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Mystics on the Road to Vanishing Point

a novel

by John Robinson

Also by John Robinson:

Love Letters Unsent to People Unmet, a book of poetry Love Letters and Mystics are both available in unabridged audiobook form as well. www.onetusk.com for more details

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MYSTICS ON THE ROAD TO VANISHING POINT

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Introduction to the Online Version

My first novel took five years to write. Partly because it was, indeed, my first novel and your first time using heavy machinery is always a time for caution and delicacy.

Partly the length of time was because I was going to college full-time, working full-time and being in a band full-time all at once. And writing. Looking back on it now, I'm amazed I survived the experience, honestly.

After the novel was finished it sat on my hard drive and in printed versions at friends' houses for a very long time. I was waiting for the publishing industry to grant my passage into the Promised Land of Being in Print.

Oh, I wasn't waiting. Not in the sense of resting on my ass and waiting for them to somehow magically knock on my door and say, "My sweet Christ! The Great American Novel! There it is! Where the hell have you been all our lives?" No, I submitted to places--but anyone who's submitted novels for publication probably knows that it makes submitting short stories for publication look like a walk in the park. A nice park, even. With ducks. And people playing frisbee.

Basically, for those who haven't had the pleasure: you submit the first fifty pages and a synopsis. Then you sit on that aforementioned ass of yours and wait. And wait. Then, if you're lucky...you wait some more. And usually, after nine months to a year, you get it back and chances are it hasn't even been read.

After I decided that the entire routine was sheer idiocy and an outdated paradigm that somehow we had all bought into--this idea that you need someone's permission to get published, especially in this day and age--I quit sending the book out and decided to wait until I could do the whole thing myself.

I started small, with a chapbook: *Love Letters Unsent to People Unmet*. Falling on your face self-publishing poetry is a short fall compared to--something that at the time I started conceiving this the only option--printing up five thousand or so copies of a novel and then sleeping on them for the next six years as you desperately try to sell them.

Love Letters sold. And sold out. Then it came time to figure out how the hell to move onto the next project, *Mystics*. Every print on demand place I looked at seemed like it was setup more to serve strict vanity press people. You know the type: they want their Aunt Matilda to buy a copy, but they don't exactly have plans for world domination. I prefer to think of myself as a mad-as-hell-and-not-going-to-take-it-anymore press. And if you've ever looked into actually printing up copies of a book--damn, it's expensive, son. And then there's the whole sleeping on them bit I mentioned above. Bad for the back.

Then God tapped me on the skull. Not literally, because that would have, you know, hurt. But figuratively. Three Moons Media (<http://www.threemoonsmedia.com>) started up and wanted guinea pigs. And they offered to waive their initial fees. Talk about a blinking neon sign for the artist who has no money.

So the book came out, and for a novel that no one's ever heard of from a guy that no one's ever heard of (and those who have heard of him are trying desperately to forget they've heard of him) it's sold well. I am not displeased.

Then Warren Ellis' mailing list (<http://www.diepunyhumans.com>) pointed me to Cory Doctorow's website (<http://www.craphound.com>). Doctorow had released his books in hardcopy and in softcopy under a Creative Commons License (<http://www.creativecommons.org>) simultaneously--and the hardcopy books were still selling. Selling well, even.

"Well," in this case meaning "Better than mine." And, bonus: lots more people were reading his books. Again, even if you take into account just his sales position(s) on Amazon--barring all those who were downloading it--more readers than my book had. And I figure: people read your books, people like your books, people want to give you money in some form or fashion because, in theory, they want to read and like more books by you. Call me crazy.

So I figured it looked like a good bandwagon, so I've hopped on it. *Love Letters*, both book and audiobook, are available online under a Creative Commons License. And now, this novel. The license is coming up quickly, so I have to say the rest of this and get gone.

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So that's it. The next book is screaming at me from the next room, so I gotta go feed it. Be good.

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For my wife, Maegan.

Prologue

1.

