raw and bleeding. He ignores all that. It's not important. Not as important as getting away from that house.

Headlights swing around the curve, impaling him in their bright glare. Tires squall in protest and the headlamps come to rest half-a-dozen feet in front of him.

He wants to run, but can't think which way. He can't go back. Whatever else happens, he can't go that way. The glow of the headlights glints off a barbwire fence on his right, casts a deep shadow over the drainage ditch he knows is on the left, and highlights another fence just beyond it. There is nowhere to go but forward, and he can't do that. He's pinned as surely as the insects on that board in Mr. Dennison's science class.

The driver's door creaks open and a tall, thin man emerges. He leaves the door open and walks around it to stand in front of the lights, towering over him.

He looks up into the shadowed face, unable to see any of it's features. Not that it matters. He's lost and there's no hope of escape. Duane's come back to get him.

And that's when he wakes up. When he always wakes up. At least this time he hadn't been screaming. At least, he didn't think he had been screaming. It was hard to tell. No one had come knocking on his apartment door to ask if he was okay, but, then, this wasn't the kind of place where people did that. Most of them would rather not know, at least until it was in the papers or made the TV news. Then they would be all over it, telling everyone and anyone who would listen how they had been right there when it happened.

He had thought he had beaten this thing. George had said he had, assured him of it years ago when the dreams had finally stopped. But George had been wrong.

* * *

Liz Garvey reassembled them all in the living room and looked at her watch. “It is getting late, but I think we must deal with the other concerns Paula has, even if we have to do so briefly. T.J., could you remind us of the principles we decided were involved, please?”

T.J. consulted the minutes and said, “We decided honesty, trustworthiness, and obedience were the ones that directly affected Paula. Secondly, we decided that how one deals with prejudicial attitudes directed at oneself needed to be reviewed.”

“Does anyone have something else to add to this list?” No one spoke or raised a hand. “Very well then, Mary, what did you find in the Writings?”

“In the case of honesty and trustworthiness, I saw no need to submit a exhaustive list of quotes. We all know that Bahá’u’lláh commanded us to practice absolute honesty and be utterly trustworthy. There isn’t a great deal of room for interpretation in either of those commandments. Likewise he forbade lying for any reason. Does anyone object to our passing on reading these references?”

No one objected.

“On obedience, there are literally dozens of references to obedience to Bahá’u’lláh’s laws, Bahá’í administration, and the laws of the government of the country in which one lives. There is only one exception to this principle—denial of our Faith. In the Bahá’í News, March, 1951, a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, states in part: ‘The cardinal principle which we must follow... is obedience to the Government prevailing in any land in which we reside... We must obey in all cases except where a spiritual principle is involved, such as denying our Faith. For these spiritual principles we must be willing to die...’

“I know that we are all aware of this requirement. What, in my experience, is frequently questioned is obedience to informal laws, such a administrative regulations and the like. In *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi says: ‘To all administrative regulations which the civil authorities have issued from time to time, or will issue in the future in that land, as in all other countries, the Bahá’í community, faithful to its sacred obligations towards its governments, and conscious of its civic duties, has yielded, and will continue to yield implicit obedience.’ I take this to mean the general principle of obedience means obedience to those in authority.”

“Even when they’re wrong?” Manny asked.

“It depends on what you mean by being wrong,” Mary replied. “If you mean that you think what they have ordered is wrong-headed, or stupid, or unworkable, then you are talking about an opinion. It may be an extremely well thought out opinion, and it may even be correct, but the Bahá’í principle of obedience doesn’t allow you to disobey an order because you disagree with it. If, however, you mean that the order is wrong because it violates some other law, such as a law passed by the government, or a court order or ruling, or a provision of the constitution, what you might consider as a higher law, then you must obey that higher law. But, and this is most important, you must explain your reason for disobeying the order to the one who gave it, and continue to be obedient in all other matters.”

“But what if it’s dangerous, I mean like people getting hurt or killed even. Are you saying we just have follow this person blindly?”

“No. If you have serious reservations about a certain order, then you have the responsibility of bringing them to the attention of the person who gave the order. This you must do with deference and respect for his or her authority and position, and in all humility. It will do no good to antagonize this person. That, as we all know, will just cause them to harden their position.”

“Okay, so you protest their decision, like you say, and they still decide to go ahead with it. Do you just go along with them then?”

“Then it is time for you to seriously evaluate your own position. Are you as certain as you can be that this will be as disastrous as you originally thought. Remember that you may not, indeed probably do not, have all the facts. Those in authority are frequently privy to information that you do not have, and they are often reluctant to give that information out for a variety of reasons. It is also helpful to remember that very few decisions are truly life-threatening. Ultimately, you have to decide to obey or not, and accept the consequences. In most cases, obedience is far more preferable, for if the order is faulty, obeying it will make that obvious very quickly. Disobeying it will disguise that fact because we won’t know if the order didn’t work because it was wrong, or because it wasn’t followed. Much as we seem loath to admit it, there’s no great shame in being wrong. The great shame is in persisting in being wrong.”

“Okay, I see. Boy, that’s sure a lot different than the way I was raised.”

“It’s different than the way most of us were raised,” Liz said.

Paula said, “I know all of this and have tried to follow it. What I’m finding increasingly difficult is that my boss refuses to listen to any of us. At times he seems quite irrational, like when he suspended me for refusing to violate the Grand Jury secrecy oath.”

“Have any of his orders, other than the one you just mentioned, been illegal?” Jack asked.

“No. Just very poorly thought out. They’re more like reactions to specific and unique situations which he then generalizes into an all encompassing policy.”

“But they’re not necessarily dangerous.”

“No, not really. Just a waste of time.”

“Then, I think that your course is clear,” Liz said. “Based upon what we know from the Writings, we must be obedient, even when it is inconvenient, or goes against our better judgment, so long as we don’t violate a clearly defined spiritual principle or a higher law. Does any one else have a comment to make on this?”

Sam Cohn raised his hand. After Liz nodded at him, he said, “In a way this is all a moot point. Paula is in the enviable position of being able to remove herself from what could be called an untenable situation. Many of us have had to put up with similar situations because we didn’t see any way out of them for one reason or another. She has a way out. She can take her retirement and do whatever she wants.”

“So, is that your suggestion, Sam?” Liz asked. “She should get out while the getting is good?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Anyone else have something to say to this issue?”

No hands rose. No voices replied.

“Then I think we should move on to the question of dealing with prejudicial attitudes. Do you have anything for us on that, Mary?”

“Well, first of all, I’m not convinced we’re dealing with religious prejudice in the usual form of an attack by someone, or some group, of a different religious belief. As Paula described it, it was more a rejection of the validity of religion and religiously based beliefs as a whole, and, specifically, as a basis for making decisions.” She looked at Paula for confirmation.

After a moment of reflection, Paula said, “I would have to agree. I’m not even sure that he knows that I’m a Bahá’í, just that I’m ‘religious,’ as he puts it. From his other comments, I would say that he thinks all religions are irrational, and therefore can’t be trusted as a basis for making real life decisions. The real prejudice that I’m dealing with is the one he has against all

of us who have been working at the jail. He has all but said that none of us is fit to be a nurse because of where we chose to work. It's almost as if he believes that the only medical people who work in jails and prisons are those who couldn't get a job anywhere else. At one time that might even have been true, but it's not true now. Medical care of prisoners is too closely monitored by all kinds of groups to allow hiring and keeping incompetents to be the rule rather than the exception."

"So, in fact, we may not be dealing with religious prejudice at all," Mary said, "though I doubt it. Personally, I think we're dealing with both. I'm sure there are some references somewhere that relate directly to this question of how to deal with prejudice directed at oneself, but I couldn't find any in the material I have. Everything I found related to our removing all traces of prejudice from within ourselves. The only things I could find were the repeated admonitions in the Writings to follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example. After all, Bahá'u'lláh appointed Him as the Perfect Exemplar of Bahá'í living. When confronted with evil, 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned good. When confronted with hate, He returned love. Never did He take revenge. Never did He engage in acrimonious debate. I was particularly reminded of an incident when He was visiting in this country, I think it's from Howard Colby Ives' book, *Portals to Freedom*, which I couldn't find. Must have loaned it out. In any case he describes a visit by several clerics who were rude and scathing in their attack on Him and on the Faith. Throughout it all, He sat quietly listening to their diatribe with an interested smile on His face. Never did He utter a single word in His defense. When they had finished, He rose, thanked them for coming to meet him with utter and sincere graciousness and ushered them out with the utmost courtesy. The Friends, in whose home this occurred, were outraged and asked Him how He could just sit there and listen to their ignorant rantings. He told them that there was no point in arguing with them for that would only harden their attitude. He pointed out, that only by listening could the other person be encouraged to listen. He also said that we must exercise patience and wait until the person is ready to hear what we have to say. Otherwise it will surely fall on deaf ears."

"Perhaps," Paula said, "I need to pray more fervently for patience and serenity."

"Amen to that for all of us," Liz said, recalling her Baptist upbringing. "Does anyone else have a comment?"

Sam raised his hand, Liz nodded, and he said, "All I can do is repeat myself. Comes with advancing age. Of course, some of us advance much faster than others. Seems to me you're three years older than I am, Paula, but some days I feel like I'm your father's age. Anyway, you have the perfect opportunity to shed yourself of this burden. I think you should take it."

"Even if it means going out under a cloud?"

"If you planned to work somewhere else and needed a reference, then it might be worth trying to salvage the situation. Though, from what you've told us, I don't think that's possible. He has most of the cards and some kind of personal agenda to which he seems fully committed. You're just a pothole in his road. I should think that your retirement would please him no end, and I doubt that he'd make any kind of public issue of his opinion of your competence as a nurse."

"You know," Anoosh said, "this is something we faced daily in Iran. Unreasoning hatred, even when we had proven ourselves the most capable of people at our jobs. In fact, our striving after excellence seemed to inflame even greater hatred. Nothing we could do seemed able to eliminate it from those who were the most fanatical. Those who were more moderate were eventually willing to acknowledge that we weren't so bad, maybe, after all; but it took a long time to overcome their prejudices. And always, always, it was our following of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

example that won them over. Fighting them—which, sadly, a few would do out of frustration and lack of patience—only made it harder on all of us, and confirmed their low opinion of us.”

“I know how I felt when I first started my business and one of my employees argued with me about a decision I’d made,” Jack said. “I didn’t like it. Not one bit. And I’d just turn them off as soon as I knew that’s what they were doing, even when they were right. Of course, I wouldn’t know they were right till later, sometimes too much later, because I’d just rejected their opinion out of hand. If I did cool down enough to think about what they said, and if it made sense, then I might go ahead and use it. But I never used to give them credit for the suggestion. It was only after I joined the Faith and started looking at how I ran my shop that I saw how much I’d hurt my business. It’s a wonder any of them stayed with me more than a month. Thank God I became a Bahá’í early on. In an autocratic type of organization, which is what Paula works in, dissent is treated harshly. Mostly, I think, because it’s so threatening to those in power. There is probably no position that is more unstable in the corporate world than that of a new middle manager. And that holds true for government as much as it does for business. If his superiors think he isn’t measuring up in the usually ridiculously short time frame they’ve set, he’s out. In government it usually means he’s relegated to some back office instead of being fired, but it’s no less humiliating. When you’re unsure and in an insecure position, the last thing you want is someone confirming how fragile your world is. If I were in Paula’s shoes, I’m not sure I would remain there, even if I didn’t have a pension to fall back on. I think I would bail out as quickly as possible and find someplace else to work, because I don’t think this is one she can win.”

“Well, you’re right about the time frame,” Paula said. “It has nothing to do with whether anything is truly wrong or not, it has to do with the upcoming county elections. And I have to agree with you that no purpose can be served by arguing with him. As much as possible, I’ve tried to avoid that, though, as I look back, I may not have been as good about it as I could have been. As for salvaging my reputation, as Sam alluded to, it hasn’t really been tarnished except in Mr. Browne’s mind. No one else seems to have accepted anything he has said or intimated as being valid. It’s just that you hate to tuck your tail and run, and that’s what taking retirement feels like right now.”

“Please, don’t take any offense at this, Paula,” Mary said, “but this sounds a little like an ego thing.”

“I’m sure it is to some extent, and I take no offense, Mary. And I’ve thought about that quite a lot these past couple of days. Am I hanging on just to prove I’m right and he’s wrong? That I’m better than he is? I’d like to think not. I’d like to think that I’m trying to protect the good name of the Faith by seeing to it that one of its members doesn’t give it a black eye.”

“But is the Faith tied to you publicly?” Liz asked. “Is your reputation inexorably linked to the Faith?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Then I fail to see where the Faith’s reputation and good name are endangered. I don’t mean to be unkind, Paula, but perhaps you are using protection of the Faith as a convenient reason to forge ahead with this battle when you have a perfectly acceptable and very attractive alternative.”

“Yes,” Mary said, “I dare say that if anyone of us had the opportunity you have right now at your age, we would take advantage of it without the slightest hesitation.” She looked around the room at the others who all nodded.

Manny added, “Excuse me for maybe shooting my mouth off, but I can’t imagine doing what you’ve done for as long as you’ve done it, and not wanting to take a hike, with pay no less, when

the chance comes. If I were you, I'd be outta there so fast they'd be knocked over by my slipstream. I just don't see how something that isn't going to affect my life in any significant way is worth hanging around to fight over. You know you're cool. And the people you work with know you are, right? So let him have his little worthless victory. It can't hurt you. Besides, from what you've told us, he's already been proven wrong several times. You don't have a damaged rep to save, he does. This guy doesn't sound too tightly wrapped, and I think it's possible he'll do something vindictive, even if it ruins his career. Get outta there before it's too late."

"Well, Paula," Liz said with a rueful smile, "I don't think we intended to tell you how to run your life, but it certainly seems that we have. The consensus obviously is that you should retire. Personally I think we're all a little bit envious—"

"—Speak for yourself," Sam said, "I'm downright jealous."

"The thing is, Paula, we can't decide this for you. The consensus is not binding in any way."

"But to me it carries considerable weight," Paula said. "Isn't that the point of consultation? You bring your problem to the Assembly and it consults on it and renders its decision. You have done that and your decision is unanimous no less, because I vote with the rest of you. To continue this squabble is pointless. All I'm doing is massaging a teeny bruise on my ego. Now, all that's left is to figure out what I should do with all this time I'm going to have."

Thursday

Chapter Fourteen

Fireside

T.J. and Paula entered Jack Johnson's modest forty-year old home at seven-fifteen in the evening and followed a familiar routine. They gave him their coats, which he put in the entry closet, and followed him across the living room through a wide arch into the family room where they turned left to a maple kitchen which ran across the end of the room. They sat at the long, granite-like slab that served as the breakfast counter and set the kitchen off from the family room.

Paula looked around the room and turned back to face Jack as he set two steaming mugs of spiced apple cider before them. She fingered the counter's edge and ran her hand along its highly polished surface.

"No nicks yet," Jack said. "I can't thank you enough for your help on this, Paula. It's the crowning touch. And these cabinets. Sylvia's almost afraid to use them."

"Just my way of paying you back for your help with the floor. And tell her not to worry. That finish is very tough. Just wipe it with a damp cloth."

T.J. offered no comment. Remodeling, building cabinets, laying wood floors, and setting solid surface countertops was utterly foreign territory to him. Paula and Jack spoke that language and shared those skills. He had trouble hitting a nail more often than his thumb. In his hands, a circular saw was a suicidal weapon. During both remodeling projects, which had taken place in spurts over the last several years, he had fetched and carried, cleaned up after them, and stayed out of their way. He had also inaugurated both remodeled kitchens with a sumptuous feast of their favorite Chinese dishes.

Paula looked back over the room and smiled. She had been very tempted to skip coming tonight. She had to go to work in a couple of hours and could easily have begged off with everyone's sympathy and understanding. But Jameson was coming tonight, and she felt she owed him her presence, even if she didn't feel particularly like the happy and joyful being that a Bahá'í is encouraged to be.

Now that she was here, though, she was glad she had come. The warmth and inviting atmosphere that pervaded Jack and Sylvia's home soothed her frayed nerves and buoyed her tired spirits. She was still troubled by all her cares, but they had begun to cease looming over her like a dark, avalanche-prone cliff.

Folding chairs had been set up to augment the couches and easy chairs that hugged the walls of both rooms. The focus of the seating, which could accommodate thirty, was a loveseat against the front window. The decor throughout was light, clean, and simple: beige carpet, white walls and ceilings, cream drapes, and bone upholstery with cherrywood tables.

"Sylvia will be down in few moments," Jack said, continuing another familiar routine. Sylvia always ran a few minutes behind. "So, you're definitely going to pull the pin."

"Yes. I'll be going over to the personnel office tomorrow morning after work to sign the papers. The effective date is the day after my anniversary date. I plan to write my notice tonight, just a short note that says thanks for the memories."

“And have you two figured out what happens next?”

“Not really,” T.J. said. “We’ve talked about it, but the only conclusion we’ve reached so far is that there’s no real need to rush a decision. We can just sit tight and see what happens.”

Paula frowned slightly, not at all as sanguine about things as T.J., but said nothing.

“Good decision,” Jack said. “I can tell you from experience, Paula, that your days will fill up pretty quickly. In fact, you’ll have to be careful that you don’t take on too much.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a very strict timekeeper here,” she smiled and gave T.J. a kiss on the cheek. “He’ll protect me from myself.”

“So now, tell me about this guy who’s coming tonight. He sounds interesting.”

“He’s an Assistant District Attorney, currently assigned to the Grand Jury. That’s where I met him. I can’t go into anything I said there, of course, so let’s just say that my testimony made him curious about the Faith. I gave him one of your Fireside cards and invited him to come tonight.”

The Thursday Fireside at the Johnson’s had been an institution for years. Through it, both Manny and Liz had been introduced to the Faith. Few appreciated more than T.J. and Paula the Johnson’s sacrifice to keep it going. It meant being at home every Thursday to welcome anyone who showed up. Many nights in the beginning, no one had, but they had persevered. It had been several years now since they’d had a Thursday to themselves. It meant cleaning the house and preparing some kind of refreshment, usually cookies, but sometimes cake, or pie, plus tea, coffee, and cider in winter, lemonade in summer. It meant they took short vacations, or none at all. Neither Jack nor Sylvia considered that a sacrifice. Jack said he had gotten in all the traveling he had ever wanted to in the Navy. Sylvia never liked to be away from home for more than a weekend. In fact, the only time they had missed a Thursday was when they had gone on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Then they had made sure that their daughter had been home to host it.

“Who’s your speaker tonight, Jack,” Paula asked.

“It was supposed to be Stan, but he’s down with the flu. That’s why he couldn’t make it last night. I was kinda hoping T.J. here could do it.”

“If you don’t want to yourself, I’d be honored.”

“Naw, you know I love hosting these things, but being the speaker makes my palms sweat like I’d just cut through a hidden water main.”

“So, do we have any other seekers coming?”

“Maybe one or two. Liz said she’s bringing someone, and Stan had someone, but I don’t know if she’ll show up now that Stan won’t be here. Manny’s been teaching someone at school, but he wasn’t sure if he could get him here. ’Course, the regular crowd’ll be here.”

T.J. smiled. The regular crowd consisted of Bahá’ís from all over Franklin County. Twenty people constituted an average-sized gathering.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it, dear,” Sylvia called out as she came down the staircase.

T.J. and Paula rose and walked into the living room carrying their mugs of cider. Jack stayed behind to finish setting up the counter with cups and Sylvia’s homemade cookies. By custom, T.J. and Paula took up a position in front of the loveseat to greet guests ushered to them by Sylvia, preventing, without fuss, anyone from inadvertently sitting in the speaker’s place.

Liz Garvey greeted Sylvia with a hug and introduced her friend Steve Hansen, an elegant, tall blond man who looked like he made his living modeling for Ralph Lauren. T.J. felt almost shabby in his corduroy sports coat and open throat dress shirt as he introduced himself. Even

Jack, whose idea of formal dress was having to wear a tie, checked that his polo shirt's tail was tucked in when he walked into the room.

Paula, whose nursing career had exposed her to entirely too many men in various styles and stages of dress and undress to be much impressed by a man's wardrobe or how well he wore it, noted the men's reaction to Hansen and thought: They're not that different than we are when a beautiful and striking woman enters the room. Nonetheless, she was glad she had opted for a sweater and slacks instead of her usual jeans and oxford shirt. She stuck her hand out when T.J. introduced her, and received a warm smile and a firm clasp of just the right duration in return.

Oh, Liz, she thought, what have you brought us tonight?

Just as Sylvia began to close the door, a man started up the walk. She held the door for him and greeted him warmly with a handshake.

"Welcome, I'm Sylvia Johnson."

"Harold Jameson. I called earlier. Mrs. McKenzie invited me."

"Yes. She's right over there."

Jameson greeted Paula, who introduced T.J., Liz and her guest. Jameson, who looked like he had just come from his office, touched his tie with his left hand as he shook hands with Hansen.

"Liz told me this was an informal occasion," Hansen said, loosening his collar and tie, "but you know how it is when you're meeting new people. Want to make a good impression and all that. I hate these things." He pulled his tie off and stuffed it in the pocket of his coat which he removed and placed in Sylvia's waiting hand for hanging in the closet. Then he rolled up his sleeves.

Jameson loosened his tie, but couldn't bring himself to go any further. It didn't matter. Buttoned up or not, he still felt disheveled next to Hansen's now casual elegance.

The room filled quickly with Bahá'ís laughing and joking, catching up on recent events, swapping stories, and introducing their guests. The last one to arrive was Manny with his friend, John Bell, an athletic, if unremarkable, looking black man about Manny's age. After everyone had been served their choice of beverage and settled back in the living room, Jack welcomed them formally and introduced T.J. as a famous author and their guest speaker.

"Let me dispel any misconceptions right from the start," T.J. said. "While it is true that I write for a living, my fame rarely extends beyond the narrow confines of nerdville. I write technical manuals, mostly for high tech industries, and you'll almost never see my name in them. If you bought an LDX-85 in the past three months, you've read one of my latest works. And I know you've read it, because there's no way anyone can figure out how to turn that stupid thing on without reading the manual. It took me the better part of a day to describe that procedure in language we mere mortals could understand."

Everyone laughed, especially Steve Hansen.

"You're right. Absolutely right," Hansen said. "That is the most complicated piece of equipment I've ever worked with. But let me say this, you are not only a life saver, but a job saver. Whatever they paid you, it wasn't enough."

"Thanks, I'll remember that when I negotiate my contract for the X-86. Now, with apologies to Jack for his effusive introduction, you are not necessarily in for a special treat. I'm standing in tonight for someone who presents one of the best explanations of the Bahá'í Faith I've ever heard. He's ill and Jack asked me about twenty minutes ago if I would do the honors tonight. So since I didn't come prepared, I'm going to fall back on an old speaker's trick. I'm going to have you talk. I recognize most of you, but there are several faces I don't know. I'd like everyone to introduce themselves and tell us in a sentence or two what first attracted them to the Bahá'í

Faith. I'll ask my wife Paula, here, to go first, and we'll work our way around the room. I'll go last. Now, take notes, there'll be a quiz after the break. Paula?"

"I'm Paula McKenzie and I was brought up in the Faith. But that doesn't mean I didn't have a choice. At age fifteen, every Bahá'í child can choose whether or not they want to be formally enrolled in the Faith. It's not an obligation and it's not automatic. I signed my declaration card on my fifteenth birthday because nowhere else did I see the kind of unity that I saw in my home and Bahá'í community."

"I'm Sylvia Johnson and I liked that the Faith accepted all other religions as being valid."

"Jack Johnson. I liked the sense of commitment I saw in the Bahá'ís, but they weren't fanatics either. They seemed like regular people, but somehow saner than the rest of the people I knew."

"My name is Harold Jameson and I know almost nothing about Bahá'í, except some things that Mrs. McKenzie over there said recently. What initially attracted me was her serenity in a very stressful situation. Although she didn't say it, after listening to her I knew it had to stem from her religious beliefs, which she explained to some extent, and which I found very compatible with how I felt about things."

As each person spoke, T.J. listened carefully, making eye contact with each person in turn, concentrating on what they said, letting each know by the attention he paid to them that what they had to say was important to him. It wasn't an act. He was genuinely interested in them and would remember most of what they said.

"John Bell. I became interested in the Faith because of the way Manny and his friends at school are. There's something different about them."

"We know," Jack said, "and we're trying to fix it."

When the laughter died down, John continued. "Please, whatever it is with them, it ain't broke, so don't fix it. If they are broke, then I want to know how I can get broke like them."

"That's easy, John," Manny said. "Just give up your football scholarship and put yourself through school like the rest of us." More laughter. "You all know that you're in the presence of greatness tonight, don't you?"

"You mean you are that John Bell?" Jack said.

Bell nodded his head just enough to acknowledge the compliment and then stared at his feet. A kind of reverent hush fell over the men in the crowd.

"I'm Manny Espinoza and the greatness I was talking about is this Faith. I heard about it through the Bahá'í Club at the university. What I liked most was the elimination of prejudice. And I don't mean just racial, but economic, gender, every kind, anything that lets you think you're better than someone else."

"But I am better than you," John said with a broad grin.

"Only at catching, running, and passing," Manny shot back with an equally huge grin. "If it wasn't for me, you'd still be trying to figure out how to compute the hypotenuse of an isosceles triangle."

"True story. He talked me out of architecture as a major and helped me find my true vocation which is English Literature. I owe him my life, so I figured the least I could do was humor him and tag along for this evening."

"As Jack said, I'm, T.J. McKenzie. What first attracted me to the Faith was Paula. I'd never heard of the Bahá'í Faith before I met her. She was this cute little nurse in the ER where I'd gone because I'd almost cut my finger off trying to fix a drain pipe in my condo. I didn't know Jack

then either, which is good because not only would I never have met her, but I'd have been bankrupt to boot."

"Not true," Jack said, "I'd have taught you the Faith and my rates were a lot more reasonable than my competitors, so you'd only have been half bankrupt."

"Anyway, there was just something special and very attractive to me about her, something that wasn't your usual boy-girl, sex and hormones kind of thing, but something much deeper. Suffice it to say that what I found so attractive about her turned out to be her being a Bahá'í.

"Okay, now I'm going to take a couple of minutes and give you the basics about the Bahá'í Faith, so you'll have some idea of where it came from and what it's tenets are. Then we'll break for some of Sylvia's cookies. Has the DEA caught up with you yet, Sylvia? I keep expecting us to get busted some night because these are truly addictive chocolate chip cookies. After we exhaust her supply, we'll come back and have our quiz."

In a set piece that T.J. had worked out over the years for just such occasions, he covered the history of the Faith and then, in quick succession, enumerated some of the basic principles. Concluding twenty minutes later, T.J. said, "And that brings us to my need for a cookie fix."

* * *

Dave Thompson sat at the desk in the Dispensary bent over a small pile of charts. It had been a very quiet evening. Too quiet to distract him from his terrors. So quiet that his mind constantly strayed from the charts beneath his pen to the images from his nightmares. They filled his mind, at times obscuring his vision.

Of course, these weren't just bad dreams. These weren't just the frightening images and sounds a child's subconscious conjured up to deal with watching too many slasher flicks. These were memories. Deeply painful memories.

For many years now, Dave had been able to hold himself together enough to function fairly normally, if one could call living a monk's life normal in these hedonistic times. His friend, mentor and foster father, George, had taken him into his home when no one else would, held him through countless, interminable nights, endured his primal screams, and wiped away his tears until at last the frequency and power of the night terrors had faded, leaving behind a phantasm like the smell of ozone after a lightening strike.

How George's wife, Wanda, had endured those first years, he never understood. He could probably count the nights she got eight uninterrupted hours of sleep on his fingers. Yet, never had she complained or spoken a harsh word to him. She had loved him as her own, perhaps because she couldn't have any of her own.

In the summer before he had started high school, she and George had asked if he wanted to be adopted by them. His response had been immediate and seemingly without consideration. No, he didn't want to lose his birth name. He loved them, but he could not bring himself to desecrate his mother and sister's memory by abandoning their name. It was the only time he had ever seen tears well in Wanda's eyes and he had wished he had not been their cause, but it could not be helped. He would never surrender to the monster who had killed them—the monster who had never been caught—by allowing their name to be wiped out of existence.

In the following weeks, without deliberation, they all began referring to each other as Mom, Dad, and son. If anyone had ever asked who had started it, George and Wanda would have insisted quite accurately that it was Tommy, or Dave, as he had decided he should now be called. It was the name his mother had given him and the name on his registration papers at his new

school. Tommy was a child's nickname. He was starting high school. It was time to put that child behind him.

He never saw the tears of fierce pride wash over Wanda's cheeks as she overheard him explain his decision to George on his way out the door to his first day of high school. He had also missed her tears the first time he called her Mom. It was so casual, so ordinary, that it had taken her a few seconds to realize he had done it, and by that time he was gone.

Never popular in school, too shy to form many friendships, too skinny for sports and hampered by a limp—the legacy of his ordeal—he had concentrated on his studies. His foster parents refused to allow him to become a recluse, however. They had started him in scouts in junior high, but it hadn't work out very well because the other children were all gregarious and athletic and shunned him or made him the butt of their frequently cruel jokes. The efforts of the pack leaders to intercede only made matters worse.

In high school they tried the YMCA. Here he found a more accepting atmosphere, and formed, despite his reticence, a couple of close friendships. Here also, he found a sport he could enjoy with a fair measure of accomplishment. His gaze drifted with this memory to his dearest treasure, a beautifully carved cane George and Wanda had given him at his high school graduation.

Following his foster father into nursing had been as inevitable as rain. During his training he discovered his true gift—an ability to form an immediate and healing bond with his patients. It didn't matter what their ailment was, physical or emotional, terminal or merely an annoying interruption in their life, he was able to intuitively find the common ground between them and enlist their active participation in the healing process or the acceptance of their mortality.

A year after Dave's graduation, George transferred to the mental health department from the hospital where they had first met. The move included a promotion to supervisor. As soon as a staff position became available, he encouraged his son to apply for it. He had long been aware of his son's gifts and thought they would find their fullest expression and usefulness in the dark forest of tortured minds that had become his responsibility.

The psychiatric milieu, with its Freudian rejection of religion, suited Dave quite well. He had determined on that pivotal July night in his ninth year of life that there couldn't be a God. Religion was just an excuse to justify the most hideous and unspeakable acts that one human can perpetrate upon another.

Originally, George had been essentially neutral about religion, neither believing nor disbelieving. He had just ignored it. Then he had met Tommy and learned his story. It had so inflamed him, touching as it did his own deeply seated fears, that he ultimately became a greater foe of religion than his son. He blamed it for forever scarring Tommy's life, not to mention destroying thousands of others'. The evidence for his belief paraded up and down the halls of George's workplace and sat around him during group or across from him in private consultation. Religious, superstitious claptrap cluttered their minds, filling them with demons of guilt and self-loathing. His revulsion and rejection of religion hardened over time into an irrational and automatic response to the mention of religion in any form.

Wanda, as she had in so many other things, kept her own counsel. She had learned very early in her marriage that it was the best way to keep the peace. George considered himself open-minded, but he held the opinions he formed fiercely. Only when the issue was of paramount importance to her, would she insist on being heard and weather the storm that inevitably followed. On a couple of occasions, she had even managed to make her point and gain a

concession, which she considered a victory. Fortunately, because she dearly loved and cherished her husband, issues of such importance rarely arose between them.

To offset what many women would consider an intolerable situation, she had developed many subtle ways of incorporating her ideas and beliefs into their life in such a way that they both benefited and neither suffered. She may not have had the glory, but she had the peace, and she considered that a far greater prize. Dave had recognized this early on, being the intuitive person he was, and learned from it. He hated confrontation and arguments above all things, and loved his mother for her ability to circumvent them and still accomplish her goals.

Wanda, he knew, had no great liking for any of the organized religions of which she was aware, but she did harbor a belief that there had to be some kind of Supreme Being. The world, she had told him once, was just too complex and well-organized to have evolved randomly. But she had no answer for where this God had gone, or, if He was still around, why He wasn't doing anything to help mankind.

"Well, He's definitely been absent these past few nights," Dave said quietly, unaware that he had spoken out loud.

He had no idea why the dreams had started up again. He only knew that he had been unable to get more than an hour's uninterrupted sleep for the last week and a half. He recognized that he was beginning to suffer from sleep deprivation, the most obvious sign being his difficulty concentrating, as evidenced by this rambling review of his life tonight. He had charts to write and orders to take off and fill. Yet, here he was drifting down memory lane and obsessing about something that had happened twenty years ago.

He had to get some sleep, but he wasn't sure how he was going to do that. He had already tried an over the counter sleeping medication and it had done nothing. The problem was that most sleeping meds made this kind of problem worse because they interfered with the REM cycle. The only ones he had ever seen that really worked were more like general anesthetics than sedatives, and they were all injectable. He hated needles. He had had more than a lifetime's worth of them during the two months it took them to cure the osteomyelitis that had crippled him. Maybe George would have a suggestion. He would ask him tomorrow.

* * *

Juggling a plate of cookies and a coffee cup, Jameson worked his way through the crowd to Paula.

"Thanks for inviting me. This is really very interesting. I've never heard of a religion that was so practical. No magic, no suspension of disbelief. Just good old common sense. I can see why you're into it."

"Oh there's a great deal of magic in it, but without the tricks. It is very down-to-earth, but it doesn't forget that religion is about spiritual matters which are, by their very nature, not down-to-earth. Bahá'ís look upon humans as spiritual beings in a material world. We are here to learn, to grow and mature, but sometimes it's easy to forget that this material world is actually just a classroom and the real world is out there, just beyond our reach. However much we think we know what it's like, we really don't know much about it at all because we haven't entered it yet."

"I can relate to that."

Paula saw Jack beckoning them and said, "We're being paged. I think you'll find this the best part of the evening."

When everyone had settled into their seats again, T.J. said, “Okay, now comes the quiz.” The Bahá’ís let out a loud, insincere, and well-practiced groan. “Ah, but this is a different kind of quiz. You get to ask me the questions. I’m sure each of you who are here to look into the Bahá’í Faith has at least one question. I’ll try to answer each one, but let me warn you that no one here has all the answers, least of all me. None of us is the ultimate authority on things Bahá’í. We have no clergy. We have institutions who have the authority to make binding decisions for Bahá’ís, but no individual has any authority over anyone else in the Faith. That means that it is your responsibility to read the original works of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, which we call the Writings, and make up your own mind. We call that the independent investigation of truth, which is another central principle of the Faith. So what that means is that whatever I say tonight, unless I am quoting directly from those texts, is my interpretation of things and not gospel. Now, that said, who has a question?”

Paula became absorbed with Jameson as T.J. answered John Bell’s questions regarding Bahá’u’lláh’s claim to be the second coming of Jesus with quotes from the Bible. He seemed anxious, like a kid in school who can’t wait to ask the teacher his all important question.

At last T.J. asked “Now, anyone else?”

Jameson shot his hand up. “My concerns are so much more mundane than the Second Coming, I almost hesitate to ask them.”

“There is nothing profane about the mundane,” T.J. said. He too had caught Jameson’s intensity and was equally curious to know what had sparked it.

“Well, I originally came here to learn more about your legal system. When your wife explained a little bit about Bahá’í before, I got the feeling that it was a very practical belief system. Now that I’ve listen to this very involved, and I must say brilliantly cogent, explanation of how we all missed the Second Coming, I find myself having to confront my feelings about God. I mean, look at the world. There’s famine, hunger, misery, cancer, serial killers, kids killing each other over five bucks worth of crack, or the color of their bandana, or for no reason at all that makes any sense. If God’s so all-powerful, why doesn’t he do something about it? Can you tell me that?”

“I get the feeling that this is a very personal and emotional issue. Are you certain that you want to get into it here. We could arrange a time to deal with it privately if you would prefer.”

“No. You’re right that it’s personal and emotional, but I’d like to hear what you have to say. What I’m having trouble with is God Himself. I’m afraid I’m getting to the point where I don’t like Him very much.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Steve Hansen said. “I mean you guys are amazing. The world’s falling down around our ears and you all seem to just take it stride. How can you do that? Doesn’t it get to you?”

“Yes. Exactly,” Jameson echoed. “Doesn’t it get to you? All the crime, the crooked lawyers, judges, and politicians. How can you be so calm about it?”

“Who says we are?” Jack asked. “There are lots of things that upset us.”

“Sure that stuff gets to us,” Paula said. “We suffer through the same things as everyone else does—morning breath, bad hair days, being trapped in traffic, cancer, even torture and murder sometimes.”

“But we try to keep them in perspective as much as we can,” T.J. said.

“And it isn’t easy,” Liz said. “Make no mistake about that.”

“What helps us,” T.J. said, “is our understanding that many of the things we think of as bad are just tests that God gives us to help us grow and mature. And because God is always just, he never tests us unfairly by giving us a test we can’t pass.”

“I guess that sounds good in the abstract,” Jameson said. “I mean you see it everyday. The guy who keeps going out with the same type of girl who always trashes him. Crooks making the same mistakes over and over again. You know what I mean. It’s fine for those things. I can even see it in my own life. But it still doesn’t answer my question of how God can let all the terrible things we see every day happen to us if He loves us like every religion says He does?”

“Before we go any further, we need to establish something, or there’s no point to continuing this discussion. Do you believe in God? Do you believe that there is some kind of Supreme Being?”

“Yes. There are times when I’d like not to, but I can’t just say there isn’t one,” Jameson said.

“Me too, though sometimes I wish I didn’t,” Steve said. “It’s just that sometimes I think he took a walk, and other times I think he’s some kind of sadist.”

“So, would it be fair to say you don’t understand Him?”

“You got that right,” Steve said. “I don’t understand Him one bit.”

Jameson nodded his agreement emphatically.

“It may be small comfort, but you’re not supposed to. He is unknowable. The difference between God and us is greater than the difference between a virus and a human being.”

Steve smiled. “Liz used the analogy of a rock and a human. Trouble with that one was that I’ve know a lot of people who were more like rocks than humans.”

That brought a chuckle from Paula. “I couldn’t agree more. I’ve spent half of my life trying to keep a lot of those rocks healthy.”

“And I’ve spent most of my career trying to put them in her care,” Jameson added.

T.J. sat back on the couch and relaxed with the chuckles that rippled through the group. “Okay, why do bad things happen to us? That we are tested is one answer, and we know it has some validity because we have seen evidence of that in our own lives and the lives of those around us. Historically the question has been phrased more like, why do bad things happen to good people, and it has vexed mankind for millennia. The story of Job in the Old Testament was, in fact, one attempt to deal with this question. In Job’s time, the idea was that good men were rewarded by God in this life, and bad men were punished, but this didn’t square with the reality people saw around them. As a way of explaining this discrepancy, God was portrayed as allowing Satan to test a good man on what was essentially a bet. I don’t think it satisfied a lot of people because a new concept, that one’s reward or punishment came after death, caught on and spread rapidly throughout Christianity, based on Jesus’ references to getting our reward in Heaven. The problem is, I don’t think we ever really got rid of the old idea so much as we kind of combined it with the new one. At any rate, the one constant has been that the bad things that happen to you are always been seen as some kind of punishment. Bahá’u’lláh’s explanation, which harkens back to Job in some ways, is simple and sensible, and whatever else I believe about God, the one thing that seems abundantly clear is that He is sensible and rational. It is our lack of understanding that makes Him seem capricious or irrational.”

“I have to agree with that,” Steve said. “Like I said, there is just too much evidence that there is a God to deny His existence rationally. The natural world is too well-ordered to be accidental.”

“Okay. Now, I think there’s something else here that we haven’t really looked at. There’s an assumption that bad things aren’t supposed to happen to us, that God is supposed to protect us from harm. There’s an attitude that if there is a God, it’s His job to make the world to our liking.

We've decided that our lives should be free of pain, frustration, and any unhappiness and it's God's fault if they aren't."

"What you describe kinda sounds like Heaven," Jameson said, "or at least, what I was taught Heaven was supposed to be like. You know, everything is wonderful, no troubles, no worries, nothing bad ever happens to you."

"Yeah," Manny said.

John Bell echoed his agreement as did several others in the room.

Paula was nodding along with the rest of them when it hit her. She had been spoiled for nearly half of her life by her relationship with Owen. At times he had been like a doting father, wise in the ways of the world and determined to keep her sheltered from its vicissitudes. The rest of the time he had simply been one of her closest and dearest friends. And then God had taken him from her. How dare He!

Her resentment had found an easy target in Browne, but he wasn't the real problem. She had handled people like him all her life with a lot more aplomb than she had shown in the last two weeks. The problem was within herself. She had been ready to retire for a long time. Owen had seen that. That's why he had suggested they go out together. And she had been too stubborn or too proud or too scared—too something—to take his advice. If anything, she owed Browne a vote of thanks. Without him, she would have stayed there forever, while her anger and frustration with the place grew steadily. Eventually she would inevitably make some huge mistake or keel over like Owen. All because she didn't want her life to change, even if it was for the better.

A smile creased her lips and she nodded as she became aware of what T.J. was saying.

"...but isn't heaven supposed to be our reward after living a good life? So then, why on earth should we expect to have it now while we're living this good life?"

"We shouldn't, if things are as you say," Jameson said. "And I have to say that that is what I was taught in Sunday School. Live a good life and your reward is in Heaven."

"You know, this attitude that we shouldn't experience anything bad is a very recent one. I believe it is a myth that we, in our arrogance, created for ourselves. And that, I think, is what humility is truly all about. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that God rewards us with tests, that we should look forward to them and be grateful to God for giving them to us. He doesn't promise us bliss and unending joy without suffering. He tells us to rejoice in our tests, that they are His mercy to us."

"Your talking about a positive attitude," Steve said.

"I suppose you could think of it that way, but it's much more than merely thinking positively. I think there are two kinds of misfortunes that befall us. There are the tests God gives us, and there are the consequences of our mistakes, our inadvertent or deliberate violation of God's laws, if you will. If you step off a cliff, you fall. That's the law of gravity. You broke it. You suffer the consequences. It's not God being vindictive or failing to save you from your own ignorance, stupidity, or arrogance because he doesn't care, or took a hike, or is dead. You screwed up, now you pay for it."

"So, if I understand you correctly," Jameson said, "you're saying that the bad things that happen to us are either deserved because we broke one of God's laws; or they are tests he has given us and therefore aren't really bad things at all. Maybe we should just look upon them like a math test."

"If we approached each test with the attitude that we can learn something from the experience, that we can grow from it, and that we will get help with it if we just ask for it,

because God never abandons us or tests us beyond our capacity, then we hopefully would be glad that he thought enough of us to give us the opportunity to prove ourselves.”

“Okay. I can sort of go along with all that. But what about a baby who’s killed in a drive by shooting? What test could God possibly be giving it?”

“It isn’t being tested. It died as the result of someone breaking one of God’s laws. That doesn’t lessen the tragedy of it. If anything, it makes it even more tragic because it is preventable, not by God, but by us. By how we live our lives and by how we affect the lives of others. Making it God’s fault is just our very human way of shifting the responsibility from ourselves to Him.”

“So you’re saying to God doesn’t control everything,” Jameson said.

“That is correct. He has told us that He has granted us what is often called Free Will. The ability to disobey Him, to reject Him, to deny His very existence if we choose to. He has done this so that we can grow as spiritual beings. He wants us to obey Him of our own free will. If He controlled everything, we would not have free will, we would not have the capacity to choose, and, therefore, the capacity to learn. We would just be His robots.”

“So the horror that surrounds us is the price we pay for God’s gift of free will?” Steve asked.

“The horror that surrounds us is the price we pay for refusing to obey Him. We bring it upon ourselves by refusing to accept His laws. As more of us bring our lives into accord with His laws, there are fewer left to disobey them. Ultimately we know that God will prevail. We know it will be difficult and that it will take time because mankind has always been stubborn and rebellious, but we know it will happen because God has promised to establish His kingdom on earth. And history has shown that God has never broken a promise.”

“You people still truly amaze me,” Jameson said. “I’m not sure I could ever reach that level of faith. You say you suffer the same as everyone else, but it still seems to me like it doesn’t get to you like it does other people.”

“Oh, it does. We just don’t let it show,” Manny said with a broad grin. “That’s our real secret. Sorry, T.J., but he’s got a right to know. It’s like this. Saving the world is tough, but you can’t let it get you down. Know what I mean? You gotta just keep pluggin’ away at it or else the whole world’ll collapse and it’ll be all your fault. Can’t let that happen.”

Jameson burst out laughing, then Steve, then T.J. and Paula, then the rest of them as though they were doing the wave at a soccer match.

“So that’s the secret, huh?” Steve said.

T.J., regained control of himself and said, “Let me say this and then we’ll call it a night because it’s getting late and we have to go. You don’t have to be perfect, or even some kind of spiritual Samurai who shows no fear or pain, to be a Bahá’í. All you have to do is believe that Bahá’u’lláh is the Manifestation of God for this age, this time in mankind’s history, or, as Mr. Bell might think of it, the return of Jesus Christ in the Glory of the Father. If you recognize this and accept it, then you are a Bahá’í in your heart. Now, all you have to do to put that belief into action is declare your recognition and acceptance to the Bahá’ís. As your faith deepens and your knowledge grows, you will find yourself wanting to conduct your life in a way that would please Bahá’u’lláh. It’s a process, not an accomplishment. A process that can bring you incredible joy and serenity, regardless of what is going on around you. ’Abdu’l-Bahá, likened it to the sea. Above, storms can rage and roil the surface, while in the depths all is calm and serene, untouched by the commotion above.”