Two hours before, the boxes of cigars, one blue and one pink, sat in his lap nervously anticipating which of them would be chosen. Now these same boxes were on the standard-issue waiting room table, forgotten along with the obligatory copies of Redbook, Cosmopolitan, and Woman's Day, all of them hopelessly out of date.

His unnerved mind wondered absently what in the world they were thinking when they decided on women's magazines for the waiting room by the maternity ward. I don't think most of the women in this part of the hospital are much interested in the three latest recipes for better brownies, he thought to himself, maybe Anesthesiologist's Monthly would have been a better choice.

The seat which he had inhabited was vacant, the indentation his presence left now little more than a memory on the vinyl. If he could feel his legs, he would know they were tired. They were sick of pacing back and forth, to and fro; they would be begging, please, can we sit? can we just sit? He ignored them, however, for his mind was elsewhere.

The green gown he shambled around in could have, under some circumstances, symbolized the promise of life, but the sickly fluorescent lighting turned its color into something less than desirable. The garment, which was now completely unnecessary, was as forgotten as the matching slippers he had been given in order to witness the hallowed event.

There had been no pretense when the situation began to go wrong. There had been no time for pretense. He was instantly escorted outside. After a few minutes, the doctor in charge had come out briefly to explain. Mills? Miller? what was his name? did it matter? "Situation" was the term that Mills/Miller had used. It had never occurred to him before that such an everyday word could take on such ominous overtones. He supposed the simplest of words did so in such a place as this, one that specialized in healing and death.

That one simple word seemed to hang in the air maliciously each time it escaped the obstetrician's lips. He had not cared for it.

The details of the "situation" seemed to be just out of his reach at the present moment. There seemed to be a maelstrom at the very center of his mind. It was barely held in check by sheer force of will, fueled by the knowledge that he would do her no good as a gibbering idiot.

The short obstetrician with the glasses, whose name he could not remember to save his life, had covered the "situation" quickly before disappearing back into the delivery room. The labor becoming complicated...the baby not completely dropped...some other things...he tried to focus, but it was so hard. It did not all come to him.

He grew suddenly frustrated and angry at his helplessness. He was a doctor himself, was he not? That damn piece of paper on the wall of his study meant something, didn't it? There had to be something he could do. But the answer came back to him quickly, no, on both counts. Not here, and not now. Now and here, he was just another worried husband who in his real life happened to be a general practitioner. That real life was long gone, though, and he had to deliver his wife into the care of strangers.

For at least the hundredth time he shuffled distractedly to the swinging double doors to look through the plastic windows for some sign of something. For at least the hundredth time, he saw nothing but another set of double doors just ten yards away, staring back at him dumbly. He felt in some dim fashion that he had always done this, and everything else that had occurred before this last hour, before he was taken from the delivery room to this semi-existence in the waiting room, had been a dream and nothing more. It all felt so unreal.

He stood there in the sterile hallway and looked around the sparse setting. Nurses occasionally strolled by, little white hats pinned to their hair, trademark apologetic half-smiles pinned to their faces, but beyond that there was no traffic. At this time of early morning, just after the passing of the previous day and the creation of the new, not much stirred.

He felt more alone and helpless than ever before.

He finally went to the seat which he vacated a lifetime ago and sat. He massaged his temples, and an image came to him. It was her, coming out of the darkness to comfort him. It was always her at moments like this, showing her face, and dispelling the darkness that gripped his mind. All she ever had to do was smile, and the power of that smile never failed to work wonders. It had slain him the first of many times at a mixer in his second year of college. It carried him through the hard times of internship when he knew he was going to chuck it all, and become a nurse. Forget the fact that he weathered school, forget the fact that it was a step down from his goals, he was sick of it all, and that was final until, of course, he saw her smile and she told him it was all going to be all right. The chaos in his mind retreated at the sight of her. Sandy was always able to help him face it. And when she said it was going to be all right, there was a certain something in her manner that you just had to believe her.

They never expected her to become pregnant. They had known that childbirth would be difficult, if not impossible, with Sandy's condition. But sometimes the impossible happened. They learned that the joyous accident had most definitely occurred, and with the dangers in mind, they pressed on nonetheless. Now, this.