“Thank you,” Jameson said. “The answers you’ve given me weren’t the ones I expected, but they were ones I needed to hear. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“That goes for me too,” Steve said, “but I think it’s time I quit stalling and took some action. Liz told me that most Bahá’ís in this country join the Faith by signing something you call a declaration card.”

“That’s right,” T.J. said. “Though it’s not obligatory, it is the simplest way for us to enroll you in the Faith.”

“You got one handy?”

Jack handed him the card and a pen, while Sylvia slid a book into his hand to sign on.

T.J. took the card, signed the back as Secretary, to officially accept Steve’s declaration on behalf of the Assembly, and then crossed the room and took Steve’s hand in both of his.

“Welcome, my friend, to the greatest adventure in the history of mankind.”

Chapter Fifteen

Preacher

Distant shouts echoed throughout the first floor, growing louder and more distinct as Paula walked into the Dispensary and said hello to Dave.

“You’re all going to Hell!” The voice rasped as though its owner had spent far too long pounding a brimstone pulpit. “God has condemned you to everlasting perdition!”

“I’ll take care of this, Dave. He’s mine now anyway,” Paula said, pointing at the clock which read midnight exactly. Dave nodded absently from his seat at the desk, barely raising his head to acknowledge Paula’s statement.

At the door, Paula met two deputies who were struggling to control a gaunt man with rabid eyes and wild gray hair in filthy chinos, a disintegrating sweatshirt, and mismatched work boots. Behind them stood Deputy Blake.

“Let’s take him straight to Restraint,” Paula said. “No point in trying to get anything done in here.”

She turned right and followed the three deputies down the hall. Tony Longbrake, the deputy on the right, called the man “Preacher.” Troy Longbrake, the deputy on the left and Tony’s twin brother, echoed the name, sometimes completing his brother’s instructions to the inmate. Blake walked one pace behind the threesome. Silently, Paula followed them all, a half pace behind on the right, bothered by the feeling that she was missing something here. Something about Preacher tugged at her, but she couldn’t identify it.

None of them had noticed the change in Dave when Preacher had appeared at the door. He had taken a quick glance at the prisoner, then froze, eyes wide in shock. He stared straight ahead, unseeing, his face as pale as his pristine white lab coat, a fine sheen of perspiration spreading rapidly across his forehead and upper lip.

Paula, the one most likely to have noticed the change, hadn’t seen it because her back was to him, and she never turned around before taking Preacher to Medical Restraint.

Preacher struggled all the way to the door of the padded cell. They lined up across the door, Blake beside Troy and Paula beside Tony. As Tony fumbled with the key, Preacher loudly commended his soul to God, and went limp. Taken by surprise, the twins relaxed their grip so as not to hurt their charge. As soon as their grip loosened, Preacher stomped on Troy’s foot, whirled around, wrenched free of Tony’s grasp, and pushed him backwards. Troy, bent over his injured foot, trapped Blake in the narrow corridor, preventing him from reaching Preacher or protecting Paula, the only person between the prisoner and the freedom he sought.

Still trying to put her finger on what bothered her about Preacher, she had paid little attention to the deputy’s routine handling of him.

“Out of my way harlot!”

Paula snapped out of her daze in time to dodge a huge, bony hand aimed at her face. She backpedaled as rapidly as she could, afraid to risk turning around and losing her footing until she was out of the narrow passage. At the entrance to the corridor a pair of strong hands grabbed her from behind and pulled her sideways just as the crazed sermonizer lunged for her. He lost his balance and fell heavily to the concrete, knocking the wind out of himself.

The twins landed on him seconds later with a great deal less concern for his physical well-being than they had shown earlier. Blake looked like he wanted to add to the pile and then thought better of it. He had had enough of this Three Stooges act.

Looking over her shoulder at her rescuer, Paula said “Thanks, Mace. Your timing was impeccable.”

“You okay?”

“Fine, thanks.”

Mace helped the twins stand their prisoner up and Paula took a quick look at him. Determining that he had not suffered any obvious injuries, she said “You can tuck him in now.”

Using an extremely firm grip, they marched the prisoner into the cell. The same size as the Med Iso cells, its floor, walls, and the inside surface of the door were covered by two inches of cloth-sheathed rubber padding.

The fall seemed to have taken the fight out of the man, but they took no chances. Once inside, all four deputies stretched the man out prone and removed his clothing. In the early years of the jail’s operation, they had let prisoners placed in the Rubber Room wear a jumpsuit. It hadn’t taken them long to learn that people despondent enough, and/or psychotic enough, to require this extreme level of safety provision, had no problem with using their clothing to hurt themselves. More often than not, they ripped off their clothing and shredded it. So the decision had been made that they would be stripped and given a pair of boxer shorts for modesty’s sake. The boxers frequently got shredded anyway, but at least they offered little in the way of weapons of self-destruction.

Preacher started a symphony of imprecations and damnations without any physical resistance. While he shrieked that their defilement condemned them all to everlasting hellfire, Paula quickly looked him over. She found no injuries, judged his age to be about sixty, observed his unwashed, and obviously psychotic state, and determined that nothing further could be done for him at the moment.

The deputies pulled a pair of jail issue boxer shorts over the now quiescent man’s cadaverous legs and left the cell. Mace slammed the door shut, then pulled on it to make sure the automatic locking bolt had caught. It had.

Mace said he’d get the name and other information from Reception and take care of putting the door card in place. The guard station would phone her with the information for her log.

Paula returned to the Dispensary to get report, now fully concentrating on the things she needed to accomplish. Dave, recovered from his shock, gave her a terse report which underscored her sense that he was in a hurry to leave. While it was a little unusual for him, she didn’t give it much thought, figuring he was just tired from pulling two shifts in twenty-four hours. She also had a lot to do and wanted to get to it.

Dave took up his beautifully carved cane and left. She began putting medication bottles on the counter. As she worked her way through the preparations for filling the med envelopes, she thought about the evening’s Fireside and how it had helped to confirm in her mind the correctness of her decision to retire. She’d had her own way in the jail for a very long time. The realization that she had become resentful had surprised her because she had always thought of herself as the essence of cooperation and good will. It bothered her more than a little to realize that she wasn’t as much of a paragon as she had come to believe herself to be. She had become complacent in her role as the most trusted nurse in the jail, unconsciously assured by her tenure that she was infallible. Yet she had not ever run things here. It had just seemed like it. And she had turned down that job in no uncertain terms when it had been offered to her. Still, as she

looked back on the last few weeks, she realized she had been acting as though it had been taken away from her.

Talk about irrational, she thought, shaking her head slowly as she set out two more bottles.

For most of her life, she had defined herself as a nurse. It had been much more than simply an occupation, a job she went to out of economic necessity. Giving it up, she now realized, threatened her perception of herself, of her worth, both as a human being, and to the society she had always sought to serve. Wanting to know what she would do with her time had been more than mere fear of boredom. Retirement threatened her most cherished image of herself as a servant of humanity.

Work in the service of humanity had been elevated to the status of worship by Bahá'u'lláh. This principle had been such a fundamental part of her personality, that she hadn't consciously considered it until this moment. The work she did here in the jail was a service to some of the most wretched human beings imaginable, but she hadn't been performing it with the same sense of satisfaction as she once had. It had become a burden, something she had to do, not something she wanted to do or enjoyed doing. She knew that this change had to have affected her performance, which meant that her work had to have become a more perfunctory form of worship. And that was unacceptable. While she might, with a great deal of effort, change her attitude towards her work, she doubted it would be worth the effort. Finding another way to serve made much more sense, and she had no doubt that God would guide her to it. All she had to do was be open to new possibilities and recognize the one He had chosen when it appeared before her. Most importantly for her peace of mind, she knew she would not be embarking on this new course alone. Not only would she have T.J., but she would have the Assembly's invaluable advice and counsel.

She decided then and there that she would do everything she could to see to it that she and Browne parted amicably. She doubted they could ever be friends, though stranger things had happened, but she would do whatever she could to remove the hostility between them. With that decision made, she felt a great weight lift from her soul.

Anger, she reflected, might be a necessary primitive survival emotion, but it exacts a terrible price. And that is something else I'm going to work on a lot more, too.

The first task in achieving her goal would be writing her letter of resignation. It had to be more than the "thanks for the memories" type of statement she had planned. It had to bind old wounds and bridge the divide that separated them. Even if it meant a day's delay in turning it in, it would be worth it to lessen the discord between them.

A shout interrupted her thoughts and drew Paula to the door. Loud voices in this area of the jail were uncommon, especially at this hour of the night. Another shout gave her enough reason to check on its source.

She locked up and trotted down the hall towards Med Iso where the shouts had come from. As she neared the Medical Restraint, they grew more frequent and more enraged, and allowed her to identify that area as their source. Breaking into a run, she reached the corridor that wrapped around the padded cells and heard a sharp, whacking sound just before each new yell. Now, she also heard another voice, lower in pitch and so choked with rage that the words were unintelligible. She reached the open door and stopped, transfixed by the sight of David Thompson beating Preacher with his cane.

Paula rushed in and grabbed Dave's cane as he swung it over his shoulder. The cane slid out of his hand so easily that she nearly lost her balance. She threw the stick into a corner and opened her mouth to tell him to get out. Dave pivoted a quarter turn and ran the cane's unleashed

blade through her left shoulder before she could expel the first syllable. If she had been of average height, it would have pierced her lung, if not her heart. Instead, and because she was leaning forward, the sword's point entered just above the collarbone, skidded down the outside surface of her shoulderblade and emerged just below her bra strap.

Paula had never felt anything like it before, not even in childbirth. Her shoulder exploded into a fireball of searing pain. Nausea drove her stomach to clear itself of the remnants of Sylvia's addictive chocolate chip cookies. As she sank to the floor and a merciful loss of consciousness, she mused that this must be what woofing your cookies meant.

Before he could identify who had unsheathed his sword, Dave felt a bony hand on his shoulder and spun back to face the object of twenty years of pent up rage and loathing.

"So, Tommy, you finally grew some hair," Preacher said. Dave brought his sword around, but the crazed man snared his wrist in a vice-like grip. "Never thought you had it in you. Always mewling and whimpering like a sick puppy. At least now you're acting like a man. We'll have to see just how much of a man you are."

Dave Thompson's step-father pulled his fist back to hit his prey in the gut, but Dave had been in this position many times before and knew what to expect despite the passage of time. He twisted so the blow slid by him and Duane's hand smashed into the padded wall. In the same move Dave rammed his left elbow into his step-father's solar plexus and pivoted away from him, tearing loose of his grip.

The old man sank to his knees, clutching his stomach as he tried to breathe. He looked up malevolently, yet strangely, respectful. "You've learned a couple of things, boy," he gasped as his breath began to return. "Good. That'll make this just that much more fun."

Eyes burning with a lifetime of hatred, Dave took a step back and raised the point of his sword. In a high-pitched voice, strangely reminiscent of the boy who had once cowered before this monster, he yelled, "You killed my sister! You killed my mother! And now I'm going to kill you!"

"What's going on here?" Mace asked, door card in his hand. He saw the sword in Dave's hand and yelled, "Drop that, Thompson! Now!" as he strode across the threshold into the cell.

Thompson whirled and drove the blade deep into Mace's stomach with the suddenness of a scorpion. Mace grabbed for the blade, but only managed to abet his own evisceration and shred his hands. Duane, taking advantage of the distraction, stood and rushed Dave. The swordsman flicked his blade through Mace's hands and across Duane's chest in a single, swift motion that looked as choreographed as a scene from a ninja movie. Both men sank to the floor like slashed wine sacks.

Paula, head swirling as consciousness returned, rolled onto her right side and groaned.

Thompson turned and saw her curled up on the floor, vomit next to her head and a blood red bud on her shirt. Rushing to her, he grabbed her left arm and yanked her upright. She screamed as the sliced muscles and ligaments separated, letting the ball of her upper arm slip free of its socket. She passed out again, fresh blood blossoming across her shirt.

Deputy Clancy was passing in front of the guard station on his way home when he heard her bone-chilling scream echo off Med Iso's concrete walls. He went to the pass-through window and yelled at his relief to hit the panic button. Someone was being killed back in Med Iso.

Sixty-one years old and afflicted with arthritis, he longed to go back there the way an old Dalmatian feels the urge to follow a fire engine. He knew, though, that he wouldn't be able to do anything other than add his name to the body count. That's why he was permanently assigned to

the guard station. Had it not been for two ex-wives sucking him dry, he would have retired long ago.

No matter. Booted feet were already pounding down the escalators. He would have to be content with pointing them in the right direction.

Paula's scream tore the poorly patched hole in Thompson's fragile psyche wide open. The shock of seeing Duane after all these years had been compounded when he had opened the door to this room and Duane had rammed his head into the unpadded doorframe. Their fight had returned him to those days when he had lived in unremitting fear of his step-father's disapproval. That appalling night, when Tommy's craven paralysis had caused the two most important people in his life to die, returned with a vividness and immediacy beside which the most compelling reality paled. Two decades of suppressed rage finally found release, and he rewrote the history that had destroyed his life.

This time he had conquered the paralysis his fear had once induced. Duane lay dying, blood spreading from the wounds he, little Tommy Thompson, had inflicted to save his sister. Melissa was hurt, but not dead. He had gotten to her in time. Gotten to her before Duane had been able to carry out his savage plan. He had slain the dragon!

Stampeding footsteps sounded through the halls, echoing another set of feet that had pounded to his door twenty years ago, and cut his exaltation short. The slip of a girl at his feet stirred, a soft moan escaping her lips. It wasn't over yet. The dragon had friends. He couldn't kill them all. They had to run. They had to find a place to hide. Quickly, Tommy reached down, grabbed his surrogate sister around the middle, and like a rag doll, carried her out of the room, stooping to pick up Mace's ring of jail keys on the way.

Between the two Rubber Room doors was a door similar to a ship's hatch. Tommy saw that only one key on the purloined ring could possibly fit the lock. He tried it and pulled the door open. Pushing Paula in ahead of him, he stepped through, pulling the door shut as the stampede skidded to a halt outside. He held his breath, as he had so many years before, and shivered, not from the chill of a remembered river's water, but from the thrill of having beaten the dragon and saved his sister.

He listened anxiously to the excited voices and waited for a key to snick into the hatch's lock. None came as the excited voices shouted their anger at the loss of their comrade. Then a new voice rose above the others and they hushed. This one spoke quietly and, though the words were indistinct, with unmistakable authority.

He may have killed the dragon, but another, more powerful one had sprung up in its place. Where was George? He could sure use his help right now. At least things were not as bad as they could have been. They had a safe place to hide. He just needed to figure out what to do next. He took a deep breath and turned around to check out his new cave.

Chapter Sixteen

Hide and Seek

Davies reached the Rubber Room a couple of minutes after the first contingent of deputies and issued orders to seal the jail, find the nurse, and call the paramedics. Blake moved off to carry out his instructions. The Longbrakes remained, at his orders, to carry out any further instructions.

He knelt beside Mace. Blood spread over the floor beside his balled body, his ashen face twisted in an unconscious grimace. Davies checked for breathing and a pulse the way Paula had taught him. He found faint forms of both. He then saw the deep, flaying lacerations on Mace's hands.

Blake returned to report that he had told Central Control to seal the jail and call for paramedics, and that the Dispensary was locked.

"She could be in the can, you know," Davies said. "Pound on the door! Get the keys if you have to and search it. If you don't find her, then notify Central that we have a potential hostage situation, and have him call the Captain. Then get back here and report."

Davies moved to the elderly looking prisoner and checked him as best he could with his limited first aid knowledge. The marks on his arms and back looked like the kind a nightstick made, except for the odd pattern on them. The bloody furrow running across his chest worried him. Something very sharp had made that as well as Mace's wounds, but what? A shank? If it was, it was the sharpest one he had ever seen. This thing had cut them up like a sushi knife.

Standing up, he walked around the two fallen men and looked down at the emesis, controlling the urge to puke that its smell provoked.

Now, who did that? Mace? Unlikely, he concluded. He's too far away to have been stabbed here, and then puked, and then fallen over there. Not with that hole in his gut. Besides, there's no blood here. The old man? Same thing, and he's even farther away.

He spied something in the corner and walked past the jabbering crowd of guards.

"Did Thompson leave yet?" Davies asked as he picked up the nurse's cane minus its top.

"I don't know," Tony said.

"Haven't seen him, though," Troy said.

"Troy! Find out. Now!" Davies snapped.

Troy hurried down the hall to a sentry phone and asked Central if Thompson had checked out yet. He returned a minute later to report that Thompson hadn't turned in his keys yet.

The distinctive rattle of the paramedic's gurney sounded in the hall outside and Davies ordered everyone out to make way for the paramedics. He answered their standard questions, which he had always felt could be answered by simply taking a look first, then left the room.

Blake returned out of breath. "She's not there. I had to get the keys. There's bottles on the counter and the medicine book is out. It looks like she got interrupted or something. I notified Central like you said."

Davies nodded and looked back at the puddle of vomitus. Then he looked closely at the cane in his hand. A thin triangular hole was centered in the top of the shaft. He couldn't tell how deep it went, but he would bet next month's salary it went most of the shaft's length.

“Listen up,” he called out to quiet the low rumble of voices exchanging uninformed opinions. “We’re looking for Paula and Thompson. Thompson is probably armed with a sword. He might be a hostage along with Paula, but I doubt it. Most likely he’s holding her hostage. In any case be very careful. Whoever did this took out three people. I can see him doing Paula and the old man, but Mace knew how to take care of himself. I don’t see Mace’s keys, so we’ll have to assume they’ve been taken as well. Return to your assigned areas and check everywhere. Don’t leave any door unopened, and lock every single one after you’ve checked it. Now go! All except you, Blake. You’ve just taken over for Mace. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Advise Sgt. Harris of the situation and tell him I want him to run the escape protocol. I’ll be up to talk with him as soon as we’re clear here.”

“You got it.”

Everyone moved off and Davies returned to the cell. “How’s he doing?” he said indicating Mace with a nod.

“Not good. Something gutted him like a fish. A big knife. Very sharp.” the paramedic said. He fit Mace with a pair of pneumatic pants that would force blood out of his legs and into his vital organs, thereby reducing the risk of shock. Then he bent to blow them up.

“How about a sword,” Davies said holding up the cane sheath.

Looking up between breaths, he said, “That could have done it. If it was sharp.”

“How’s the other one?”

The medic working on the old man turned and said, “Not as bad as it looks. He’s going to have a lot of bruising from the beating he took, but nothing’s broken that I can tell. The cut on his chest isn’t that deep. Whatever did it skidded across his ribs, but doesn’t seem to have penetrated them. It’ll take some stitches, but nothing vital was hit as far as I can tell.” He stood and took a closer look at the cane. “This might have made those marks. There are some funny patterns to them.”

“Yeah, I know. And you’re sure his chest isn’t that bad?”

“A few stitches and he should be fine.”

“Well, get them out of here as quick as you can. My nurse is missing.”

* * *

During all the uproar, Tommy had pulled out his penlight and directed its small beam around the new cave. Long dark strings of greasy soot hung from pipes running along the walls of the narrow passage. Fine, black flannel covered the concrete walls and floors, absorbing most of the light cast over it. He shined the light back along the corridor, but couldn’t see anything. He took a few cautious steps away from the door. Fuzz-encased pipes loomed across his course. One step closer and he could see that it marked a turn in the passageway. He returned to Paula.

Looping his arm around Paula, who had slid down the wall in an unconscious heap, he dragged her towards the turn in the tunnel and scuttled around the corner. Certain now that they were safe from detection, he set his burden down and turned back to check the hatch. He couldn’t see anything, but he could hear a great deal of activity—booted feet stomping over concrete, loud, but mostly unintelligible voices, a heavy door slamming shut, and finally, silence.

Paula came to while Thompson concentrated on his pursuers. The worst of the shock and nausea had passed. The pain in her shoulder had subsided to a powerful ache. She started to straighten herself and nearly passed out again when she unthinkingly tried to push herself up

with her left hand. A fresh wave of nausea and bitter bile choked off the scream that formed in her throat. After she cleared her mouth, she rolled gingerly to her right. Taking great care not to put any pressure on her damaged arm, she struggled to sit up.

Cradling her left arm in her lap, she scooted back a couple of inches so she could lean against the black soot on the wall and assess the damage. She diagnosed a left shoulder dislocation with severe collateral trauma from the sword thrust. She wasn't coughing up any blood. In fact, she wasn't coughing at all, which probably meant he hadn't punctured her lung. The back of her shoulder felt sticky and hurt like someone had trampled it in hobnailed boots, but she didn't feel like she was bleeding strongly anywhere. So, probably, no arteries had been hit. Amazing. Now, if she could just get her left arm secured in some way to keep it from hanging or flapping, she would feel a whole lot better about her prospects.

* * *

Davies pushed the Rubber Room door into the frame forcefully and tugged on it. It had locked tight. That would preserve the scene as much as possible for the forensics people. He headed for the housing area and Sgt. Harris' lair, confident that Blake would leave no lock unturned, no room, cell, closet, or cupboard unopened and thoroughly explored. He was that kind of deputy, and someday he would make an extraordinary detective because of it—if he overcame his arrogance about being a cop.

In Housing, he laid out the situation for Harris in detail. Harris had done a good job of organizing the men and the search as Davies knew he would. He might be a conceited pain in the neck, but he knew procedure and followed it like a map to the Holy Grail. Which was why, despite whatever he and Captain Hill thought of him, Harris would unswervingly rise in the department's bureaucracy. Innovative brilliance was rarely rewarded in organizations like this. Plodding, slavish adherence to the manual, regardless of its appropriateness to the situation, was.

Which is why governments routinely have people of mediocre ability in positions of responsibility and authority, Davies reflected. And military style organizations such as this one are frequently the most tenacious upholders of that unwritten rule.

While all this ran through Davies' mind, he watched Harris field sentry phone reports from the men as they cleared one area after another of their prescribed search patterns. He had to admit one thing, galling though it might be. Harris was doing a better job than he would have done. Davies wanted to be out there snatching doors open and shining his four cell Magalite into all the dark spaces. He hated sitting and waiting. It was one of the reasons he had stayed in patrol so long, even after making sergeant. In fact, he wouldn't even be a lieutenant now if he hadn't been forced into it by the Old Man before his retirement.

Harris punched the hold button and put the phone in its cradle. "Captain Hill's here. He's on 425 and wants to talk to you."

Davies thought: And this is the other reason I didn't want these bars. "Yes, sir. Davies here."
"Tell me what we've got."

Davies related what they knew, what they suspected, and what they were doing. Hill expressed his approval and said he would stay out of the way for the moment in Davies' office, but he expected regular reports.