He stood up, and not sure what good standing up would do, sat once more. He was not sure what good either sitting, standing, or anything else would do, but he remained sitting anyway. He ran a minutely trembling hand through his dark hair, and laughed a dry, hollow laugh. Never again, he thought, because first thing we're going to do after this is all over is get those tubes taken care of. I'm pretty sure we can agree that once was wonderful, and now that we've been there, we can do something else now. "Honey," he saw himself telling her as she cradled their only child in her arms, "I think it's time to move on to other things."

He laughed again. Louder this time, as if he was trying to fill the vacant hallways with life, and it rang back at him from all directions. Sandy's smile was always infectious, and he obliged the friendly vision by grinning from ear to ear.

He leaned over to the table and stared intently at the two boxes of cigars that rested there. A silly last minute thing, he mused. The gift shop downstairs had them, so he thought to himself why the hell not, and bought

them. They peered back at him as if to ask, "Well, have we decided which it is yet?"

Reflecting back, he had no idea whom he meant to hand them out to in the first place, for he was alone here. Hell, he thought now, I'll run amok through this hospital giving them to everyone if someone will just come out here with some good news.

With a finger that mocked steadiness, he stroked the plastic of the pink box.

So intent was his focus on the box of cigars that he never heard the doctor, the one whose name he could not remember to save his life, come up on his right. "Dr. Hardin?"

He saw, actually saw himself standing bolt upright in surprise, and jerking his hand away from the box as if he had been caught doing something that might be considered profane.

He did not do this.

Instead, he froze there, his finger still touching the plastic which showcased the box's contents. Only his head turned to face the speaker. He was quite sure his voice had left him. He was positive that he had left it over by the double doors, much like one might leave a set of keys in another pair of pants. When he tried it, however, it appeared to work perfectly. "Yes, Dr. Miller?"

The name had come to him like divine providence. If he had ever stopped to look back and think it over, that feeling of instant recall might have been frightening.

However, that one moment turned out to be the only thing about this day that never crossed his mind again.

"The baby is going to be fine, doctor," Miller told him. "It's a strong little boy, fighting and kicking."

He caressed the box of pink cigars once more with a hand that felt like someone else's. Then he sat up straight and stared ahead with knowledge far too sobering for words.

But two came.

"And Sandy?"

2.

The two of them stared at the letter, unbelieving. The envelope which had carried it faithfully this far lay on the faded tablecloth of the kitchen table, forgotten. One side was torn completely open.

Both of his hands gripped the letter with a subtle panic which suggested he was absolutely sure if he were to let go for even one moment, it would either fly away or disappear completely from view.

Her left hand gripped it just below his right, as if she agreed with the idea that it was just a slant unreal to be allowed to stay for long on this plane of existence.

They seemed fixated on the object as a whole. All of it was studied with inhuman scrutiny: the onion skin paper, the halfmeaningless letterhead at the top, the no-nonsense Roman font throughout. There was no need to have their eyes move from left to right across the page, they had both perused its contents numerous times.

What seemed like three days later, she was able to speak.

When she did, it was a whisper from another world. "This was your mother's father?"

He had been in deep meditation over the letter, oblivious to his surroundings. Her voice, though faint, still managed to visibly startle him. It was the reaction of a little boy being caught doing something he has been told expressly not to do.

He turned his head away from the letter, annoyed that his attention had been shifted from something so valuable. "What?"

She pointed at the letter. The long nail of her index finger made a slight scratching sound on the surface of the onion paper.

Don't hurt it! a frantic voice inside her mind said with shrill clarity, It might not be good if you abuse it in any way! Be careful! She knew it was both her own voice, and the voice of her mother. Her mother, who had served as curator of the museum that had looked suspiciously like the house in which she grew up.

She cast all this aside for later consideration, and returned her full focus to her momentarily dumbfounded husband. "Your mother's father. This him?"