"You'll get them. Wish our radios worked in here."

"The new types would, but no money for them. Just have to do this the old-fashioned way."

"Yes, sir."

He returned the phone to its cradle and looked at the pad Harris was using to keep track of the search. The jail was divided into alphanumeric sections. Harris had written all of them down. As each one reported clear he drew a line precisely through the middle of the notation. As more and more sections earned that precise line, a cold emptiness began to form in Davies' stomach. Third floor cleared first, reporting no finds of any kind except a lot of very angry inmates whose sleep had been disturbed. No inmates were missing either, according to the quick count Harris had asked each housing area deputy to conduct in the course of his search.

Davies mentally doffed his hat to Harris for that one. It was the right thing to do, and he should have thought of it. He would have to thank him when he had a chance.

Fourth floor cleared, then second. That left first, the roof, and the basement—a rabbit warren if ever there was one. The roof, which Davies thought should have cleared first because there were so few places to hide up there, finally got a line through it.

“How come the roof took so long?”

Harris looked up at Davies. “It’s essentially inaccessible so I gave it a lower priority. We don’t have enough men to search everywhere at once. Housing is clear. Mind if I send some men down to help in the basement?”

“Good idea. Do it,” Davies said. “Good call on the quick count, too. No one’s missing?”

Harris shook his head as the phone rang. He mumbled something into the phone, hung up, and turned back to Davies. “That was Blake. Operations is clear. He’s heading for Medical.”

* * *

“I think they’re all gone, Melissa. Have to wait a few more minutes to make sure, then we’ll get out of here.”

A chill grabbed Paula’s heart and squeezed it at the sound of Thompson’s voice. It was so childlike. High pitched, almost shrill, with little of the resonance an adult developed, she could have sworn the person standing beside her was a boy of nine or ten had she not been able to see him in the backwash from his penlight. Even then, it would have taken very little imagination to superimpose the sweaty, dirt-streaked face she saw upon that of the child she had just heard.

He’s regressed, she thought. Now what?

Though she had been a nurse for most of her life, she had never studied psychology or psychiatry any more than was absolutely necessary. To her it was a confusing bunch of gobbledygook. It was the one field where every expert seemed to be right, yet none of them seemed to be able to agree on much of anything.

Throughout her years as a nurse, she had relied on simple common sense, well-developed observation skills, an intuitive ability to put the pieces of a person’s health puzzle together, and respect for the individual to get her through the night and help her patients. She knew the definitions for the major psychoses, confusing as they were, but she had found them useless when confronted by the real thing. All she could tell was that the person was crazy, out of touch with reality, living in a fantasy world, and/or scared out of their wits most of the time. It didn’t matter to her what the technical name of their affliction was, they were messed up and needed help. To get it, she sent them to the county psych unit.

Now, she was faced with someone she couldn’t send out, and she had no firm idea how she should deal with him.

Should I go along with his regression, she asked herself, or should I refuse and confront him with reality? Was there a middle course?

Surprisingly, she wasn't angry with Dave. Yes, he had stabbed her and ripped her arm out of its socket. Maybe it was that she hurt too much to be angry, though she doubted that. A better explanation might be that there was no malice in any of the things he had done to her. She wasn't his enemy. If anything, she was angry at herself for jumping into this. Not that she could have stood by idly, waiting for a bunch of deputy's to come storming in while Dave beat that old man. Now that she thought about it, she did wish she'd had enough sense to bat the sentry phone off the wall on her way. Might have saved her a whole lot of pain and trouble.

Mostly though, she kicked herself for not paying more attention in psych. Just went to prove, once again, that Bahá'u'lláh was right. No surprise there. He had admonished His followers to learn as much as they could about everything they could because one never knew when one might need that knowledge in an emergency. And this certainly constituted an emergency. That had been one of the reasons she had made such an effort to learn the jail's procedures, despite being kidded at first by Owen that she actually wanted to be deputy but couldn't measure up—literally. Then he had seen the difference in how easily she had been able to get the job done compared to his bullish ways. After that, he had not only learned the procedures himself, but saw to it that they were included in every nurse's orientation.

"You okay, Melissa?" Tommy asked.

Melissa? Who's that? Play along. "My arm's hurt."

"Real bad?"

"Pretty bad. I think it's dislocated." She had debated mentioning the stab wound but decided not to press her luck.

"Everything'll be okay. I'll get you out of here real soon. I'm going to make sure they're all gone and then we'll go. Don't be afraid. I'll be right back."

Tommy went down the corridor to the hatch and listened intently. Nothing. As quietly as possible, he pulled the key ring out of his pocket and found the key that had opened the door to let them in here. Then he shined his light on the door to find the keyhole. There was none.

A cold sweat broke out on his brow and his stomach turned over. He brushed the black flannel-like covering off the door, banging his hand on a box welded in place about where the lock should be. He rubbed the box clean. There had to be a keyhole in it.

He rubbed it again, shined his light on it, and checked every millimeter of the casing. No keyhole. No hole of any kind. Must be the wrong place. He brushed more of the greasy, black crud off, scraping his hand on bolts and rough weld spatters, but found no keyhole.

He pushed on the door and it rattled softly in the jam, but didn't open. The box he thought held the lock had a counterpart on the jam that overlapped the door's box by about an inch. There was no way to jimmy it, no way to force the lock's bolt out of the jam. They were trapped.

In his rising panic, Tommy almost began pounding on the door. He stopped himself and pushed the panic down. He couldn't give in to it. He had his sister to think of. He would just have to find another way out of these caverns. Even if they died in here, it would be better than the way he knew they would die if his step-father's friends found them.

Chapter Seventeen

Counting Down

Blake had opened every door outside the Dispensary and, after checking the room or closet behind it thoroughly, locked it again. In the Dispensary itself, he had opened every cabinet and door, and then relocked them. Still nothing. He saw no sign that anyone other than Paula had disturbed the area. With a sigh he picked up the phone and reported the Dispensary clear.

He then went back to the the Medical Isolation cells. These were not going to be happy campers. Most of them were back here for various and sundry forms of mental illness. Very few inmates needed isolation for medical reasons.

Taking each room in order, he turned on the light, opened the door, and stepped inside. His apology for disturbing the person was usually lost in an avalanche of verbal abuse. When it wasn't, it was met with sullen silence. He bent down, shined his flashlight in the space under the bed, and exited as quickly as possible. After locking the door, he turned out the lights and moved on to the next cell.

As he worked his way around the twelve cells, he checked the the supply closet. Negative. Then he checked the fire stairwell door. Locked. He couldn't open it because his set of keys, identical to the one Mace had carried, had no keys that could open a door to the perimeter of the building. Finished with room twelve, he almost skipped the two Rubber Rooms because he knew they had been locked and the forensic team had not yet arrived. But Davies had said every door, so he went back there.

* * *

While Tommy listened at the door and fought his panic, Paula took stock of her situation. Her first step in that process was to quietly recite over and over one of her favorite prayers.

Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!

She used this prayer whenever she faced some kind of trial or difficulty. In the past few weeks, it had become a daily necessity instead of a once or twice a week custom.

As she finished the ninth recitation, the calm she sought enveloped her, enabling her to consider the situation dispassionately, if not exactly serenely. First, her injuries, while not completely debilitating, were serious and precluded her taking any kind of strenuous action to escape her captor. Second, her captor didn't view himself as a captor, but as a savior. He seemed to believe that she was someone else. Melissa, whoever she was.

Which brought up the third point: Dave's regression. It seemed as complete as any a good hypnotist could produce. Probably better and more complete. So complete, in fact, that Dave no longer seemed to have his limp, though it was hard to judge that accurately in this stygian place.

And that brought her back to the proper way to treat him. The only thing she could remember from some continuing education course she had taken on handling out of control psychotics was that you never went along with their delusions. You always brought them back to reality. Which was fine, she thought, if you were working in a psych unit, but not much help in this situation.

The only thing that made sense to her right now was dealing with him on his own level. Confronting him with reality seemed not only pointless, but very likely dangerous. Besides, she didn't have the strength to fight with him, much less the inclination. She just wanted them to get through this as easily as possible. It might not be an approved psychological treatment methodology, but it was definitely a good survival technique, and that was a lot more important right now than therapizing.

So, she decided, for now I'll just follow Dave's lead till he regains his senses or they find us.

With that decision, the serenity she sought began to infuse her as she realized that they would be found. It was as inevitable as sunrise. The only question was what condition she would be in when the inevitable happened. She determined then that she would do whatever she could to improve their chances of being discovered as quickly as possible and minimize further damage to herself and Dave.

That left Bob Davies and the department's response as her only other concern. If it wasn't already obvious to them, it soon would be that she was missing and that Dave hadn't checked out. When they found Mace, that pathetic old man, and the cane, they would know that Dave had a sword in here. And that did not bode well for him.

The deputies didn't like him. Their list of reasons ran longer than a thirty-year con's rap sheet, but the top reason on everyone's list was, of course, that he was Browne's friend. He might have been able to overcome that obstacle if he had made some attempt to develop a working relationship with the deputies, but he hadn't. Instead, he had adopted the same attitude as his mentor, which was that law enforcement people were stupid bullies and boorish louts. Implicit in that attitude was the corollary belief that he and Browne were inherently superior to the deputies. Dave's meticulous, even prissy ways merely served to reinforce the enmity they felt towards him. As a result, neither group had tried to overcome their own prejudices to get to know the other. Now, of course, as far as the deputies were concerned, their attitude had been justified.

They would conduct a search with the single-minded thoroughness of starving wolves in winter. She knew it would be thorough. Bob would see to that. When they had eliminated all the obvious places, then they would look in the less obvious ones. Sooner or later, they would be left with only one place—the plumbing tunnels.

How Bob would explore them, she could not predict. He could flood them with men, or send in just one or two. There was no way to tell because there was no precedent for this. They had hostage prevention plans and hostage negotiation plans, of course, but they had all been designed to deal with the threat of an inmate taking someone hostage in the cells, or mess hall, or even the Dispensary. It had never entered anyone's mind that an inmate would even try to enter the tunnels with a hostage. It made no sense. But then no one had ever considered that a staff member would go nuts and take someone hostage either.

In her mind it didn't much matter what Bob did right now, or how he went about it. She was still a hostage, whether Dave thought so or not. In the end, she supposed, the outcome would depend upon whether he interpreted the deputies' actions as a threat or not.

How would Dave respond if Bob did send in a flood of deputies to flush him out? Like a nine or ten year old or like an adult? Dave was a child right now. For all she knew, he had always been one. Just one who had become pretty good at playing grownup. So, how did a kid act when threatened?

She thought back to how her son, Chip, had responded to threats. Of course, that wasn't necessarily much of a guide. He had been raised as a third generation Bahá'í. From birth he had

been loved, treated with respect, and taught to consider others needs before his own. He would be incapable of responding as Dave had.

When Chip, whose given name was Steven, had been threatened by a schoolyard bully in the second grade, he had first been tempted to fight. Her own temper having always been a trial for both herself and her parents, it came as no surprise that her son might have one. Her seven-year old son had then said he remembered something his father had told him about bullies. They were frequently cowards, and they were often more scared than you were. If you looked for a way to let them walk away a victor in their own eyes, you could usually avoid the fight. So Chip had agreed with the bully that he was a wimp and pointed out that beating him up wouldn't prove anything. In fact it might lower the bully's standing because the fight wouldn't be a real challenge. It would be like beating up a girl. Paula remembered wincing at that, and T.J.'s wink at her in response. The bully had accepted this reasoning with a friendly punch on the shoulder and a warning to stay out of his way. He then walked off with his buddies, reputation still intact. T.J. had congratulated him on his handling of the situation and called him a chip off the old block. From that day on, Steven had been Chip.

Dave she realized, could not have experienced anything like that. To have resulted in this spontaneous regression, his childhood must have been one long trauma, relieved only by brief moments of neglect. The only lesson she could draw from Chip's childhood was that if pressed, Dave would probably fight. He had to be frightened, most likely terrified. And one thing she had learned from her years in the jail was that terrified people reacted violently to opposition. Occasionally the violence was directed at themselves. Most often, though, it was directed at the threat. When they felt trapped or cornered, they almost never cowered. They fought with a ferocity that was beyond all reason and out of all proportion to the situation and the threat.

Bob would have no idea what was going on other than that someone he didn't like much had taken hostage someone he liked very much. She suspected Bob's reaction would probably be to flood the tunnels with men and take Thompson down hard. She had to find some way of telling him what the real situation was.

She had her spiral pad, her pen, and her penlight. She fumbled them out of her pockets, stuffed the penlight between her teeth and quickly wrote a note. She tore it off the pad as silently as possible and then began considering where to put it. She needed to put it where they would find it quickly, yet not so conspicuously that Dave would spot it.

She had no doubt that Dave would move them deeper into the tunnels. She had no idea of their layout, but she knew they were extensive and ran all over the jail inside the security perimeter. She also knew that they served as the ventilation system for all the inmate housing areas, which explained the breeze that contributed to the chill she felt.

As she put her pad, pen, and light away, her hand brushed against her badge.

Of course, she thought. That'd work.

She removed the badge and ran the clasp pin through the paper. She set the two on the floor behind her butt with the badge on top to hold the paper down. She hoped that as they searched this area, their flashlights would reflect off the brass. If the opportunity arose, she would try to scoot the message into the entry corridor with her foot as they left. If not, then she would just have to hope they saw it when they checked in here.

She heard Dave hustling back to her and assumed the posture she'd had when he left. He rounded the corner, turned around, and squatted down to peek at the hatch. She heard the key clatter in the lock and Dave snapped his head back.

A flashlight beam roved around the wall that led into their corridor, then withdrew, probably to explore the other walls. She heard a grunt, and then the hatch slammed shut.

Dave whispered, "We've got to get away from here. They'll be back."

"How do you know that?"

"There's no way they coulda missed the way I smeared up the back of that door trying to find the keyhole. Why ain't there no keyholes on the inside a these doors? It don't make sense. And what's this stuff all over everything in here?" he asked, pulling a greasy tendril off a pipe."

"Do you know where we are?"

"Some kinda building."

"Its a jail. We're inside the plumbing and ventilation conduits of a jail. That means there's policemen out there. They can help us."

"No!" Tommy exploded. "Don't you remember? He's one a them."

"Who is?"

"Duane."

* * *

Blake hurried to the nearest sentry phone and called Harris.

"They're in the plumbing tunnels."

"What? How? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I checked the Rubber Room hatch. The inside of the door's all smeared, there are footprints, and most important, there's a big smear of blood on the wall. They're in there all right. No question about it."

"Very well. Return to that hatch and stand guard. Do so quietly. Lt. Davies or I will contact you as soon as we've decided how to proceed."

"Yes, sir."

Harris faced Davies and related the gist of Blake's report. "So how many men do you want to go in there and from what points?"

"None till I check this out myself."

"But if they went in there, there's no way they could have gotten out. Let's just go get them and be done with it."

"You are forgetting one thing. He's got Paula. If we run a dozen men in there from all over the place, he's likely to panic. What're her chances then?"

"But he found a big blood smear on the wall. She's might be dead already."

Putting both hands on the arms of the sergeant's chair, Davies thrust his face into Harris' and growled, "She's alive. Understand? Until I see her dead body with my own eyes, till I can't feel her breath on my cheek and the pulse in her neck with my own fingers, she's alive."

"Yes, sir," Harris gulped. "Of course. So, how do you want to proceed?"

"First I'm going to run down there and check it out myself. Don't do anything or say anything until I contact you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. What about the Captain?"

"I will call him myself as soon as I've verified this. You stay here and monitor the basement teams."

"But there's no way down there through the tunnels."

“We don’t know they stayed in them. They could have gone in, not pulled the door all the way shut, and left. All we know is that they probably were in there. When everywhere else has been eliminated, then we’ll know they went in and stayed. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Davies realized he had come down too hard on Harris, and whether he had much respect for him as a cop or not, he had proven his worth in this crisis. “Look, Ben, you’ve done a good job here. Better than I would have done. Just see it through for me. Thanks.”

Three minutes later Davies opened the Rubber Room hatch as quietly as possible. He had taken the precaution of arming himself with one of the riot batons from Central. Unlike the baton policemen carried on patrol, this was a one-and-a-quarter inch diameter, three foot long, hardwood kendo stick. Its knurled handle was large enough to accommodate a two handed grip, and the shaft was fluted like a doric column. A thick rubber ring separated the handle from the shaft. It was a weapon with which Davies was thoroughly comfortable, having been an instructor in its use for many years.

Taking Blake’s flashlight, he scrutinized the corridor for any sign of them. All he found were the footprints and the blood smear. He stepped in and went to the smear to take a closer look.

The smear was three or four inches across and maybe a foot long. Who ever had made it had bled well, but not, to his experienced eye, profusely enough to leave any drips or puddles. In matters of blood, he had learned, a little went a long way.

He moved further into the corridor, checking not only the walls and floor, but the ceiling as well. Drain pipes ran along the walls about seven feet up. Above them, rigid metal conduit carried electrical wires. All were bolted to metal racks anchored to the concrete every four feet. The gunited ceiling ten feet up was covered by the same filth that coated everything else and absorbed the high intensity beam of the flashlight like a black hole. No one crouched up there, straddling the corridor by standing on the pipes like a ninja. He had doubted anyone would be, but experience had taught him to always check over his head.

At the junction with the other corridor, which was actually an ell, he held the baton in a defensive posture, stepped to the far wall, and slid along it till he had a clear view of the new corridor.

No one was there, but they had been. More blood on the wall, lots of footprints and scrapes in the greasy black flannel. He picked up the reflection of the badge immediately, but didn’t rush to it. First he checked the corridor as far back as he could, which was only about ten feet before it took a ninety degree right turn. The footprints clearly showed they had gone that way. Two big ones and two small. The small ones shuffled. He picked up the badge and read the note.

* * *

“Duane.”

Paula stared at him dumbly. *Who was Duane?* If the cast of Dave’s imaginary world got any bigger, it would qualify as an epic on the order of *War and Peace*.

“You know. Our step-father. The one who makes you cry at night.”

That’s who Preacher is. Now it all made sense.

Duane Biddle, she thought. I remember him. He was that creepy reserve deputy who used to harangue prisoners about being saved or going to Hell. I thought I’d heard Preacher’s voice before. Well, not the voice so much as the words and the way he said them. He disappeared twenty years ago on the night his wife and step-daughter were killed. According to his step-son,

who had somehow managed to escape, Duane had done the killing. And the step-son was called Tommy. But Tommy wasn't his real name. It was David! Dave Thompson must be Tommy all grown up. Well, not at the moment, but still twenty years older. No wonder Dave flipped when he saw Preacher.

Paula sat quietly while she put all the pieces together. This explained Dave's unreasonable disdain of the deputies, but it still didn't tell her what on earth could have possessed him to want to work here surround by people he couldn't tolerate. That Browne was involved seemed obvious, but not how. What kind of hold did he have over Dave, or Tommy as he seems to think of himself now?

Tommy reached down and took hold of her right arm. "C'mon, Sis, we gotta get going."

"Don't. Please. Let me get myself up. It won't hurt so much."

So that's it. I'm his sister. But wait a minute. She's dead. Oh no, now I'm really in trouble.

Tommy backed off and Paula gingerly tucked her left hand into her shirt, then cupped her left elbow with her right hand, and held her injured arm against her abdomen. Pulling her legs under her, she got to her knees and stood up slowly.

Even in the darkness, she could see her vision black out. Her head swam, and her stomach rebelled, but she refused to give in to their call for surrender. In a moment everything steadied and she looked at Tommy.

"Okay, I'm ready, but we're going to have to take it slowly. If I had some way to tie my arm in place, it would help a lot."

"We'll figure somethin' out later. We gotta get outta here now."

Recognizing there was no point in arguing with him, Paula accepted her role in his fantasy. They moved off, following Tommy's fading penlight as it showed them the way through the maze. With each turn, which really weren't that many, the penlight faded more, but the ambient light seemed to increase. At the fifth turn, she could actually see an opening in the wall.

Tommy tightened his grip around her waist and hurried them through the opening into the center of a giant cavern about twelve feet wide and at least a hundred long. Rings of widely spaced lights illuminated, if you could call it that, catwalks that encircled the cavern at different levels above them. Each one, Paula guessed, provided access for each floor's utilities.

Every surface was coated in the same substance as the tunnels through which they had walked. From the catwalks, ropes of the stuff hung like fuzzy stalactites. The smell, which both of them had noticed in the tunnels, but not been able to identify because they were too busy with other concerns, was overpoweringly familiar.

Then it hit her. *It's tobacco. That's what this stuff is. Stale cigarette smoke. Talk about your smoke-filled back rooms.*

This was what had happened to the smoke of millions of cigarettes when it had no place to go. It had congealed with the grease from thousands upon thousands of meals and been spread over every surface by the ventilation system like blown-in insulation.

In most buildings, special, replaceable screens cleansed the air of this form of pollution. Here, the entire ventilation system was the screen, and it couldn't be replaced. No wonder T.J. complained about her always smelling like an old ashtray when she came home from work. It had been such a familiar part of her work environment for so many years, like the low hum of electrical equipment, that she was rarely ever conscious of it.

In the center of the roof a dark, rectangular shape loomed. It clicked and then growled faintly. In a few seconds it's whirl settled into a steady sough that poured a strong breeze over their heads. They looked up and Paula explained what the stuff was.

“Wow,” Tommy said softly, “talk about your toxic waste dumps. Wonder how long it’d take to die of cancer breathin’ in here.”

“It is sort of like being inside a chain smoker’s lungs.”

“Yeah. You suppose there’s any way outta here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we can’t just sit here waitin’ for ’em to come in after us. And you know they will. We got to keep moving, checkin’ out ways to get free.”

“I’m too beat up to do that, Tommy. My arm’s killing me and it’s still bleeding a little. Why don’t you set me down someplace and go exploring on your own. All I’ll do is hold you up. When you find a way out, you can come and get me. How’s that?”

“I don’t know, Sis. I don’t think I should leave you.”

“I’ll be all right if we pick a nice, safe place.”

“I still don’t like it. What if we fix up a sling for you?”

“That’d help, but it’ll have to be tight to hold my arm in place and stop the bleeding.”

“No sweat we can use my coat,” he said, removing his lab coat.

With a few swift cuts of his sword, Tommy created a crude pressure bandage and tied it in place with strips cut from the sleeves. With the body of the coat, he fashioned a sling which he tied in place with a long, broad strip.

Paula marveled at the professional skill with which her ostensibly nine- or ten-year old brother bandaged her wounds. Tommy used all the skills she knew Dave possessed, yet seemingly remained unaware that they were extraordinary for a boy of his supposed age.

She didn’t mention the incongruity. She had a protector and she needed to maintain his trust and receive his protection. When the deputies caught up with them, as they inevitably would, she would need every bit of that trust to convince him to give himself up to them.