Their abrasiveness escalated with each stunted exchange. He made no move to correct this, but instead slowly turned back to the page they were holding. "Yes, this was him," he said softly, with a vague and unfamiliar tone of recollection and remorse.

Inadvertently, he brought the mood back down again, for his words managed to remind both of them that there was death involved somewhere with this. Her flaring nerves began to cool again with this knowledge in place. They throbbed still, however, and she recognized it as a feeling that would linger. It always did in moments like these. Knowing nothing to say at the present time, she said exactly that, and watched the page in his hands intently.

He continued, as if he had not finished a complete thought when speaking before. "We only saw him...well, I only saw him twice." He studied the back of his hands with mute interest. "Once was when I was just a little kid, and then when I was in junior high.

I barely remember him. I know he was old and disgusting, and he didn't look like he had five bucks to his name. The thing I remember most, though, was that Mom and Dad constantly talked about his money."

He looked at her as if a question had been raised, and then proceeded to answer it. "He got lucky with stocks. Very, very lucky. I don't know if it was all luck, or some inside help, who knows."

His eyes were lost in boxes of reminiscence, while hers looked at the numerical characters on the sheet. A question formed in her mind. "Why you?" Her eyes flicked back to his face. "You said you had only seen him twice."

"Me and my second cousin Frank are his only surviving relatives. The only reason I got more than Frank was maybe because Frank lived around there and granddad probably was sick of seeing him, where he had only seen me twice." An utterly inappropriate laugh escaped his lips. He touched the paper in an uncharacteristic gesture of mourning. "No chance to get sick of me," he repeated, and as he said this, he lit his fifth cigarette for the day and inhaled from it thoughtfully.

"Died two days before they took the phone," she commented more to herself than anyone else. "We're lucky they tried to find us through the mail." The thought of having this letter never arrive in the first place became almost as terrible as the idea of it suddenly combusting out of existence in front of them. Her hand

inadvertently tightened on the idol.

"If this pans out like I think it's going to," he told her, smiling, his eyes never leaving the icon of their affection, "having the phone disconnected is going to be the absolute last problem we ever have."

This brought a smile to her lips, and she deposited this smile on his cheek with a kiss that was unexpected from both parties. The corners of his lips twitched upward slightly with mild pleasure, and he touched his cheek. She drew back slowly, surprised at herself.

She looked out the kitchen window, past the sun-yellowed curtains there, to the overcast sky beyond. No answer there, either, and the silence needed to be filled. "Is the baby okay?" It was the only thing she could think of.

The grin slowly faded from his face. "Lemme go make sure he hadn't climbed out of his crib again." He turned, disgruntled, and left her alone in the kitchen with their prize.

She looked the letter over again carefully, to make sure there was no mistake. Of course, there was not. She would need to make a call tomorrow while he was at work. She needed to tell the lawyer to call it all off, throw out the papers, burn them, whatever. It was all so simple. It was going to get even simpler, it seemed.

He called from the other room to report on the condition of the child, and she took a lingering look at the letter, setting it down on the faded tablecloth ever so gently, before going to join them.

Twenty-One Years

Part One

Chapter One

JACK

Jack Hardin stood with the wind blowing through his dark brown hair, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his best black slacks. His head hung down, his gaze intent upon the marker of his father's grave. He had visited the spot enough to have memorized every detail, so though his eyes looked there, they looked nowhere.

Jack stood there and tried to make sense of it all. He was sure, absolutely sure, that this was the hardest thing he would ever have to do.

The morning was clear, apart from a few clouds huddling around the sun for warmth. There was a bird delivering a morning sermon from a tree overhanging the edge of the cemetery. On days when the wind was right, Jack could hear the choir singing from the First Baptist Church three blocks over. Today was not one of those days, however, so he could not. Even if the wind had been right, Jack would not have listened, for he paid no attention to anything around him. Cars passed the cemetery, heading north toward Highway 15 and out of town, unnoticed.

He reserved his attention strictly for his father. All the various aspects of Sunday for Jack were summarized in that place. It was the only church he ever attended, the only one he felt he needed.

Taking a moment away from his reverie, he noticed the grass.