Stepping back, Tommy asked, “How’s that?”

“Very good. Still hurts a lot, but I don’t feel like my arm’s going to fall off now. Thank you, Tommy. Now, why don’t you take a quick look around and see if you can’t find another way out. I’ll just sit over in that dark corner where no one can see me.”

“I still don’t like it, but I can see how you might need to rest up. Go ahead and sit. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.”

* * *

After finding the note, Davies moved cautiously along the passageway, following the footsteps in the fuzz. At each junction he paused and listened intently. At the fourth turn, he picked up what sounded like a child’s voice. He could tell it was far enough away to not be around this corner, nevertheless he took his usual precautions when rounding it by pressing against the far wall and sliding quickly along it till he had a clear view of the new corridor.

He traversed this one quickly, drawn by the child-like voice. It had to be Thompson. He reached another turn and realized that a faint light was spilling into this passage. He doused his light and peeked around the corner.

Framed by the opening, he saw the two of them standing close together in the center of the place he’d always called a concrete canyon. He had chased a couple of inmates in here once back when he had been a deputy. They had managed to break in here by wresting a ventilation grill loose only to find themselves trapped. One had been black, and one had been white. When he

had brought them out, he wouldn't have been able to tell which was which if it hadn't been for the black guy's afro.

Now, he could hear their conversation clearly. Thompson stepped back and asked, "How's that?"

He listened, surprised at first by Paula's seeming calm, as they agreed on their plan. Good. They were going to separate. Maybe he could get her out of here while Thompson went exploring. Weird, the way he was acting. Just like a kid. Scared to death, and trying to be brave for his girlfriend. Small wonder she seemed calm. She had to be or little Tommy would run her through.

* * *

Moments after Davies entered the tunnels, Captain Hill sat listening to Harris' voice on the phone. He sensed he wasn't getting the whole story. "Okay, everything but the basement is clear. Fine. Where's Lt. Davies?"

"He went out. Said he be back shortly."

"Where did he go? And let me make this real easy for you, Sergeant. I want to know everything that you know. Everything. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. Blake found what looked like an entry into the plumbing tunnels at the hatch next to the Rubber Rooms. Davies went down there to check it out. He said he would call you when he had confirmed or eliminated the possibility. He was very specific that I not call you until he talked with me."

"You didn't. I called you. How firm are you on this being where they went?"

"Blake's description makes it look pretty good. But they could have gone in there and come back out and gone down to the basement. The lieutenant didn't want us chasing shadows. That's why he wanted to check this out personally."

"Okay. Personally, I think it'd be pretty hard for them to get down to the basement unseen, especially with this alert. But my real concern is that he went in there alone. I want him backed up. Right now. You send the Longbrakes down there to back him up. Have them pick up batons from Central on the way. I'll be up to join you in a couple of minutes."

* * *

Light flashed off the wall in front of Davies and hurrying feet scraped the floor behind him. A fuzz coated chunk of concrete skipped into that wall and rebounded down the tunnel towards the canyon. The pair in its middle had not even completed turning away from each other when Tommy grabbed Paula and wrapped his arm around her.

"They're here. C'mon. We gotta get outta sight," he whispered as he hustled her to the far wall and one of a half dozen tunnel entrances.

Davies sighed and turned around, shining the blindingly powerful beam of his flashlight in the intruder's face. Tony stopped, speared by the beam, and put his hand up to shield his eyes. Davies flicked it to his right and speared the inevitable twin.

"What are you two doing here?" Davies yelled in a whisper. "I was five seconds from getting her away from him."

"Sorry, sir," Tony said.

"Captain ordered us in here to back you up," Troy said.

“Didn’t see that rock till I hit it.”

“Who’d ever expect rocks in here?”

“Yeah. Who’d ever expect that?”

“Yeah,” Davies said sourly. “Well, let’s go talk with the captain.”

“You don’t want to go after them?”

“Either of you tired of having only one belly-button? He’s gone into the far side. It’s a maze of interconnecting tunnels. All we’re likely to do is get ourselves skewered. We know he’s in here with Paula and she’s not in any immediate danger as far as I can see. We go charging into those tunnels and that could change real quick. Let’s go.”

* * *

Once they had followed a couple of turns, Tommy stopped halfway down a passage. He shushed Paula’s inquiry with a hand over her mouth. They listened for any sound of pursuit, one with fear, the other with hope. After at least a minute of unrewarded listening, Tommy whispered, “Close one. Don’t think they followed us. Probably don’t wanna get stuck with my pig sticker.”

Paula couldn’t miss the braggadocio in his voice. Even though he had removed his hand from her mouth as soon as she had nodded, and he had not placed it there roughly, the fact that he had put his hand over her mouth told her that he very much considered himself the one in charge, and that he possessed the potential to be less gentle if pushed. Having no desire to push, she kept silent. Nine or ten year old boys may love their sisters, but they don’t respect them as equals. Still, for the first time, she’d felt a flash of anger with him. She would have to watch that. Kicking up a sibling squabble made no sense at all right now.

“You doin’ okay, Melissa? I mean, your shoulder okay?”

Surprised to realize it wasn’t that bad, she replied, “It’s okay. Still hurts, but not as badly as it did awhile ago. You did a good job on the bandage.”

“Thanks. Well, let’s go check out the doors over here.”

“Okay, but can we leave some kind of trail so we can find our way back if we have to?”

“Well, our feet are doing that pretty good, doncha think?” he said, shining his light on the floor.

“Yes, but that doesn’t tell us anything but where we’ve been. I was wondering about maybe drawing a number or something on the wall at each turn so we don’t get lost.”

“Yeah, I guess that’d be okay. I mean, if they’re dumb enough to come in here, they’ll be able to track us anyway, so we might as well give ourselves some help. You got a light? Mine’s almost gone.”

Paula showed him hers and said, “How about I draw an arrow around each corner as we go. That way we’ll know how we went and we can just follow them backwards if we get stuck in a dead end.”

Tommy nodded his assent, then realized she couldn’t see it. “Sorry. Forgot ya can’t see me. Yeah, go ahead. Sounds good.”

“Wonder if there’re any lights in here. They’re on out there. You’d think they’d have put some up in here, too.”

She let the beam from her stronger light rove over the walls and then up to the ceiling. High above she thought she saw a light bulb.

“But where’s the switch?” Tommy asked.

“Probably by the door.”

“Makes sense. Be just our luck that we’ll find the switch and the door’ll be open so it don’t matter. C’mon. Let’s see where this goes.”

* * *

Hill and Davies stood across the desk from Harris because the sergeant had no chairs except his own in his cubby hole. Not that there was any room for them anyway. Pack two more people in and they would feel like they had won a phone booth stuffing contest.

Harris put the phone down and said, “That’s it. The basement’s clear.”

“Not that it makes any difference now,” Davies said. “We know where they are and we know that they can’t get out of there unless they can fly. So, Captain, how do you want to proceed?”

“How would flying help them?” Harris asked. “I thought there was no way out of there except by one of the hatches, and they have to be opened from the outside. Do you know something I don’t?”

“I was just thinking about the fan.”

“The fan?”

“Yes, the ventilation fan. It’s not really any threat to our containment, it’s just that it’s the only place where there’s no locked door. There’s a big fan instead. But there’s no way they could get through it.”

“You sure of that?” Harris asked.

“Yes. Anybody foolish enough to try going through the fan’s housing would be hamburger in seconds.”

“So you don’t think there’s enough room for them to slip past the fan and out the intake duct to the roof.”

Davies started to speak, then paused a moment to consider the idea. “Thompson’s skinny enough, though he’s kinda tall for it. Paula, too, for that matter, but I can’t see her trying it. From what I could see, she looked pretty banged up, and we know he stabbed her. Besides, she’s not crazy enough to step in there, even if she could make it up the ladder to the fan, which I seriously doubt.”

“But,” the captain said, “Thompson’s not very rational at the moment. He might make the attempt, and it’s always possible he might get through, unlikely as that may seem. So, let’s say he manages to get on the roof, can you think of any way he could get down and stay outside security?”

“That’s why I said he’d need to fly, sir.”

“You’re sure of that.”

Davies said, “There’s no ladder, no fire escape, no way down the walls except falling, and after that he’d still have to climb the security fence. The only access to or from the roof is by the service elevator and the fire stairs, both of which need a key to use.”

“But he has a key set,” Harris said. “Two, in fact. His own and Mace’s.”

“And neither is a perimeter set,” Davies said. “Mace’s key ring doesn’t have keys to that elevator or any other door that leads outside security.”

For the first time since either Harris or Davies had seen him tonight, the captain’s face brightened. Granted it was brightened by a faintly malevolent glow, but anything was a welcome change at this point.

“Get those two in here,” Hill said.

Davies opened the door and motioned the Longbrake twins in from the post they had been commanded to occupy since returning to the Housing Sergeant's office. They wedged themselves in, braced for a tongue lashing. In their minds, a day's suspension wasn't out of the question. They turned, faced their smiling captain and their blood froze.

"Relax, you two. You are not here to bleed, die, lose your pay, or clean out your lockers. Lt. Davies has defended your carelessness as understandable, considering the circumstances, and the fact that neither of you has been out of the academy for a month yet."

"That's right, sir," Troy said.

"We went though it together, sir," Tony added.

"Of course. Well, Frick and Frack, I'm going to offer you both a chance to redeem yourselves."

They spoke in perfect unison. "Yes, sir."

"I want you two and Hernandez and Blake to start a little whispering campaign. You're to go into the tunnels on the first floor in pairs and discuss how you hope our fugitives don't find their way up to the top of the central ventilation shaft where they can escape through the fan housing."

"Sir?" Tony said.

"What, sir?" Troy said.

"It's not true, but I want all of you to make them think it is. In particular, I want you to make Thompson think it is. And since the only way to get up there is by climbing a ladder sixty some feet straight up, I seriously doubt Mrs. McKenzie will be able to go with him, not that she'd want to in the first place."

"Yes, sir," Tony said.

"We see, sir," Troy said.

"Good. Because I want you to get Mrs. McKenzie out of there as soon as he leaves her behind. Now, there are two ladders in that shaft, one at each end. One team goes to the east ladder, the other takes the west one after you've spread your little white lies. Stay out of sight and watch. If you do your jobs properly, they'll show up at one or the other ladder. Once you've got her safely out of there, we'll send in some help and you can take Thompson down. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Tony said.

"Perfectly, sir," Troy said.

The twins spun around, nearly tripping over each other in their escape of the claustrophobic confines of Harris' office. On their way to find Blake and Hernandez they argued over who was Frick and who was Frack.

They had earned nicknames! And from the Captain no less! What an honor! By the time they found Blake, they had decided that Tony would be Frick and Troy would be Frack and joyfully informed him of their new status.

Blake snorted, then realized how perfect the appellations were and congratulated them. The twins had enough grace not to point out that he had been out of the academy seven months and was still just called by his name. He wondered if he would ever be so honored. Probably not, he thought. You've got to be colorful to get a nickname.

* * *

It didn't take Tommy and Paula long to find the switch.

It was at the first hatch they came to, right beside the door just like at home. Paula tucked her light away to save it, and followed Thompson as he began exploring the pathways.

It quickly became apparent that they all led like tentacles from the long, narrow cavern to various areas on the first floor. At the base of the walls, grilles allowed them to listen to conversations in the occupied rooms on the other side of the wall. They didn't linger at these locations because the risk was too great they might cough or sneeze or in some other way, give away their location.

Through all of this wandering, Paula struggled to keep her mind off the bone deep, inescapable aching in her shoulder. With each step it grew more insistent, demanding she pay attention to it like a pathologically jealous lover. Finally, somewhere near the middle of their trek, she could take no more and sank to the floor.

She tried to say the short healing prayer that Bahá'u'lláh had given the Bahá'ís to use when they are ill, but she couldn't separate herself from her torment enough to recall more than, "Thy name is my healing, O my God..." The pain became so intrusive and all-consuming that she had trouble remembering the favorite prayer she had repeated so many times just hour-long minutes ago. Excoriating herself for her weakness, she simply asked God for strength, knowing He would hear her prayer, inelegant as it was.

Great martyr I'd make, she thought disgustedly.

When she sank down, Tommy, ever attuned to her, yet unable to comprehend the depth of her afflictions, came to her side.

"What's the matter, Sis?"

"Hurt. Need to rest."

"But we don't have much time. They'll be back soon. You know that. And if they find us—"

"—Then maybe I'll get some help."

Tommy's face, no more than a hand's width from her own, blackened in anger, then fell in despair in the space of a second.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I know you're doing the best you can, but I don't know if I can go on. My whole side feels like its been crushed. I can't think of anything but the pain, no matter how hard I try."

Tears rolled down Paula's cheeks as she gave way to the intolerable aching that had filled her chest and threatened to become the center of her existence. Through her quiet sobs, she begged him to leave her there and go on his search alone.

He refused, not because he was afraid she might run away. That was inconceivable. No, he refused because he was afraid he wouldn't be there when she needed him. He could not explain this to her for it would reveal his own weakness, and even more important, his own sense of failure. He couldn't let her see that, not if he ever hoped to free her of their step-father and his friends. He had to be strong for her as well as for himself.

He reached out with his hand and stroked her wet cheek, tears welling in his own eyes. He fought them back, swallowed hard, and said, "Let me take a look at your bandage. Maybe it's come loose."

"No, I don't think it has. It feels fine. I'm just too exhausted to keep on going. You go check the last couple of tunnels and leave me here. I'll be fine."

"No. I can't leave you," he said, sitting down beside her. "I'll stay here with you and we'll rest for a few minutes. Then we'll go on."

Submitting to his implacability, she silently laid her head on his shoulder and gave herself up completely to the pain. Her tears flowed freely, and exhaustion overtook her mind. She drifted into an uncomfortable slumber.

True to his word, Tommy held her and let her rest. His own thoughts in turmoil, riddled with a fear so compelling that rationality had long since ceased to inhabit them, he bounced around in a jumble of nasty memories.

After several minutes, Paula stirred with a little whimper in her sleep and he took it as a sign she was ready to go on. He eased her off of his shoulder and she looked at him with bleary eyes.

“Feeling better?”

Strangely enough, she did. The pain had receded to a pervasive, but tolerable ache which no longer held her chest in a vice. “A little,” she said, “but we’ll have to take it more slowly. Okay?”

“Okay,” Tommy said with a smile as he carefully helped her up.

After checking every remaining door without success, they returned to the central cavern and sat at the entrance to the last tunnel they had explored.

Tommy said, “There has got to be a way out of here.”

“There is,” Paula said quietly.

“Where?”

“The hatches. It’s obvious that there’s no need for any other way out of here, so that’s it.”

“So what are you saying? We pick one and wait for them to leave a door open by mistake?”

“No. But we could go to one and pound on it and surrender when they open it. Those are policemen out there, Tommy, and we are not criminals. They are there to help us, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tommy sneered. “No! They’re just like Duane! You don’t want to go back to him, do you?”

“No, I was just thinking that they can’t all be like him.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but do you really wanna take the chance that the one who opens the door isn’t one of Duane’s buddies?”

Paula said nothing as she mulled over the connections. Duane was Tommy’s step-father. Her step-father, too, as far as Tommy was concerned. Duane had killed her—Melissa—in reality. As she remembered, the method employed had been brutal and sickening. She also remembered that there had been strong evidence that Duane had been molesting her before he killed her. It was pretty obvious that whatever he had done, it had angered Tommy in a very primal way and had instilled a need for vengeance that was matched only by his fear of Duane. He was an all-powerful figure in Tommy’s mind, able to effortlessly make their lives miserable.

But what about his mother? He hadn’t mentioned her once. It was as though she never existed. She had, of course. She had been killed by Duane that same night in exactly the same way as Melissa had been. Paula had seen this pattern before countless times. His mother had been unable to defend him. Probably beaten by Duane whenever she tried. So she had just disappeared from Tommy’s, landscape.

She would have bet a month’s pay that Duane had knocked him around as well. Probably set him up as the little man around the house and then undermined it every time he could. All he would have known was failure and fear. It’s amazing that he survived at all, much less made it through nursing school to become such a good nurse.

Someone had to have stepped in after the killings. Whoever it was, they had done a masterful salvage job.

The hatch at the end of a tunnel opened. Both of them waited for it to close. It seemed to take forever. Finally it did, but whispered voices followed the unmistakable sound of the bolt snicking into place.

Tommy stood up carefully and helped Paula to stand. Taking her hand, he led her across the cavern into a tunnel. They went just far enough back that the faint light in the cavern would not reveal their presence. Both held their breath and listened.

The voices were low, but not whispering. If they thought they were being quiet, they were very much mistaken. As they neared the cavern, their words became distinct.

“...up top.”

“What?”

“I know it’s crazy, but he wants us to sweep this area and work our way up, clearing every tunnel as we go.”

“Why?”

“He’s afraid they may know or find out that they can get out up top.”

“There’s no way out up there. All that’s up there is the fan.”

“Wrong. There’s a service door for it that doesn’t have a lock. They can slip through it onto the roof.”

“Yeah? And then what? Fly off into the night?”

“No. Shiny down the side on the fire hose.”

“I forgot about that being up there. Maybe we’d better shut up about all this or they’ll be running up that ladder before we get out of the next tunnel.”

“Right. Here we are. Keep your voice down. Better yet don’t say anything.”

“Yeah.”

Paula smiled in the dark, grateful that Tommy couldn’t see her face. Those sneaky devils. She knew there wasn’t any fire hose on the roof. She also doubted the fan could be traversed so easily, if at all. But she did recognize a good gambit when she heard one. Sounded just like the kind of thing Bob would try. And she knew what role she was expected to play, not that it would take much acting ability. She had to be too injured, too beat up, and too weak, to climb that ladder. What ever else happened, she had to stay down here and get him to climb up there alone.

“Melissa!” Tommy whispered at her ear. “Did you hear that? We can get out through the roof. Isn’t that great?”

“Maybe you can, Tommy, but I can’t climb up there. I’m too weak and I only have one hand. There’s just no way for me to make it.”

“I’m not leaving you. It’s too dangerous. They’ll find you and then it’ll be all over for you.”

“We don’t know that, Tommy. I’ll bet there’s a better than even chance that if a deputy finds me, he won’t hurt me. I just can’t believe that everyone of them is like Duane.”

“No, we’re going out together or not at all. Now, let’s go find that ladder.”

Tommy took her right arm and pulled her towards the central cavern. She stifled a yelp, but he heard her sharp intake of breath and apologized. Seeing no way to avoid it, she went with him.

Tommy checked the big cavern carefully before stepping into it. No one was visible. He couldn’t see the far end at all, but he assumed that if he couldn’t see them, they couldn’t see him. The tunnel they were exiting was close to the eastern end and he slipped rapidly and silently along the wall toward it. Paula, right hand held tightly in his grasp, trooped along right behind him. As they neared the end wall, he saw the ladder the deputies had referred to. It ran up the middle of the wall.

Tommy's gaze followed it upwards and he almost shouted with joy. It was surrounded by a wire mesh safety cage that looked almost solid because of the black fuzz that coated every strand of wire. The first rungs had tendrils, but up inside the cage, he could see that the rungs just had a light coating. They might be squishy when he grabbed on, but he could climb the ladder without too much trouble. Melissa couldn't fall off, and she couldn't fall down because he would be below her. They were going to make it.

With all his attention focused on the ladder, Tommy failed to notice Paula's crestfallen face. She knew immediately and without a word from Tommy what the safety cage meant. She wasn't done yet, but she held out very little hope that she could convince him to leave her behind now.

Tommy turned suddenly to face her and read her expression accurately.

"What's the matter? This is great."

"Oh, Tommy. I don't want to go up there. It's so high, it scares me. And how can we get me out even if we do both get up there?"

"Don't worry, Sis. It'll work. I know it. Here, I'll help you up the first couple of steps, then you can sit on my shoulders and I'll push you up."

"But that's too hard. You can't do that. You'll get too tired."

"No, I won't. We can take breaks at those catwalks up there if we need to, but I'll bet I won't need to more than once, maybe not at all. C'mon. Let's go before they find us."

He pulled her to the ladder and put her in front of it.

"Go on. 'I've got you,'" he said, putting his hands on her waist.

Sighing, Paula put her right hand on the rung just above her head and her left foot on the lowest one. Tommy lifted her up, and she stood on the rung.

"Three more and you'll be able to take the rest of the day off."

"You sure about this, Tommy?"

"You bet. You're so little, I won't even notice you. Now, go on up."

* * *

Blake and Hernandez watched in frustration as Paula mounted the ladder with Thompson's help. Hernandez wanted to rush them while Thompson was busy holding Paula on the ladder. He reasoned that there was no way Thompson would let go of her to grab the sword in his belt, but Blake couldn't count on it and put a restraining hand on his partner's shoulder.

"He's nuts. Who's to say he won't let go and grab for that sword. Sure we might beat him to it, but where's that leave Mrs. McKenzie? You think she can hang on there? Look at her. She can barely hold on to the ladder. If he wasn't holding her, she'd be on the floor with her head split like a ripe melon. The captain said our first responsibility was to see to her safety. We'll get him some place else. C'mon. This isn't the end of it. Believe me."

Still protesting, but not very forcefully, Hernandez followed Blake back to the hatch. They went directly to the lieutenant's office which the captain had set up as a command post. After giving their report, they stood at cringing attention, awaiting their fate.

"Who'd ever have thought he'd do that," Hill said. "Good job Blake. You too, Hernandez."

Blake's head snapped up and his eyes popped wide. "Sir?"

Hill smiled. "It's a compliment, Blake. Ever hear of them? It means you did the right thing. Rushing him would probably have done little more than get Paula hurt worse than she already is, or maybe even killed. Hernandez, I know you feel like you screwed up, but you did the right thing. Now, return to your duty post. Blake you stay here."

Hernandez left feeling so relieved not to have incurred the Captain's wrath, the first place he went was the restroom. He would never doubt Blake's skill or good sense again. The man could do no wrong.

After Hernandez's hasty departure, Davies laid out the contingency plan he had worked out with the captain. It was simplicity itself. They would go up to the fourth floor, enter the tunnel system at the western end, and climb up the west ladder to the top. There they would deploy themselves near the fan housing and wait for Paula and Thompson.

Their goals were equally simple. Keep Paula out of the fan housing at all costs. Capture Thompson by whatever means necessary. This was as far as either of them were going. That was final. Davies emphasized his point by picking up a riot baton and handing it to Blake. Picking up his own baton, he said, "Let's get going. We've got to get there ahead of them and its going to be tight."

"Don't you think we should take some more people with us, sir?" Blake asked.

"I'd love to have more, but there's only room for two of us up there if we want to stay out of sight. And we have to stay out of sight until we can isolate him and take him down. This is one time a show of force won't work."

Blake nodded. "Understood, sir. Let's go get him."