It had begun to encroach upon the bronze plaque with its raised letters declaring his father's presence. He bent and began pulling up the shoots. The few intruders were ripped up by Jack's slow, thoughtful hands.

He did not care for the cemetery, although it was not the purpose of the place which gave him pause. Being the son of a doctor had done something to prepare him for the inevitable.

Jack disliked the cemetery because it seemed to have lost its significance. There was a kind of perennial dignity in the large headstones of old. Now, the newer sections of the cemetery had only plaques set in the ground. Even a vase for flowers was conveniently provided: you twisted a knob in the plaque, pulled it up, turned it over, and there was a place for the plastic flowers you bought downtown.

Jack had a theory as to why the majestic gravestones were no more. The plaques were not designed with aesthetic value in mind, not to be pleasing to the relatives who came to pay respects. They were not even created to maximize the space available, still not the noblest of reasons, but at least practical.

The idea Jack subscribed to was this: the plaques were now used so the boys who did the mowing could do their job easier and faster. He had seen them once or twice, going back and forth across the spaces on their riding mowers with a pair of headphones in their ears, and not a thought in their heads. Back and forth.

The place had gone from a series of memorials to one of receptacles. This was how Jack felt.

He cast aside the blades of grass, and with them his complaints about the cemetery. He remained bent over the grave for some moments longer.

DENNIS HARDIN, the plaque told him with no emotion in its soundless voice, December 25, 1942 December 28, 1992, and that was all. No epitaph.

Seeing no reason to remain as he was, he stood up and looked around him. He was near the middle of the cemetery, with nothing to be seen but a wasteland of lives.

He returned his gaze to his father. Fifty years old, he thought, fifty, and gone. He strained his mind to think of how he had gotten here from the time two years before, and could not seem to make any logical connection.

Forty-eight and gone, a voice in his mind told him sharply. You mean forty-eight, and those two years are the reason. If only you hadn't started to mourn him while he was still alive...

"Shut up," he responded out loud.

Instantly, and not altogether unsurprisingly, the voice obeyed.

He took one last look at his father's grave. Then he turned and started back on the road toward home. Or his house, rather. But he would be back. The following Sunday, in fact.

He didn't need a voice to tell him that.

He had three false starts on the walk home.

He kept jerking his hand to his right back pocket where he kept the small notepad. He always kept a pen in his breast pocket, or clipped just inside his collar, if he was wearing a T-shirt. During his return trip, his hand never quite made it up to retrieve the pen.

By the time he had touched the leather cover of the pad, the feeling had subsided. The song had not begun to play in his head, as he thought it was going to.

The third time he found himself standing on a street corner with the pad in one hand and his pen in the other, the leather cover of the pad flipped open. He had the top off the pen and the tip was pressed against the exposed blank page, waiting, waiting.

The only thing it put there before he folded the pad closed and placed it back in his pocket was a blue inkspot. Another false alarm. But this one had been a good one. He could almost reach out and touch the chords he needed with the tips of his fingers though that did little to dull his disappointment.

These false starts had been happening so often, he had grown used to them. His muse had grown callused and tired.

He rounded the corner of Third and Main, heading away from Highway 15, and toward his house. He took some consolation in the knowledge that at least the muse was not dead. She still spoke inside him on occasion, and those occasions more than made up for the long lapses in their friendship. Two months ago, he had finally been able to complete his fifth major composition. The fifth composition he had been especially proud of, he added to that thought. Others had been completed only to find themselves soon after in an unmarked box of juvenilia in the back of his closet. This latest completed work was the fifth to remain in the piano bench for easy access. Only the worthy creations had a place there.

That voice in his head spoke up again, adding still more. That last one was finished a long time ago, Jack, you just never bothered to put it down on paper.

Stephen Drake drove by in his Camaro with the dangling muffler that he never found important enough to repair. Stephen waved as he drove past, and then lobbed a newspaper into the Simmons' front yard, where only the orange plastic wrapping saved the news from death at the hands of their automatic sprinkler system.