Chapter Eighteen

Tag

Thompson's boyish enthusiasm carried them to the second floor catwalk fairly quickly. He wanted to go on to the next level, but Paula sensed he was tiring more quickly than he was willing to admit. The last thing she needed or wanted was for him to exhaust himself before they reached the roof. If he fell, she would go with him. But young boys raised on macho-man movies cannot be expected to admit they have limits of physical endurance, especially when saving their sisters. So, it is up to the sisters to save them by exaggerating their weakness.

"Tommy, I need to stop a moment. My shoulder's really hurting and I'm afraid I'm going to pass out."

"Okay. But only for a couple a minutes." He boosted her onto the catwalk and climbed up to join her. "Here, lemme take a look at that."

She submitted to his inspection and minor adjustments meekly. Actually, his retightening of the makeshift bandage helped quite a bit more than she expected. Her real hope for salvation now lay in delaying their ascent long enough for someone (preferably several someones) to get to the roof platform ahead of them. She had no doubt that Hill and Davies would think of this. Hill, at one time, had been a SWAT commander, and Bob taught tactics at the academy. Exactly how they would set up, she couldn't guess. She just knew they would be there waiting, if she could give them enough time.

"Ready?" Tommy said as he climbed back into the ladder's tube. It wasn't really a question and she didn't treat it as one.

It took some doing to slide sideways off the runners of the catwalk onto Tommy's shoulders, but she managed it without significantly increasing the pain that had become so constant a companion that it had filled the background of her attention the way a constant, low noise filled one's hearing.

Tommy started climbing rapidly, pushing her into the bolts that held the mesh to the reinforcing braces and rings.

"Tommy, please take it easy. There's no rush now. I want to make it in one piece, not leave bits of myself on the cage all the way up."

"Sorry. I just wanna get us outta here as quick as possible."

"I know, but it won't do us any good if you miss a step because you're going too fast, or my shirt or bandage hangs up on these bolts and makes us slip. Just go carefully, okay?"

"Sure. Think you can make it all the way up from here, or are you gonna need to stop at the next level?"

"Let's see how I feel when we get there."

* * *

As soon as Davies and Blake left the office, Captain Hill went to Central Control. This guard station controlled all entrances and exits to the building and the security yard. The deputy who manned it answered not only the sentry phones, but also manned a switchboard connected to

every phone in the jail. The phone system had no direct dial in or out except for the phones in the booking area. All other calls went through this switchboard. A series of TV monitors provided him with a view of the security yard, its gates, and the loading dock. All key sets were also kept here in locked cabinets. Lastly, it contained the environmental systems readouts and control switches. It was here that Hill went as soon as the Central Control deputy opened the door for him.

No one had a key for the Central Control entry door, not even the sheriff. One existed, but it stayed in the locked key cabinet. The only time it was to be used was when the building was completely evacuated which would only occur in a major disaster such as an earthquake or an uncontrollable fire. In the nearly thirty years the building had been occupied, no such disaster had ever occurred, so Central, like every other guard station, had never been unoccupied.

The deputy returned to his console. Hill threw the switch which controlled the fan, shutting it off. A red light on the panel above it went out, confirming that the fan was shut off. He left the other switches with their corresponding lights which controlled the other parts of the environmental system alone. There were a whole lot of very good reasons not to shut down the whole system, starting with the problems involved in a cold restart. It required a technician. Hill only needed to eliminate the chances of the fan catching Thompson, if he was foolish enough to climb inside the housing when he discovered that the only door up there opened onto the fan's axle and not the roof. Paula, he knew, wasn't foolish. Turning just the fan off took care of anyone getting shredded.

Next, he called the fire station captain and explained the situation.

"... so we'll need your medics, I just can't say how soon. If you can spare them, I'd like them here and ready to evac our nurse as soon as we've got her."

"You think it'll be within an hour?"

"Almost certainly."

"You got 'em."

"Thanks, and could you please have them come Code One. I don't know if he'll be able to hear the sirens in there or not, but there's no sense in taking a chance on making our boy nervous."

"I'll tell 'em."

* * *

Above the panel where Hill had killed the power to the ventilation fan, a panel of thermometers showed the temperature in each of the fourteen climate sectors of the building. Those temperatures were translated into pneumatic pressure and transmitted by slender, high pressure tubes to the master thermostat in the basement boiler room, providing a mechanical average of all the temperatures in the jail. The master thermostat read in pounds per square inch, not degrees Fahrenheit or Celsius. A preset pressure of sixty activated the heating system. As each gauge in Central slipped downwards from the infiltration of the thirty degree weather outside, the master gauge in the basement slid past fifty-eight and continued to climb.

* * *

Sgt. Benjamin Harris punched in the final number from the count and hit enter. The numbers balanced. Every inmate was accounted for.

He signed the count sheets, tapped them into a neat pile, placed a staple through them at precisely forty-five degrees to the edges and three-quarters of an inch in from the upper left corner, and put them in his out basket, aligning them with the other papers into a tidy stack. Then he called Central and told the deputy to announce a Code Gamma, which meant that the count was clear.

“But we are still on lockdown,” he added, “and will remain so until further notice so re-announce the Code Beta when you call the Code Gamma. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the deputy said. Knowing Harris’ punctilious nature, he routinely repeated the sergeant’s instructions to make sure he had them right. “Call Code Gamma, then Code Beta. Got it. Anything else, sir?”

“Where’s the captain?”

“Right here, he’s just about to leave. Captain?”

Captain Hill picked up the indicated receiver and said, “Hill here.”

“Harris here, sir. Count’s clear and we’re still on lockdown. Housing Hold is getting a little crowded, but it’s not anything to worry about. Where do you want me?”

“Come on down here. The paramedics will be arriving shortly and we need to get them set up where they can get into the system as soon as Davies and Blake take control. You take them up to the fourth floor and stand by at Mod L’s hatch. That’ll put you closest to the ladder. I’ll have Central call you on the sentry phone as soon as I know we’re clear. I’m going to go up on the roof and stand by the intake duct. Davies will call out to me when they’ve taken Thompson.”

“Yes, sir. Be down in a minute.”

* * *

Paula called a halt when they reached the third floor catwalk. She didn’t really need it, but she had to slow down their ascent. Tommy fiddled with her bandage again, which had been torn by the bolts.

“Just two more levels to go, Sis.”

Paula nodded. There was no sense talking. She had said everything she had to say and it hadn’t done any good. Besides, saying nothing made her look weaker and more tired. She lean against the wall and closed her eyes.

Two seconds later Tommy said, “Ready? We can’t take all night or they’ll see us up there.”

“Just a couple minutes more. We just got here.”

“We’ve been here five minutes,” he said, pointing to his watch. “I checked. C’mon.”

Repeating her earlier procedure, she again climbed onto his shoulders and rode up the ladder. Had she given them enough time? Would Tommy let them stop at the next level? He was getting anxious and impatient. Dare she insist on another rest stop?

* * *

Harris strode into Central just as the paramedic van pulled through the inner gate of the yard. He picked up a phone and dialed Reception. As he explained to the deputy what he wanted, he let his gaze rove around the room. Everything looked to be in order, the way it should. Then out of the corner of his eye, just as the Reception Deputy asked him a question, he spotted a light out in a row of lights. While he answered the deputy’s question, he absently reached over and flipped the switch under it. At the same time, something occurred to Harris that he wanted the Central

Control deputy to take care of. Never one to trust a mere oral communication when a written one could be given, he snatched a pen and wrote a note which he then handed to the deputy as he hung up the phone. Without another word, he left Central for the elevator, pleased once again with his ability to take care of several things simultaneously and, therefore, more efficiently than most men. This singular ability, he knew, was one of several reasons he would achieve his goal of becoming the youngest captain in the department's history.

* * *

Davies keyed the hatch to the Mod L plumbing tunnel very carefully and swung it open. He ushered Blake through the portal and then stepped through himself. He turned back to the fresh-faced rookie he had grabbed on his way here and said, "Remember, hold the latch back until the door is all the way into the jam, then release it slowly."

The deputy nodded and pushed the hatch's door carefully into place. The latch bolt slid home silently. The only sound that escaped during the whole procedure was the faint scrape of the key as it was pulled from the lock. Davies nodded in approval.

Wasting no time, but still being careful to make as little noise as possible, the two men traversed the tunnel to the catwalk, skittered over it to the west wall ladder, and climbed up to the roof platform. There they paused a moment to reconnoiter.

The floor of the platform, unlike the catwalks, was made of steel mesh welded to a steel grid. Walking on it would undoubtedly be noisy.

The fan itself was in the center of the platform inside a galvanized sheetmetal housing. Davies knew that it was a squirrel cage fan, eighteen feet in diameter and six feet wide. When spinning at top speed, it produced a thirty mile-an-hour wind. That wind dissipated rapidly into a gentle breeze in the main ventilation shaft. Then it flowed through the tunnels and out the vent registers. It was fed by a five-foot wide, four-foot tall intake duct that descended at a forty-five degree angle from its opening on the roof.

The platform perimeter was made of six-inch wide angle iron bolted into the concrete. They would have to walk on this around the side and then cross the shortest distance possible to the fan housing on the support framework.

The central shaft at this level was not truly silent. A low level of random noise echoed up here from all the tunnels. The two men were also able to discern the sound of Thompson's approach up the far ladder. His own noise might mask some of theirs, but neither man believed it would cover a head long flight over the mesh floor of the platform. If they took some care, they would probably be able to follow the perimeter and still make it in time to take up their positions. They would just have to exercise care to step on the mesh only where it was supported by the grid. Judging Thompson and Paula to be no more than one level down, Davies set off with Blake following exactly in his footsteps.

* * *

In the basement, the Master Thermostat's needle slipped over the hash mark representing 59 pounds per square inch. In the Reception area, arrestees and deputies alike felt a chill as gooseflesh rose on exposed arms. Throughout the housing area, inmates pulled their military-style wool blankets closer in their sleep.

* * *

On the fourth floor catwalk, Paula noticed that the place seemed stuffy, but she was also chilled. The air had stopped moving. Random clinks and clanks, muffled earlier by the constant flow of air and the drone of the fan's motor, were now distinct. Tommy, seemingly oblivious to the chill in the still air, bid her back onto the ladder.

"Elevator going up. Next stop, Penthouse and Flight Deck. Climb aboard."

His elation, Paula realized, along with his exertion, was keeping him from recognizing the changes in his environment. Hopefully, it would also keep him from being cautious when they got to the top.

* * *

The paramedics disembarked from the elevator and wheeled their gear through a series of double-gated sally ports to the Mod L hatch. There Harris relieved the rookie who had sealed Davies and Blake in the tunnel system and began a detailed explanation of what the paramedics could expect once they were inside.

Though they couldn't fault the sergeant's depth of knowledge, they did wish he would impart it with less condescension. Having had little contact with the man, they could not know that Harris was completely unaware of his patronizing demeanor. He, in fact, considered his manner humble.

In particular, they were disturbed to learn that they probably would not be able to use their radio inside the tunnel system. The team leader, whose plastic tag identified him as "D. Swanson, Lead Firefighter/Paramedic," decided that they would very likely need contact with the hospital base station, so he asked if it would be possible to have a man stand by on the roof with the radio, assuming they could communicate with him from inside.

"You'll be able to relay messages through the intake duct, which feeds directly into the fan housing, by having someone shout into it."

"Is there anyone who can take one of us up there?"

"The captain's going up there. I can call and see if he'll take you up with him. Should be just a couple of minutes. It's cold up there. You think your gear'll keep you warm enough?"

"Yes. Just get Cooper here up there. Anyway you can."

Harris picked up the sentry phone and relayed the message to Central while Cooper hefted the radio box and started back towards the elevator. In the elevator he met Captain Hill, now dressed in his winter patrol coat.

* * *

Davies and Blake reached the fan housing and settled themselves into their hiding places on either corner of the west end of the housing. They shivered in their short sleeves as they watched Paula's head rise through the hole in the platform like an apparition from a lake. When she had risen far enough, she scooched sideways and sat on the platform, pulling her legs out to allow Thompson to exit the tube.

"Look! There it is, Melissa."

He grabbed her right hand and helped her to her feet, then started pulling her rapidly across the mesh floor. Their pounding feet set up a considerable din, confirming what Davies and Blake had thought of their own chances for a silent, direct crossing.

Davies reached out with his baton and gently prodded Blake. He turned and Davies said quietly, "Let's stop him at the housing. That sword gives him the advantage on these narrow sides."

Blake nodded and the two men stood up. Holding their batons at port arms, each walked down his side of the housing and stopped in front of it.

Thompson pulled up a couple of paces away and shoved Paula roughly behind him. Pointing the sword at Blake, he said, "That's it, Duane. I'm not afraid of you anymore. I'm not afraid of your friend or those sticks either. Now, unless you wanna spill your guts, you'll get outta the way."

Davies barked, "Thompson! It's over! You're not going anywhere. Put the sword down and let Paula go."

A bewildered look passed across Thompson's face. The point of his blade dropped, and Davies and Blake took a step forward.

Rage flooded Thompson's eyes and roared from his throat as he lunged at Blake. Blake brought his baton up and across to parry, but he was a millisecond too slow and the blade's tip sliced through his right cheek, laying it open. In that second he felt his cheek open from lip to ear, but no pain. In the next, white heat seared a path across his face and he dropped the baton to grab his filleted face.

Davies, startled by the flitting speed of Thompson's assault, needed both of those seconds to act. Shifting to a classic two handed kendo grip, he charged Thompson. He got in a couple of quick, but glancing blows before he was surprised by a bump on his right thigh. He stepped back, out of range, shifted to Thompson's right, and looked quickly down at the wound. Not bad, just a nick.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Paula sprawled on the mesh floor. At the same time he recognized that he was not dealing with some fool who happened to have a cane sword. He was dealing with someone who had been trained to fence. Someone who was fairly adept, but not truly expert. He had no one to blame but himself for that little nick. His own overconfidence had allowed Thompson an advantage he shouldn't have had. He would never have it again.

Thompson followed Davies move and fell into a comfortable fencing posture. Legs apart and flexed for balance, sword held firmly, but easily, as he let the point inscribe small circles in the air. From the corner of his eye he kept watch on Blake, though he was sure that he posed no immediate threat. His face would occupy his full attention for awhile.

Davies feinted right and attacked left, delivering a rapid series of blows directed at Thompson's sword, hand, and arm. Thompson parried them skillfully, but still suffered a knock to his knuckles. Rather than retreat, as might be expected, Davies paused only for a heartbeat before pressing again, this time snapping a sharp blow to Thompson's forearm, causing him to drop the blade. He followed it up with a crack to the shins and one to the midsection, doubling Thompson up. Then he flattened him with a blow across the shoulders. He kicked the sword out of reach and dropped a knee into the small of Thompson's back, reached for the captive's left hand, and pulled it up between his shoulder blades.

Thompson screamed and cursed, then begged him not to hurt his sister.

"She's not your sister, Thompson," Davies yelled in frustration. "She's a nurse you stabbed and dragged all over this jail, and I swear to God that if she dies, you are gonna wish you'd never

lived.” Setting his baton down he pulled out a pair of handcuffs and cinched Thompson’s hands behind his back.

Tommy lay there whimpering, suffused with impotent rage. What a jerk! Of course she was his sister. Did the big bully think he could fool him into believing that that wasn’t Melissa? Well, at least he’d given Duane something to think about. He’d be scarred for life. Tommy twisted around so he could follow the bully’s movements.

Quickly, Davies checked Blake, who had by this time started to sit up. He looked at the gaping wound, saw the gums and teeth exposed by it, and told him help was on the way and to sit quietly. Blake gingerly held his cheek in place and nodded.

Davies moved on to Paula. Thompson yelled, “Stay away from her!” Davies ignored him and knelt beside her. She had remained on her back after scooting out of the way during the fight. She assured him she wasn’t going to die in the next two minutes, “Three maybe, but definitely not two.”

Reasonably assured by her humor, he ran to the fan housing and ripped the maintenance cowling off. Sticking his head inside, he yelled for them to send in the paramedics just as the needle on the Master Thermostat in the basement touched sixty.

Chapter Nineteen

Ally, Ally, Oxen Free

Seething as he waited for the second gate to open, Red Browne cataloged the indignities to which he had been subjected by this bunch of barbaric bullies. He blamed no one but himself. He had let himself get talked into taking this job. They couldn't help who they were. Like children, they just didn't know any better.

First and foremost had been that idiot sheriff's interference with his enforcement of discipline on an unruly, not to mentioned incompetent, staff. Then, his second millstone, that Mesolithic captain, had called not half an hour ago to tell him that Thompson had tried to kill an inmate and a deputy, and had taken hostage the bane of his administration, Mrs. McKenzie (she was so out of touch with modern feminist thought).

Ridiculous! Dave would never do anything like that. He wouldn't be surprised to find out it was all a crock. Like that stupid mess with Pollack, this was most likely some elaborate cover up. Well, they weren't going to get away with it this time. No possible freaking way. He would see to that.

The gate finally slid back far enough for him to get through. He swore they could control how fast it opened and closed. He marched up to the window of Central Control. Like all the guard stations, it was elevated some thirty inches above the floor to intimidate the inmates and force them into inferior positions when supplicating before their masters. He rose up on his toes to put his mouth at the three inch circle cut in the wire reinforced, half-inch plate glass and told the deputy to get him the captain right now.

"I'm sorry, sir," the deputy said with disdainful calm. "The captain is on the roof."

"So call him and tell him get down here. I'm here because he called me. The least he can do is show me the courtesy of seeing me."

"I will relay your request."

"What do you mean, 'relay your request'? Who do you think you are?"

The deputy ignored him and talked into his headset which was reminiscent of the kind telephone operators used to wear twenty or thirty years ago. He couldn't hear what the deputy said and his insufferably flat affect gave no clues either. It seemed to take an inordinately long time to get a response.

"The captain says he cannot come down at this time. He says he didn't ask you to come in, he just called you to make you aware of the situation. He has, however, given permission for you to go up to roof."

Given permission, Browne fumed to himself. Who does he think he is? Am I not the director of the medical program here? Does not that position give me the right and authority to go wherever I see fit? You bet it does.

"All right, I can see talking with you is a waste of time. How do I get up there?"

"Do you know where the south elevator is?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

The deputy understood that to mean, no. He was aware, as was everyone else who worked in the jail, that Mr. Browne had refused to take even the most cursory tour of the jail. He made another call then said, "I've called for an escort. He will be here shortly."

"He'd better be. Give me my keys."

The deputy answered a call, and then went to the key locker. On his way back he was interrupted by another call, which Browne assumed was just an excuse to delay handing over the keys. They could be such children about their little symbols of authority.

Nearly two full minutes later, a deputy sauntered up to him and requested to exchange his key set for a perimeter set, which that arrogant fool in the Central Control (Boy, was that a revealing name) Guard Station had to fetch from the key locker. He should have had it out and ready. They had to be doing this purposely just to spite him. If they ran things this slowly all the time they would never get anything done. Of course, Red reflected, they don't have a whole lot to do anyway. Just abuse people's rights, keep them locked up, and occasionally beat them to relieve their boredom.

* * *

Outside the Mod L hatch, Harris snatched up the sentry phone, nodded, and hung up.

"You've got some badly hurt people in there," he said as he keyed the door open. "Your man's on the roof and set up to transmit. I'll stand by here."

The three paramedics ran into the tunnel and found the catwalk and ladder without difficulty. The sergeant's directions had been accurate and simple. Each lugged a large, heavy box. One was a cardiac monitor/defibrillator. The other two, nearly as large as an infant's coffin, were filled with supplies and medications and weighed over twenty pounds each.

At the ladder, they discovered their first problem. Only the monitor/defibrillator would fit in the tube with them. The other two boxes were too large.

Swanson said, "Harry, you take both of them up to the roof to Cooper. He can hand whatever we need down through the fan duct, I hope. Then get back in here with us as quick as you can. I'll take the BP cuff and some dressings in with me. Sheila, you grab the Ambu-Bag and mask."

* * *

At the fourth floor, the elevator stopped, further infuriating Red Browne. The deputy lifted the inner gate and the outer door split to reveal a dirty, sweating paramedic with two huge boxes. They climbed on and the paramedic said, "Roof?"

Where else would they be going? Red thought, irritated at the interruption, then asked himself why the medic was going up there?

"Who's hurt?"

"People inside I'm told," the medic replied as the door slammed shut and the elevator resumed its ascent.

"Then why are you going to the roof? You should be inside with that stuff."

The paramedic lifted one of the boxes he was toting and said, "Won't fit."

Red rolled his eyes. Typical.

* * *

In the basement boiler room, a switch tripped at the moment the needle on the Master Thermostat touched sixty. This sent an electrical charge to a relay which opened a valve, allowing gas to flow into the burners. It poured through the holes and found the pilot light, exploding softly into a steady blue flame.

The flames heated a water-filled coil connected to a thickly insulated pipe. The pipe led through the ceiling into the central cavern and up the wall to the tunnels where insulated branches ran off to feed radiators placed near each ventilation register. The radiators diffused their heat into the air, causing the steam to condense and drain through a separate set of pipes back to a tank in the basement which fed the heating coils.

The closed system relied upon pressure to create steam hot enough to provide sufficient heat in the radiators for the fan to push through the vents into the inhabited parts of the building. Only when the system reached 240 degrees Fahrenheit in the core pipe at the boiler, would the fan start turning. Any sooner and the air flow would cool the system too quickly to reach the operating temperature in a reasonable amount of time, thereby drastically increasing the energy needs of the system.

Even though the fan had been off no more than a few minutes longer than a normal heating cycle, the core had cooled below that required to generate steam. Within a few minutes of the burner's ignition, however, the temperature read 230 degrees in bright red LED numerals on the core pipe thermometer. Now, as the pressure built, the rapid change of the red numbers slowed, each degree of rise taking a little longer than the last.

* * *

Davies pulled his head out of the housing and turned around to check on Paula and Blake. He could just make out their shapes where he had left them. His head reeled. The already murky light seemed to fill with shadows like a black fog. He stumbled and nearly fell as he took a step towards them. His right leg didn't want to move. It felt funny. Not exactly numb, because he could feel a wet stickiness on it, but cold, almost stone-like. He managed one halting step before he felt a cold sweat break out on his face and everything blacked out.

He didn't feel himself fall, nor did he feel the mesh leave its imprint on his forehead. He came to a second after hitting the floor, unaware that he had passed out. He was acutely aware of being on the mesh floor and queasy with a terrible throbbing in his right thigh.

He rolled on his side and grabbed his leg. His pants were saturated with something sticky. Lying down had restored the flow of blood to his brain enough to allow him to recognize that the dark, spreading stain on his pants was indeed blood. Where'd all this blood come from? He vaguely remembered the bump Thompson had given him during the fight. It'd just been a little nick, hadn't it?