That Stephen, Jack mused fleetingly, always prepared. Jack waved back. Stephen had turned to throw just in time to miss a wince that had moved over Jack's face like a shroud. It was the voice, still speaking in its accusatory tone.

That fifth one you're so proud of getting it out of you was like pulling teeth.

Stop, he told the voice. But he obviously did not command the respect he had in the cemetery, either that, or this particular voice was not afraid of him. This voice did not want to comply.

Face it, Jack, you haven't had anything really original, anything really new since...

The Smiths' brick wall that separated their immaculately kept yard from the sidewalk was on his right. Before he was aware he was moving, he had taken his right arm, and swung it into the wall very deliberately and very hard. His hand smacked against the wall with a sickening sound, and a slick bolt of pain raced up his arm.

Jack stopped and grabbed his throbbing right hand with his left. He clutched his wounded hand to his chest, his breath hissing in and out through clenched teeth. Two thoughts occurred to him simultaneously. First, was that he had succeeded in stopping the voice completely. Second, was that the method had been as effective as it was stupid.

He let his right hand go warily, as if part of him expected it to misbehave again. He looked at the back of it, and was not entirely surprised to see blood welling up from a few small puncture wounds.

None of them were serious, and he would see to them when he arrived at his home. House, he corrected. He clutched his bleeding hand to his chest as he walked, knowing that he had been here before.

Debra did not look up from the kitchen table when Jack entered through the front door, nor did Jack expect her to. She sat there, with one hand fishing in the customary bag of pretzels on her right, and the thumb of the other hand holding open a book, pressing hard on the spine. He knew without inspection it was one of those ridiculous romance novels she spent all her time on. Whoever was trying to go down on whomever else, handy between the covers of that literary masterpiece, was obviously more important than her stepson. Not that this bothered Jack much. If anyone had taken the time to ask him about this, he would have told them that after six months one becomes quite numb to lack of attention.

But of course, no one ever took the time.

Jack went about the making of his lunch, just as Debra went about the reading of her book. Both of them had these common rituals to be performed, and they always had to be performed in absolute silence, no matter which ritual they decided was appropriate for that particular moment.

Jack considered something he learned in a history class somewhere: when performing rituals for the gods during the time of the Roman Empire, if one mistake occurred, no matter how slight, the entire process would have to be started over. With this in mind, Jack had a sudden epiphany, like silent divine wisdom, that perhaps if either of them actually were to speak, they would be expected to go back and start from the very beginning. He would have to go out, come back in, and find her the same way he had before, and they would do it again, so as to not offend whatever gods they kept silent for. Worked for the ancients, he thought absently as he smeared mustard on the white bread which Debra loved so much.

He despised white bread. His pleas to Debra to buy something for once as minutely healthy as wheat bread had all been either ignored or forgotten. She had written it down on her list next to the Duncan Hines Brownie Mix. The brownie mix managed to make it home.

He opened up the freezer to get ice for his soft drink, because the ice dispenser built into the door had not been functioning for two months or more. Debra had not called to get it repaired. None of it mattered, because he wanted it not to. So it did not matter.

So he smeared mustard on his white bread and said nothing.

He said nothing as he went up to his room. He said nothing as he finished off his sandwich and the cola he had poured. He said nothing as he put the empty glass on top of the empty plate and walked to the far corner of the room.

He sat down on his piano bench, opened up the keyboard, and let the instrument speak for him. He warmed up his fingers with simple twelve bar blues he had known how to play as far back as he could remember. Then he played the sonata he had finished three summers before. The segue between the incongruous pair of musical pieces was quick, but it disturbed no one, because Jack was the only one here.

The only thing that never seemed to disturb him was his music. He was rounding the third page turn in his mind, when the emotionless face he always wore when playing his more somber works turned to the left.

A large plant was hunched there by the piano, leaves drooping.

A few stems with brown ends, pointed straight upwards in mock exclamation, were scattered around the intact leaves. The other stems, the ones that were farther gone, had curled themselves up as if stricken by a palsy.

His hands stopped moving. The song lingered for a moment more and then was still.

Next to the plant was a green plastic watering can. He got up from the bench and took the can in his right hand. On his palm, he felt the remnants of the price sticker where it had been removed from the handle. He was almost sure that its removal had taken place five minutes before he received it along with the plant.

He could see the scene now in his mind's eye, her pulling up to his house in her little Jeep, with the plant riding shotgun and playing navigator. She began to pick up the plant. He still had the tremendous yellow bow it had worn; it was somewhere among his various keepsakes. He could see her grabbing the watering can and spying the price sticker. He could see her picking the sticker briskly off the handle and then going on.

No one had ever given him a plant before.

He went to the bathroom and filled the can. He brought it back and knelt by his plant. My first plant, he thought. The idea did not cheer him. He tried to smile, and could not, so stopped trying. He watered the plant, absently stroked one of its leaves, and dipped his head closer.

"Ted," he told it, "you're looking bad."

He struggled for something else to say, but the majority of his mind was busy reminding him that he was, after all, speaking to a plant, so he stopped speaking. Kim had maintained that conversing with plants was good for them. She could have talked to it for hours, could have had a long discussion about Shakespeare with the thing, but he could not.

He put the watering can down by the plant and went to the phone on the other side of the room. He dialed without looking and then stood there, waiting. After a few rings, he was rewarded with a voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

It was the wrong voice, her roommate, Janet. "Yes, is Kim there, please?"

"No, she's not. May I ask who's calling?"

"This is Jack."

Recognition on the other end. "Oh, Jack! I'm sorry," Janet said, and Jack again felt a human need to smile, and again, could not.

"No, Kim's not here, she's..." and then, something else was there—a different kind of recognition, this one accompanied by a drop in tone, and something else which felt like loss, "...she's out running around as usual. But I'll tell her you called."

"Do that, please. Tell her also..." Jack turned and looked at Ted, who hunched in the corner by the piano, pathetic and yet accusing, "...tell her that Theodore says hello."

"I will. Goodbye, Jack."

"Thanks, Janet. Bye." Jack set down the receiver and looked back at Ted, who seemed to be waiting for something. Jack walked over to him and returned to watering his dying plant. "There," he said, "I tried. Are you happy?"

Ted did not answer.

Jack took his seat at the piano once more. He paused, stood up again, and opened the bench to reveal several dozen weathered pieces of sheet music. After a brief period of excavation, he withdrew Mozart's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor and set it on the piano.

Jack replaced the lid of the bench, and sat down upon it. He opened the music, shut his eyes, and played.

And so the routine continued.

It was Sunday morning again, as it was always bound to be sooner or later, and again Jack was making his way back to his house after another bout with ghosts that he refused to let lie still.

He felt as if something was going to happen, though he was not exactly sure what that something might be. He did know that he had not had a single false start in the last three days. He had not heard anything in his head that resembled an original piece of a song in that entire period. For the first time in a long while he had even considered not putting the notepad in his pocket. Then something else came to mind. It was probably the most frightening, debilitating thought he had entertained since some distant relative he hardly ever saw, and had not seen since, called him into the consultation room in the hospital waiting area.

Maybe there's nothing left. From a dark corner of his mind it came, a voice he rarely heard. This was the voice reserved for items of great and possibly horrific portents.

It spoke again. Maybe it's all gone, Jack. Your music, maybe you just ran out of it.

A wave of cold washed throughout his body. He was painfully aware how long it had been since he accomplished something of great musical merit, but he had never looked at it with this light before. He never accounted for the possibility that he could lose all of his creativity. Worse than anything else was that, for a moment, he believed it could be true. In an act of defiance, he shoved the pad into his rear pocket. He felt the voice retreat, but knew it did not go far.

My fear is...it could be telling the truth. And this was not spoken in any other voice but his own.

So he had taken his pad with him to the cemetery, and forgotten completely about it until walking again to Third and Main after the weekly visit with his father. He started to cross the street midway to the corner but stopped.

Jack stopped with one foot in the gutter and one still on the sidewalk, and listened.