A man dropped beside him and shined a light in his face and then on his leg. Where had he come from? Distantly he heard the man say, "Gotta bleeder here." Then he felt pressure on the center of his throbbing thigh, and the voice said, "Need a pressure bandage on this ASAP. Then we'll need to get some Ringer's going. How're those two?"

Paramedics, he thought. It'll be okay. He let go and floated just above complete insensibility, hearing the distant voices, but not comprehending much of what they said.

* * *

Captain Hill turned when he heard the elevator doors crash open and disgorge two men. One carried two large, heavy-looking orange boxes, The other man, shorter but with unmistakable red hair, he identified as Browne. He noted that Browne had not offered any assistance to the paramedic who was obviously having some difficulty managing both boxes. Instead he had hurried across the roof towards the captain.

Hill walked quickly towards them. Browne ran forward and started jabbering. Hill ignored him and grabbed one of the medic's burdens. "They need some of this stuff down there right now. One of them's bleeding badly."

"Who's bleeding?" Browne asked. "It better not be Mr. Thompson. If you people have injured him—"

"What?" Hill yelled. "Your Mr. Thompson is the one who's done the injuring. Did you know he had a sword in that cane of his?" Browne opened his mouth and shut it. "That's what I thought." Hill turned his back on Browne.

"Just a minute. You're certain of this?"

"Absolutely. He's off his nut. Calls himself Tommy to boot."

"Tommy? But he doesn't use that name anymore," Browne said almost to himself.

"Well, he's using it now, and acting like a little kid."

Browne's mouth opened with a ready retort, formed in his mind before Hill had finished speaking. Then what Hill had said penetrated and he choked on it. His mouth slammed shut, his eyes bulged, and his face blanched.

Oh, dear God, what have they done to you, my boy?

"Any chance of my sliding down that chute to them?" Harry asked, not anxious to retrace his steps to reach his comrades below.

"No way," Cooper said, "I wouldn't necessarily mind if that loud-mouthed pipsqueak over there gave it a try. He might even make it, though I doubt it. There's nothing to grab on to in there. You'd just go right on through till you got wedged between the fan and the frame. I should be able to hand stuff down, though, 'cause the chute looks close enough to the door they got open in there. Get down there."

Harry ran back to the elevator.

Browne started to berate Cooper for his gratuitous insult. Hill told him to shut up, and that when he wanted his opinion, he would cheerfully fulfill Browne's fantasies and beat it out of him. Browne started to protest but stopped mid-word when Hill turned his glacial eye on him.

Cooper thought, I hope I never see that look turned on me, as he slid a box of IV tubing down the chute to Sheila. It dropped off the end of the duct just six inches beyond her reach.

"That ain't gonna work," she yelled at him.

"Can't you get any closer?"

"No. Another inch and I'll be sky diving after that box."

"What about Harry or David?"

"They're too big, That's why I'm in here."

"Well, we gotta figure something out here and quick."

Browne ran up and called into the chute, "Tommy!"

"Get outta there," Hill yelled, grabbing Browne's shoulder.

“No!” Browne said, shaking off Hill’s hand. “He’s small. He might be able to get in there and pass stuff along. Tommy!”

“George? Is that you?” Tommy yelled back, rolling to his knees and then to his feet. He hurried over to the opening. “I knew you’d come.”

“Are you all right, son?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. A little banged up, but I guess I had it comin’. I did some bad things.”

Browne heard the plaintive child’s voice, able to recognize it as Thompson’s only because he had heard it every day many years before. This, more than anything they could have shown him or told him, convinced him that Hill had not been lying. Something terrible had happened here tonight. Not just to the people down there, but especially to his son, Tommy.

Hill leaned over and spoke quietly in Browne’s ear. “You’d better be absolutely straight here, or I will personally stuff you in this duct and see how well you can fly.”

Browne turned to him and said, “Whatever else you may think of me, first and foremost I am a nurse, and therefore want to help those people, whoever they are. Mr. Thompson seems to have been driven into some kind of regressed state, but he still knows and trusts me.”

“But can we trust him?”

“I think so. Tommy?”

“Yes, George.”

“The medic up here is trying to pass some things down to the medics in there with you, but they can’t reach each other. Do you think you can get close enough to pass stuff back and forth?”

“Gee, I don’t know. I can’t see very well.”

Swanson took his light off Blake’s face, which Harry was trying to bandage, and directed it inside the housing. He exposed not only the narrow space between the squirrel cage fan and the housing, but the six inch lip along the side upon which he might be able to stand.

“It’ll be awful tight.”

“Well, give it a try, son. See if you can make it.”

“I can’t—”

“Don’t be afraid, Tommy.”

“I’m not. My hands are tied.”

Hill yelled. “Get those cuffs off him and let him try.”

Swanson went to Davies where Sheila had already removed the key from a clip on Davies belt. She handed it to him and he returned to release the cuffs. Freed from the restraints, Tommy poked his head into the housing and put a hand on the fan to steady his entry onto the narrow ledge. The fan rolled under his hand as the LED numerals seventy feet below changed to 237.

* * *

During the entire time since she had been pushed down by Thompson, Paula had been floating on her own shock-supported cushion. She had landed on her back, but on the left side of it, jarring her shoulder. The makeshift bandage had caught on the mesh and torn loose. She’d had just enough awareness to roll herself out of the way when Thompson’s feet had kicked hers during the brief battle with Davies. That had cost her a loud grunt which had gone unnoticed during the scuffle. After Davies had checked on her, she had let herself go, unaware that her shoulder had begun to bleed again. Bob had won. Everything would be all right.

A sharp pain tore through her dreamlike state when someone undid the bandage. From somewhere far away, over the roaring ache that filled the left half of her upper body, she heard a female voice call out, "This one's bleeding. Shoulder's dislocated and she's shocky."

She felt the hands leave her and the vibration of the mesh under her carry the woman away. Her last thought: Don't leave me here to die alone.

Having completed a field dressing on Blake's face, Harry joined Sheila who was having trouble controlling Davies bleeding.

"I can't keep the pressure on hard enough to stop it for very long. We need a pressure bandage stat."

Harry cut a three inch wide strip from the lieutenant's already slit pants leg. He pulled his last two gauze pads out and placed them over the saturated ones Sheila had been holding in place. Then he slipped the khaki strip under Davies' leg and tied it tightly across the gauze pads. He grabbed Sheila's scissors, tied the strip's ends around their shank, and twisted the tourniquet with them to increase pressure.

"I know we aren't supposed to use tourniquets if we can avoid it," Harry said, putting Sheila's hand on the scissors, "But sometimes it's the only thing that works. Release the pressure for ten to fifteen seconds every three minutes and only turn it down enough to stop the flow, if you can. If you can't, then just slow it down as much as you can without wiping out his circulation entirely. Check his leg for cyanosis every minute. We don't want him to lose his leg."

"Thanks. Go take care of her. She's in a bad way."

Davies winced when the paramedic turned the tourniquet down the first time. It felt like she was trying to pinch his leg off.

He had actually come to like the place he had floated off to. The pain was all but gone, and he felt a kind of peacefulness that was incredibly comforting and inviting. In some vague way he recognized that he might be dying, but he couldn't seem to work up much concern about it. Until, that is, she had twisted that thing around his leg tight enough to cut it off.

What'd I ever do to you, lady? he said to himself.

Oddly, almost as soon as she stopped twisting, the throbbing faded. The chance that he would not see his wife or son again killed his blasé attitude. The pain, bad as it was, as much as he hated it, had galvanized him. He wasn't going to fade out anymore. He was here for the duration.

He raised his head just as she eased the pressure and his whole leg exploded into a gigantic, throbbing mass as blood flooded back into it. He bit back a curse, and let it escape as a moan.

"Sorry," she said. "I know this hurts, but it's the only way we're going to control the bleeding until we get our supplies down here."

She twisted the tourniquet tight again, concentrating the pulsing from all over his leg into the tight little spot on his thigh. He couldn't decide which was better: a throbbing wound or a throbbing leg. He knew, though, that he was going to have an unprecedented opportunity to gather data on the subject.

When his hand rolled away on the fan, Thompson almost lost his balance and fell into it. But the squirrel cage stopped on its own after his hand had traveled no more than a foot. He took it off anyway and grabbed the brace that ran up to the roof of the housing.

It was tight in here right at the door, but he could see that if he could get past the bulk of the fan, there was room for him to balance on a small triangular brace in the corner of the housing. There he could easily reach inside the duct and catch whatever they slid down to him.

He stepped inside the dark, metal cave, lit only by the light that filtered in from the intake duct and what little made it through the opening he had just entered. He straightened up and spread his arms out along the wall. Even with the back of his head pressed against the galvanized steel wall, his nose could not have been more than an inch from the fan. As he inched his splayed feet along the girder that supported this side of the apparatus, the buttons on his shirt caught on the brace, ripping his shirt open. He stopped and took a deep breath. Or tried to. He couldn't draw a full breath because the brace ground into his sternum, cutting off any further expansion of his chest. He felt his panic begin to rise, but shut it down by remembering he had been in a lot worse places than this. It certainly wasn't any worse than the riverside cave in which he had hid from Duane.

Exhaling all the air he could, he held his breath while he slid past the brace. Once past it, he took two deep breaths. He moved on, clearing the fan at the level of his head. His right hand stubbed into the front wall.

He moved quickly, but carefully to the corner and put both feet on the gusset brace. Extending his right hand a foot in front of him, he reached around the edge and into the duct. There was no room to turn, but he could squat. Just barely. If they were careful, he should be able to catch the stuff they sent down and pass it back.

"I'm ready," Tommy called out. "Slide it down next to the side of the chute and I'll try to catch it."

"I'm going to send you a box of IV tubing as a test," Cooper called down as the three red digits in the basement changed to 238. "Here it comes."

Tommy heard the box start its slide and placed his right hand inside the chute on the metal floor. The box hit his fingers and he grabbed it. "Got it." he yelled triumphantly. Putting the box in his left hand, he extended it back to the opening where Swanson took hold of it easily.

Swanson handed the box to Sheila and looked at Blake leaning against the housing on the other side of the opening. "You think you could help us by taking stuff from him and setting it out here for us to grab as we need it?"

Blake started to say, yes, but stopped with a wince and a grunt. He nodded and took Swanson's place.

"Thanks," Swanson said with a pat on Blake's shoulder. Then he leaned in and called out a list of items which included vital signs to relay to Base, two IV setups, pressure bandages, and assorted meds. Cooper wrote it all down, repeating the information as it was received in a well-rehearsed routine. Within seconds, materials began to flow down the intake chute into Tommy's hand.

Minutes later, both Paula and Davies had IV's running, the bags hung on hooks Sheila always carried for situations like these. Harry had hooked them over the top edge of the fan's access door after telling her he would never kid her about her little bag of tricks again. She and Harry reported their patient's vital signs were stabilizing, but they were still having trouble controlling blood loss in both of them.

Paula's was less critical because no artery has been cut, but she had massive soft tissue trauma which provided a thousand venues for blood to leak into the spaces around her muscles and lungs. Left unchecked long enough, it could damage healthy muscles and even compromise her breathing.

Davies' situation was definitely worse. The tourniquet was keeping the blood flow down, but he was still losing quite a bit. That artery needed to be clamped or he would lose too much blood to recover. And the longer they used the tourniquet, the more likelihood he would suffer permanent damage to his leg.

Swanson stuck his head into the fan housing to relay this information just as the numerals in the basement switched to 239. While he waited for instructions from Base, Tommy asked if they were through needing him in there. His legs were getting cramped.

Cooper shouted down that Base said they should transport ASAP. Swanson snorted at the order and asked for ideas on how to get them out of there. "I don't see either of them going down that ladder. They're too weak. And we can't fit a stretcher in there at all."

Hill shouted down, "Check on the other side against the wall. There should be a trapdoor directly above a tunnel to your left."

Harry, who was closest, ran over and cast his light around. He found the trapdoor immediately, then saw the padlock.

* * *

Sgt. Harris had paced outside the Mod L hatch like a trapped animal since the paramedics had left. He was not used to being out of the loop. He ran things in here. He wasn't some rooky relegated to guard duty so he wouldn't mess things up.

After several frustrating and entirely unsatisfactory calls to Central, his only source of information, he had decided to see if he could hear anything by opening the hatch. All he had heard had been unintelligible rumbles. He slammed the hatch, locked it, and snatched up the sentry phone again.

"Get me someone to take over this post."

"Yes, sir. Where will you be going?"

"The roof, of course."

"Yes, sir. I have to tell you that the captain has issued orders that no one is to use that elevator without his express permission. Do you want me to relay your request?"

"Yes. Immediately."

The Central Control deputy took that to mean that he should make the call to the captain before finding a deputy to replace the sergeant. He called the deputy in the elevator to relay the sergeant's request, but didn't need the deputy to relay the captain's response. It came through loud and clear. If Sgt. Harris couldn't hold his water, then he could leave after finding a replacement, but he was not, repeat not, to come to the roof.

Central relayed the captain's orders in more diplomatic terms and sent a deputy from Reception to relieve Harris. Once Harris had explained the situation to the deputy, he left for Central Control.

* * *

"It's locked," Harry called back.

Swanson relayed the message to the captain who said he had the key.

"Okay, good. But first we need all our four and six inch Ace wraps."

"All four and six inch Ace wraps," Cooper repeated. "Got it."

He dug them out of a box and slid them down one at a time. As Tommy passed the last one to Swanson, he asked if he could stand up. His legs were really cramping.

Swanson said, "Go you one better, catch that key and you can come out of there. We've got everything we can use. Thanks a lot. You did a great job."

Tommy beamed in the shadows.

"Here it comes," Cooper yelled as the numbers three and nine were replaced by four and zero on the thermometer in the basement. "I'm placing them right up against the side."

The ring of keys produced a metallic crescendo as they plunged down the slick, steep slope, masking the closing of a switch next to the electric motor on the opposite end of the housing.

Tommy triumphantly snatched up the keys, passed them back to Swanson, and started to stand up as the motor groaned to overcome the inertia of the chain drive that turned the fan. His cramped legs protested the strain of straightening themselves out and caused him to pitch forward. With a shout, he shot his hands out to balance himself. They fell on a vane of the fan and wrapped themselves over it as the motor, now suddenly relieved of its inertial burden, spun the fan's axle.

Carried by the fan's motorized momentum, he felt himself pulled into the void below. He hung on, like a stuntman on a Ferris wheel cart in a movie, and hoped the motor he could now hear whining would be strong enough to pull him up the other side. He passed the lowest part of the swing and felt himself being drawn upward. He was going to make it.

The motor groaned with the extra weight which was far more than it had ever been intended to move. The gearbox, strained by the unbalanced weight, ground to a halt. The motor's shaft continued to exert its force against the setscrew in the gear on it. The motor's coil spun and its bearings began to smoke, then screech.

Blake, who had never left the opening was the first to realize something was wrong. He had heard the switch turn the motor on, but had not recognized it for what it was. Tommy's yelp made him peer into the housing. He saw the dark form fall and the fan turn, followed quickly by the smell of smoke and the screech of metal. He couldn't yell, even though he instinctively tried to, so he beat his fist on the housing.

Swanson who had just handed the keys off to Harry, turned back to see Blake pounding on the side of the housing. He raced over to him, started to ask what the problem was and cut himself off before he had uttered three words. His well-trained nose picked up the smell of smoke. He swung his light inside, saw the gathering cloud and heard the increasingly shrill voice of a bearing in the process of seizing.

"The fan's on," he yelled.

"Impossible," Hill yelled back. "I turned it off myself."

"Well, it's back on now and Tommy is hanging on to it. He's out of reach, hanging off the bottom. Get it turned off and we'll try to turn the fan back up to where we can reach him."

Hill spun around and shouted at the deputy to tell Central to shut down the fan.

In Central, Harris walked in just as the deputy rose to go to the heating system panel. He hit the switch off and Harris rushed over to flip it back on.

"What are you doing, Mister?" he asked as he reached to push the switch up.

"Captain's orders. Someone's trapped in the housing with the fan on."

"What?" He snatched his hand away as if it had been shocked. "How? Who?"

"Don't know. Sorry, sir, but I've got to get back on the board." Harris nodded. As the deputy returned to his console he mused, "Just can't figure it out. I saw the captain turn the fan off. Who could have turned it on?"

Harris said, "Carry on," and left immediately for his closet-sized office.

Red Browne rushed to the housing as soon as he understood that Tommy was the one in danger. He began shouting to him through the duct, drowning out Swanson's instructions to Tommy. Hill grabbed Browne by the collar and jerked him out of the way. "You interfere one more time and you're going to a cell in cuffs!"

"But I was just trying to help him, encourage him."

"He doesn't need to be told to hang on. If he can't figure that out on his own he's lost already. Now, shut up and get out of my sight!"

When Swanson heard the motor stop, he asked Harry to help him try to rotate the fan in either direction while Browne drowned out his attempt to tell Tommy what he wanted to do. The chain drive, though, allowed them no more than a few inches of travel in either direction so they abandoned the attempt.

Now, with Browne silenced, Swanson yelled down, "Hang on. We're going to fix up a rope and drop it to you." Turning to Sheila, who was finishing up her wrapping of Davies leg, he said, "Bring me those Ace wraps."

She hurried over and handed him two four inch wide bandages. He tore the shrink wrap off of them and threw them out to unroll. He quickly knotted the ends together to form a twelve-foot long rope and put a loop in one end.

"You think this'll be strong enough," Harry asked.

"You'd better hope so, it's all we've got. He can't hang around all night waiting for us to get a rope from the truck. Tommy? We're going to lower this elastic bandage to you. It's got a loop in the end of it. You put your hand through that and hold on. We'll pull you up. But you've got to hang on really tight 'cause this stuff's real stretchy, kinda like a bungee cord. Okay?"

"Okay."

Swanson fed the improvised rope through the gap between the fan and the housing's support girder till the loop hung a foot away from Thompson's head. Wrapping it around his hand, Swanson braced himself and made room for Harry to take hold of the elastic cloth.

"Okay, now. It's right there, just reach up with your left hand and try to slip it through the loop. Can you do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I can hang on with just one hand."

"Then just grab the loop. When you're ready, you can put both hands together in it."

"Okay, I'll try. Just give me a second."

"Real good, Tommy. One thing. Before you let go of the fan, give us a chance to take up as much of the slack as we can, okay."

"Yeah."

"It's gonna be okay," Harry said. "Think of it like bungee jumping. Just get a real good grip on the rope with both hands."

Summoning up all his courage, Tommy drew a deep breath and reached for the loop of thin, elastic material that looked entirely too fragile to hold him. The sheet of metal that served as one of the fan's forty vanes bit deeper into the fingers of his right hand as it took his full weight.

He formed his left hand into a blade and tried to slip it through the loop. It twisted away from him. He pulled his hand back and tried again. His right hand screamed in protest as the skin separated on the thin metal edge. His shoulder yelled back that it was being pulled apart.

He got his fingers through the loop, but still couldn't get it over his thumb. His right hand, beginning to slip on the blood of his sliced fingers, left him no choice. He grasped the loop tightly with his left hand and swung his right over to grab the makeshift rope above the knot.

He dropped like a stone. His stomach rose in an intensely unpleasant replay of the one time he had gone off the high dive board at the public pool.

The Ace wrap stretched it's full length, taking the two paramedics by surprise. He had forgotten to warn them, so they'd had no time to take up the slack. He reached the bottom of the bandage's elastic reach and bounced back a few inches before settling at the end of what was now an eighteen foot rope.

Swanson and Harry, the rope nearly ripped from their grasp, immediately began pulling him up hand over hand. He hung on grimly, twisting slowly in the air, watching the catwalk slowly descend past him four or five feet away. Suddenly an idea occurred to him. He looked up, measuring the gap the rope came through, and started swinging side to side.

"Stop that!" Swanson yelled.

"Just hold it right there," Tommy yelled back. "You'll never be able to get me through that crack. But the catwalk's just a couple a feet away. I can make it if you gimme enough slack to swing over there."

Neither paramedic could see the catwalk. Indeed both had completely forgotten about it.

"Sheila!" Swanson yelled. "Get down there and see if you can help him."

"I'm still holding pressure, the Ace isn't cutting it."

"Deputy? Can you do that for her. Just put your hand where she shows you and press down hard."

Blake nodded and scrambled to his boss. Sheila put his hand in place and told him to bear down hard. Then she sprinted for the ladder. As rapidly as she could, she negotiated the ladder to the next level, and ran to where Tommy swung like a daredevil trapeze artist.

At her arrival he increased his effort, coming ever closer with each swing. "More slack," he called as his knee grazed the railing. The two medics paid out a foot, then another.

The gap closed. Another swing and he could grab hold of the railing and wrap his arm around it. Then he would be able to pull his legs up and get a knee on the deck.

Sheila didn't like it. He should be higher, not lower. If he was higher, he could get over the railing and drop onto the catwalk's deck. Just as she opened her mouth to yell this advice, Tommy grabbed the railing and let go of the rope entirely.

She reached out and grabbed his shirt as he scrabbled to pull his knees up onto the deck. His shirt rode up his back and she fell back, losing her grip on him. She sprang back up and leaned over him, groping for his belt. Her hand slipped away again, but she saved herself from falling down this time by grabbing his shirttail, raking his back with her nails in the process. Not relinquishing this purchase, futile as it was, she reached down with her other hand and finally hooked it around the belt. Heaving back, she felt the muscles in her back give way. His knee banged into her boot. Knowing she couldn't let go yet, she clung to him like an America's Cup sailor on a hard reach across the wind.

He got his other knee onto the deck and pulled a foot up. With the ball of his foot solidly on the deck he pushed up, carried over the rail by Sheila's weight.

"Got him," she called out. The man she had saved lay limply across her. She rolled him off, started to sit up, and froze in a paroxysm of seizing muscles. Flopping down she said, more to herself than to anyone else, "And myself, too."

"Sheila!" Swanson called. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine. But I can't move. Back's gone."

"Okay. Hang on. We'll get some help to you right away."

Swanson called up that they needed some manpower down here immediately, and another paramedic team. They now had four injured to transport, one of whom would need a backboard.

Paula had maintained a tenuous contact with all that was happening around her. After they had wrapped her up in the Ace bandages, the pain had lessened to a deep throbbing ache which absorbed most of her attention. She knew Bob was in some kind of trouble, but couldn't really get a handle on what the problem was. Only when all the yelling started did her focus on events sharpen.

She followed Tommy's rescue and understood that someone else had been injured, but didn't know who. She hoped it wasn't Tommy. He'd been tortured enough.

On the roof, Hill swore at the news of the new injury and turned to face Browne. Red at first tried to return a guileless look under Hill's baleful glare. When it met with little success, he tried what had worked so many times before. Bluster.

"What did you do to him?"

"Nothing, Red. We didn't do anything to him. You brought him in here with that sword. You put him in this situation because you failed to recognize that he couldn't handle this place. If you'd ever've taken the time, or just had the simple courtesy to take a look around and talk with us, you'd have realized that. I'm not going to stand here and pretend to know what set your boy off, but I will tell you that it was inevitable because you weren't honest with us, with him, or yourself. Now, get out of my sight."

Red opened his mouth to protest, but Hill cut him off. "Get on that elevator and go hide in your office till I come and get you, or I'll arrest you right here on the spot and have you thrown in a holding cell. Now move!"

Browne looked into the glowering face, eyes wide, certain that if he didn't get on the elevator of his own accord immediately, he would be placed on it as a broken and battered heap. He stepped back quickly out of Hill's reach and walked to the elevator.

Still smarting from Hill's tongue lashing, he walked into the caged vault, turned around, and watched the bottom door of the elevator rise from the floor to meet the descending top one and cut him off from everyone. The deputy manning the elevator had set it to go to the first floor and return immediately after he left it. Browne could not stop it or change it's destination. He was already a prisoner.

On the way down he reflected on what Hill had said. He was still angry, but he had cooled off enough to realize that what the captain had said had some truth to it, though he could have said it with more courtesy. Certainly he would have had their positions been reversed. Hadn't he always shown such respect?

The image of his arm brushing Paula McKenzie aside to grab the offending CPR policy statement gave him a moment's pause. Well, perhaps not that time. Though to be fair, it had been purely unintentional. And he had never done anything like that before. Or since. He deplored violence in all forms. He never countenanced it under any circumstances and certainly had never been violent himself intentionally.

A small gold cross smashing into a wall and his wife's horrified face flashed across his mind. The memory of her fear stabbed him. She'd been afraid of him. Of his temper. Of his reaction to finding that simple, plain cross.

A new image of a beautifully carved cane in his hands swept aside the one of his wife face. His right hand slid up to the cane's handle and pulled it away from the shaft which he held in his left. He looked into his son's eyes, saw the love there, and something else as he handed it to him. Pride? No, he had known then that hadn't been it. Dave had always been diffident. In that

moment, when the gleaming steel slid out of its sheath, his son beamed with... what? He had told himself at the time that his son had finally gained some self-confidence. Well, he had, but not because he had grown accomplished or had matured. He had gained a measure of self-confidence because he now possessed a concealed deadly weapon with the knowledge and skill to use it effectively. And that had made him little different, except in style, from the bullies who had tormented him most of his life.

The elevator banged to a stop, interrupting his musings. He opened the doors, stepped out, and closed the door. The elevator whirred, clanked, and disappeared. Lost in thought he headed for the Dispensary.

His career, he was now certain, was in shambles. A sickening emptiness filled his gut. As he sought a target to blame and lash out at, something Wanda had said at dinner Tuesday night came to mind. He had been going on about his problems with McKenzie and the rest of the crew here, and she had suggested that it might be helpful if he tried to look at things from their perspective. If nothing else, it would give him a better idea of what he was up against.

She was always doing that. She thought she was so clever, but she was really transparent. He loved her for that, plus a lot of other traits. And she was right, he realized. Again. The reason she'd had to take that approach, he suddenly realized, was his hair-trigger temper when someone told him he might be wrong.

As he approached Central, he began to realize that he had been mistaken about several things. He realized, now, that he had come in here with a highly biased view, and that he had refused to test it against the reality that confronted him because he took such great pride in his own lack of prejudice.

As he had stood there on the roof, unable to do anything except curse everyone else's incompetence and low character, listening to everyone's desperate attempts to save the people his Tommy had hurt, he began to see how his attitude had engendered the hostility he'd encountered, loathe though he was to admit it. His press conference, with that statement about rooting out the rot, had set the tone of his relationship with the entire department from the very beginning, before he had ever set foot inside the jail.

He should have seen that coming. If it had been someone else, he would have. Still they had been more circumspect in their animosity than he had been in his. He, in fact, had not been circumspect at all. Small wonder they hated him. He had given them little reason not to.

And then there was Ms—Mrs. McKenzie. For some reason he couldn't fathom, she had become the focus of his vitriol. Yet, as he now looked back with his new found self-honesty, she had shown him nothing but respect. Even when he had attacked her, she had not been so much hostile as exceedingly correct in her manner. He still couldn't figure out why he had felt so hostile to her. If he'd seen this reaction in a patient, he would have said they felt threatened by her. But she posed no threat to him. So why did he feel threatened? Now, in this moment of clear reflection, he could see that she had never given him the slightest reason to feel that way.

He turned around and went back to Central.

"Excuse me. How can I get to the fan?"

"What?"

"I want to help out up there. They've got a lot of injured people and need help. How do I get to them?"

The Central deputy explained the route, which was quite simple, and Browne took off.

Red wasn't fool enough to think that lending a helping hand would repair the damage he had done, not only to his career, but also, however indirectly, to those people up there, but he felt

compelled to try to make some kind of amends. Besides, he couldn't abandon Tommy. Not ever. He was his boy. His son. He had to help him in whatever way he could.

* * *

Harris hid in his tiny office, handling the routine operations of the jail with an uncommon intensity. He could find no surcease, though, from the appalling thoughts circling like hungry sharks in his mind, nor from the butterflies in his stomach that felt more like hungry hawks. He hoped that no one had seen him flip that switch on, or would figure out that he must have been the one to do it. At the same time he prayed that no one had been injured as a result of his thoughtless action. But his prayers were, he knew, tainted, so he didn't give himself much hope.

Perhaps, if he just kept his head down, so to speak, no one would notice him and this would all blow over. After all, he couldn't really be blamed for any of this. He had just been doing his job. And besides, Hill had never told him that he had shut the fan off. So actually, if you looked at it in that more proper light, it was really more Hill's fault than his own.

Feeling a little better, which translated as half the butterfly-hawks were dead, he returned to reading Mod A's report of contraband found in the recreation room of block three.

* * *

When Tommy had fallen on Sheila, he had hit his head on the concrete wall. The blow had knocked him out till she pushed him off. He didn't miss those few seconds because he woke up confused by his surroundings.

How in the devil had he wound up here, wherever here was?

The last clear memory he had was his step-father, Duane, slapping his head as he went into the Rubber Room. There were a lot of confused images of running and hiding in a big cave with lots of passages. And Melissa. Melissa was with him. But that wasn't possible. She been dead for twenty years.

He had heard the woman next to him shout something, but it hadn't registered. Then more shouting had come from above them and she had called back an answer. Her back? She couldn't move. Her back was killing her.

Quickly he turned to her, forgetting his own painful head and the blood running down his forehead. He absently wiped it away as though it was sweat and said, "Let me help you. I'm a nurse."

Sheila stared unbelievably at Thompson. His voice's timbre had deepened, though she still heard the echoes of the boy's speech in its cadence. Before she would let him do anything, she was going to check him out.

"What's your name?"

"David Thompson. I'm a nurse. Can you tell me where we are?"

"In the jail, on a catwalk in the main ventilation shaft. How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine. Can you feel your legs?"

"Yes. And wiggle my toes. It's a back spasm."

"Then just lie as still as possible until we can get you out of here."

Sheila, rarely one to keep her thoughts private, almost retorted with a epithet about his being the cause of all this trouble, but she realized in the next instant that the man kneeling at her side

was not the one she had pulled over the railing. She wasn't sure what was going on with him. She just hoped it would last until they got her out of here.

Swanson called to Harry, who had returned to hold pressure on Davies thigh, for a status check.

"Still bleeding when I let up. His pulse is getting more rapid."

Swanson came over and checked Davies blood pressure. "Still up there, but we've got to get him out of here ASAP. He's the first to go."

Davies, weakened by the continuing blood loss, drifted in and out of consciousness despite his desire to stay alert. He had a vague understanding of his bleak situation, but not how bleak. When he could think, he had trouble understanding how Thompson's little prick with the sword could have sapped him of all his strength. In his clearer moments, the word artery registered, but those moments were stretching farther and farther apart.

"Gentlemen. How can I help?"

Davies tried to lunge at the voice. He managed only to raise his head enough to see he hadn't hallucinated it. Instead, he had to content himself with a rage-choked command not to let the filthy, slimey toad touch him.

Swanson looked from Davies to Browne and back again.

"He bears a certain animosity towards me," Browne said. "Understandable under the circumstances, I suppose."

"Who are you?" Swanson asked.

"G. Russell Browne, Senior Correctional Nurse of this jail. I am at your disposal. What can I do to help?"

"Does that mean you're a real nurse? An RN?"

"Yes."

"Then go check on those other two. I need vitals, including level of consciousness."

Browne took the blood pressure cuff and stethoscope and walked over to Paula.

"Don't let him touch her!" Davies shouted. Or, more correctly, tried to.

"It's okay, Bob," Paula called back weakly. "He won't hurt me."

"No, Mrs. McKenzie," Browne said as he knelt at her side and wrapped the BP cuff around her right arm. "I never intended that any of you should be hurt, especially like this, and I am truly sorry this happened. Please accept my apologies."

"Apology accepted, Mr. Browne. I'm glad you're here to help. Thank you."

Four bewildered deputies streamed onto the gloomy platform from the ladder. Swanson quickly assigned two of them the task of opening the trapdoor to the catwalk below. He assigned Frick to assist Harry. Frack he gave to Browne. Frack wrinkled his nose in disgust, but took his place on Paula's left side without comment.

Paula, for some reason now more alert, perhaps because of the increased activity around her, smiled reassuringly at Frack. "I'm okay. I think Mr. Blake needs help more than I do."

"Yes, surprisingly she is doing well, considering the circumstances," Browne said. "You stay with her and I'll go see to Mr. Blake."

Harry's new partner took over holding pressure after donning a pair of gloves. He blanched when his flashlight picked up Davies shredded, blood soaked pants.

"Always looks worse than it is," Harry said.

Browne passed him the blood pressure cuff, reporting Paula's vital signs.

"Still stable. Good," Harry said and then took Davies' vitals, which were falling. He reported all three to Swanson.

Below, two more deputies showed up on the lower catwalk and went to Sheila at Thompson's call to them.

"Tommy!" Browne yelled. "Are you okay?"

"Browne? Is that you down there?" Hill yelled.

"Yeah, George. I'm fine," Dave called back at the same time.

Swanson yelled, "He's a nurse, We need him here right now. You can bust him later."

"Okay, Browne," Hill said reluctantly, "You help them. But you are not in charge down there. The paramedics are. You're just hired help. Then you report to the Watch Commander's office as soon as you're done."

"Yes, sir." Browne turned back towards Tommy. "You sure you're okay son?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little bump on the head is all."

"Stay there and help them get whoever that is with you out. Then you'd better report to the Dispensary till they can bring in another nurse to take over. I will join you as soon as we're through up here."

"Great!" Swanson muttered, "Now all we need is our backup team and maybe we can actually get everyone out here before any of them dies."

As if in answer, Cooper yelled down that the backup team had just pulled up to the outer security yard gate. Swanson yelled back that they needed someone to go to Sheila's location with a backboard, but he didn't know where the nearest access was. A deputy with her shouted the proper hatch designation which Swanson relayed.

"Then we need two litters on the other side below the trapdoor. Have them pick up ours. What's that hatch number?"

"Victor niner."

"It's hatch Victor niner. We also need more Ringers down here stat."

Cooper repeated the orders and confirmed that the new team had received them. "But we're out of Ringers up here and I got no way to get it to you anyhow. They'll bring some up with them."

Browne automatically checked the two I.V. bags on Shiela's hooks, and slowed the flow rate. He estimated they had fifteen minutes at most, and that only if he slowed the rate down to where it wouldn't do much good. A more realistic expectation was about half that time.

Swanson observed this and approved. "I want you to help Harry prep the lieutenant for transfer, Mr. Browne."

Davies wanted to protest, but couldn't find the strength. God, how he hated being like this. It was worse than being a baby.

Doors crashed open. Equipment banged through the tunnels and up through the trapdoor. In a whirl of grasping hands, intense voices, and throbbing pain from the reapplied tourniquet, Davies felt himself lifted into the litter, strapped down so tightly he could not draw a deep breath, and carried to the trapdoor. Harry and Frick and Frack slid the foot of his litter into the opening and lifted him up. Looking down over his feet, he saw two deputies and two paramedics with their arms upraised to receive him. As though going over the top of the first rise of a rollercoaster, he slid down to their waiting hands, leaving his stomach on the platform above. He had always hated rollercoasters.

They brought him down rapidly and set him on the catwalk just long enough for his stomach to find its way home. Then they lifted him up and swung his feet into the tunnel, which meant his head hung out over the railing for a couple of terrifying seconds. Then the thrill ride continued to the ambulance gurney on the other side of the hatch.

He looked up as the gurney raced through the halls and noticed that the IV bag had magically refilled. Someone released the tourniquet in the elevator and reapplied direct pressure, snapping him out of his contemplation of the IV bag trick. All in all, he thought as they loaded him into the ambulance, I think I'd rather ride a rollercoaster.

As soon as Davies was through the trapdoor, the second litter was passed up and Paula strapped into it. She found the ride thoroughly enjoyable, but then, she had always loved rollercoasters.

Epilogue

Paula raised her head out of the warm, crystalline water and blew her snorkel clear. She turned to her left and found T.J. raising his head about ten feet away. The sun glinted off the stark white scar that ran perpendicular to the left strap of her swimsuit. Perhaps someday the sun would darken it, but never enough to match the surrounding skin. She raised her left arm and waved. T.J. waved back and pointed toward the shore some twenty yards away. She nodded and they put their heads back in the water and swam over the coral and brilliantly colored fish to the sand.

Sitting on a grass mat on the sand, Paula removed the underwater camera which hung from her right wrist, towed dry, and laid back to soak up the Hawaiian sun. T.J. dried his face and stretched out beside her on his mat.

“Are you happy?” T.J. asked.

“Yes,” she said. “As long as you take me to every arboretum and over every road we can find.”

“I thought I already had.”

“I think there’s one more on the north side of island.”

“I think it was a mistake to start our tour of the National Parks here. After all, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is on Hawaii, not Kauai.”

“But how could you expect me to pass up the Garden Isle?”

T.J. laughed. “Silly of me, I know.” He was quiet for a moment, signaling in that special, almost telepathic communication they shared that he had something serious to talk about.

Before he could voice it, she said. “I really am happy, darling. I may not have had much choice in the matter, but even if it works out that we can’t make it to every National Park, or even half of them, you were right. I needed to leave there. What was it Hawkeye said once on *M*A*S*H*? ‘A sucking chest wound is God’s way of telling you to take a break?’”

“Something like that, but I think it was Roy Scheider in *Blue Thunder*.”

They both lapsed into silence and their memories, and let the April sun turn their skin a deeper shade of leather.

Paula’s memories were of the rush to the hospital, waking up from surgery to see T.J.’s worried face beside her, learning, as the days of recuperation passed, what had actually happened over those final four days she had been a jailhouse nurse, and what followed as a result of them.

T.J. remembered the call at two-fifteen in the morning from Captain Hill, his rush to the hospital, and the interminable waiting. First for the surgeon’s report, and then for her to come to the room, and finally for her smile when she opened her eyes to find him beside her.

The most interesting revelation to Paula had been how the two hangings had come to be so similar. It had been mere happenstance that both men had been in the same area when two deputies had passed by discussing how some inmate years ago had wound up a quadriplegic because the rope he had made with a sheet to hang himself had broken. Neither had mentioned toweling as a substitute. It hadn’t even occurred to them. Each man must have looked around his cell for an alternative and settled on the towel as the next best choice.

The last she had heard, Avery remained in a coma. He was decerebrate now, and a ward of the state because no one would claim him. If he had been a protected witness, the U.S. Marshall’s Office wasn’t saying. Paula had commented to Davies, upon learning of his

suspicious, that their silence was actually inspiring. “If I ever needed them to take care of me like that, I wouldn’t have a moment’s hesitation.”

The final report on Carter from the Medical Examiner had conclusively supported what everyone had already surmised. All she had done was keep him alive long enough to die in the hospital. Nothing could have saved him.

Davies had survived intact and returned to duty after three weeks of hell, as he called his enforced inactivity. It would be a long time before he retired.

Mason had developed a peritonitis that almost killed him. As it was he lost a third of his bowel and wound up with a permanent ileostomy and a medical retirement. The last she had heard, he was moping around his apartment, drinking beer and cussing at everyone who came to visit.

G. Russell Browne went to Sheriff Abbott in person that morning and tendered his resignation, in the form of immediate retirement. Abbott had no charge on which to arrest Browne, despite Hill’s threats. He hadn’t brought the weapon into the jail, Thompson had. He had failed to advise them about it, but that was only a breach of jail administrative rules. Under the circumstances, he felt Browne had earned some consideration because he had helped out and had made no fuss about leaving. And truth to tell, he really had earned his pension, which would only amount to a little less than half of his best year’s salary. Abbott figured that was punishment enough.

The Sheriff then dumped his trained sharks, and initiated a plan for improving the jail’s medical department. He immediately appointed Jennifer Rhoads as Browne’s replacement and set in motion the process to elevate the senior nurse position to the equivalent of captain, making the medical department a civilian division on a par with patrol, civil, and corrections. The rest of that plan included doubling the staff so there would be two nurses on duty around the clock, and ordering most of the equipment that Paula and Owen Peterson had been requesting for years. He said he’d find room for it in the budget somewhere.

He had little trouble selling the package to the penny-pinching commissioners. They recognized that they had dodged a fusillade of lawsuits this time, but could not ever hope to do so again. As it was, they still had to deal with the suit brought by Foster’s estranged wife and three children.

Abbott also won the election by a very comfortable margin. It turned out that he need never have worried about the election. Most of the supposed furor had been orchestrated by a consortium composed of the disgruntled former deputy running against him, a lawyer whose avowed cause was the elimination of incarceration as a form of punishment, and the libertine newspaper’s publisher who had an intense personal dislike of Abbott for reasons which he refused to explain. As the local TV news revealed these machinations in their election reports, several lawsuits for libel were filed by various other candidates who had also fallen into disfavor with the publisher. The publisher was brazening it out for the time being, certain that being the publisher of the only newspaper in the county assured his paper of survival. Of course, it didn’t hurt his cause that he was a primary source of the public’s information about the cases.

Abbott had told Paula that she was being given medical retirement at full pay the day she left the hospital. He had also revealed to her his plans for the department, and that he had fired his political advisors. He added his thanks for her honesty and forthrightness through the years and said he had learned a valuable lesson. From now on he would just let his record speak for itself.

Paula had, of course, protested that she should only be given the retirement she was entitled to, that her injury was not incapacitating, and that, had she not already decided to retire, she

could have returned to work in no more than six weeks. He explained to her she had no choice in the matter because the Board of Commissioners had unanimously passed a resolution mandating it. It was the first time in recent memory, he said, that they had voted unanimously on anything—except their own pay raises. Privately, she suspected they just wanted to avoid a lawsuit and this was their way of buying her off.

T.J.'s response to her supposition had been that being bought off in this case wasn't necessarily a bad thing—as long as she didn't sell herself too cheaply. After he did some quick calculations, he said he would never be able to call her a cheap date again. Counting the fully paid medical insurance, they had actually given her a raise.

Duane Biddle, Thompson's step-father, survived his injuries long enough to be indicted by the Grand Jury for the murders of Ethel Biddle and Melissa Thompson on the strength of Thompson's testimony. He was found dead of natural causes in his protective custody cell at morning roll call a week after his arraignment. He had died in his sleep, unrepentant and unashamed, still proclaiming the righteousness of his deeds.

Thompson's story became known when his testimony became public. That night, after escaping from Duane, he had been picked up by a man who had been visiting his son and gotten lost in that remote corner of the county. He took the boy to the hospital. The following day Thompson spiked a high fever. He developed a severe osteomyelitis in his right leg which would take two surgeries and ten weeks to eradicate. It left him with a right leg that was an inch shorter than his left. As he grew older, the discrepancy between his legs became less noticeable, but he would always walk with a limp.

His mother and sister had been discovered the same day his fever spiked. It took no time at all to determine that Duane had most likely been the one to kill them, but he had seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. It also took very little time for one of the nurses on the pediatric ward to realize that his patient was the missing son. That nurse was George Russell Browne.

Thompson was Paula's saddest memory. As soon as Jenny had relieved him that morning he had reported directly to Captain Hill to be arrested. Hill obliged. Browne quickly arranged for the best defense attorney he knew of in the county to take his case.

The attorney had wanted to plead temporary insanity, but Thompson had refused. Not even Browne could get him to change his mind. At his hearing Thompson said that, while he may have been in some sort of altered state of consciousness as the result of his boyhood trauma, he could not in good conscience deny responsibility for his actions. In fact, he was deathly afraid that he might do it again. The judge accepted the guilty plea, with extenuating circumstances, and sentenced him to three years, the best he could do under the new determinate sentencing laws of the state. Paula remained haunted by the smile she had seen on Thompson's face as the bailiff had escorted him out of the courtroom. It hadn't been one of triumph. It had been identical to those she had seen on the faces of terminal cancer patients, who, because the illness is so excruciating, don't think dying's such a bad thing at all.

After the sentencing, she approached Browne outside the courtroom and extended her hand. Surprised, he took it in a brief handshake and hesitantly met her eyes.

"You did a remarkable job raising him, Mr. Browne. Truly remarkable. My congratulations. And my condolences."

"Couldn't have been that good a job if he's going to prison."

"The reasons for that have nothing and everything to do with you. Why he did what he did had nothing to do with you. Without your love and support, he could undoubtedly have done much worse. And without your instilling in him the strength of character that you yourself have

demonstrated these past couple of months, I doubt he would have accepted responsibility for those actions. You should feel no shame. You are to be commended."

"I can't take the credit. Wanda here deserves most of it. She spent more time with him than I did."

Looking at the tired, but still pretty woman beside him, she said, "Then you both deserve the credit. I'm Paula McKenzie, Mrs. Browne." She extended her hand and Wanda took it hesitantly.

Browne said, "Thank you. Coming from you, it means a lot."

"A great deal, actually," Wanda Browne added.

"And Mrs. McKenzie, Browne said."

"Paula. Please."

"All right. Paula. I know I apologized that night for all that happened to you, but I need to also say how very sorry I am for the way I treated you. I was completely out of line and my treatment of you was inexcusable."

"Apology accepted."

Wanda smiled at her for the first time and added her thanks.

With that they parted, Paula's heart lightened by having taken the opportunity to relieve itself of the burden of animosity she had felt until the trial, and by the realization of what kind of man Browne truly was. She hoped that his burden had also been lightened, though there was no way she could know that with any certainty other than that his shoulders seemed less hunched and his step a little more spring in it as he walked away with his arm around his wife.

And what of Sgt. Harris? Well, just as Davies had predicted, he was given his lieutenant's bars in March. In a year, no more than two, Davies had predicted upon hearing of the promotion, there was little doubt that Harris would be wearing the double bars of a captain. Unless....