He could hear it. He could hear the song playing in his head.

It had begun as distant wind chimes on a nominally breezy day, but it was growing and getting more distinct.

Before he knew exactly what was happening, the pad was out, the pen was open, and he was scratching out musical notes on the paper, hoping he could decipher them later.

So he stood, engrossed in his work, oblivious to everything around him. So oblivious to everything was he that he did not notice the blue 1978 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme that rounded Main Street and lumbered his way. So intent was he on the song he did not notice that thirty yards from him the large automobile began to slowly drift toward him, veering slightly to the left. It was only ten yards from him when the left front tire bumped audibly against the curb and then jumped up onto it. This apparently knocked the needle off whatever album was playing Jack's song, for he looked around in time to see his own doom bearing down on him at around twenty-five miles an hour.

Jack reacted without thinking. He pushed off with his left leg, which was still firmly planted in the gutter, hurling himself backward onto the sidewalk and out of the vehicle's way. He fell over and his head connected with the concrete hard enough to make a flashbulb go off in his head. From what seemed like several streets over, he heard a car screech to a halt, and someone curse loudly.

Jack lay there for a few moments, dazed. He realized the flashbulb had apparently not subsided, but instead been turned on and stayed on. He brought a shaking arm up to shield his eyes.

It was then he realized it was not a flashbulb he was staring into at all, but the sun. A silhouette filled his field of vision completely.

"Oh, Christ, are you all right?" a voice asked.

A hand was thrust down to him and he took it after a moment's hesitation. He was jerked roughly to his feet.

"Are you okay?"

Jack's vision cleared and he saw standing before him a young man who was close to his own age. The newcomer stood there and seemed to assess Jack. The denim shirt he wore open over his psychedelic T-shirt flapped in the breeze.

It took Jack a moment to realize this stranger had asked him a question. "Yes, I think so," he replied. He noted his pad was still clutched in his left hand, but the pen was among the missing. "I took a bit of a whack on the head," he continued, rubbing the spot where a knot was rearing itself on the back of his skull while looking around half-dazed for the pen.

The stranger produced it in his right hand like a magic trick.

"Looking for this?" He handed it to Jack. Jack took it, replaced the cap, and put it back in his pocket. There

was a moment of almost fumbled silence, and then the newcomer spoke again, "Seriously, are you okay?"

Jack nodded assurance.

"Good. I don't normally pull shit like that...falling asleep at the wheel, I mean. But after fifteen hours of straight traveling, a body just gets tired." Through this entire explanation he had been looking down as he ran a slightly trembling hand continuously through his hair, making it stand straight up in places and then fall slowly down again. He turned his attention away from the sidewalk, and the look on his face seemed to suggest he had forgotten Jack was there for a moment or so. "God, I am rude as all hell, I'm like this only when I've just woken up." He smiled and stuck his hand out, a movement he had performed mere moments ago to help Jack up.

"Campbell Davis," he said.

Jack was surprised by the young man's actions. He looked at the outstretched hand, which had lost any trace of unsteadiness.

After a brief moment to collect himself, he took it. "Jack Hardin," he said.

The two shook hands, and Jack noticed Campbell looked to be sizing him up. "I know you probably haven't met some of your favorite people when they were about to be hauled in for possible vehicular manslaughter," Campbell remarked, "but I think we're going to get along just fine."

"Oh," Jack replied, "don't worry about it." He tried not to consider the fact that this strange new person had prophesied they were going to go from almost sharing spaces on a police report to being friends. He found this idea absurd, but did not let this show on his face. There was no need to be rude to the man. "A couple aspirin and I'll be " He paused. He had meant to say "as good as new," but somehow the phrase could not seem to apply to him in his current condition. "I'll be fine," he completed the thought and let go of Campbell's hand.

"Aspirin?" Campbell asked. "Anytime I take aspirin, my body just laughs. I have to take Advil or something like that." Campbell thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and scowled. "I sound like I'm in a commercial, for God's sake." He shook the thought away. "I'm sure I can come up with some aspirin if we go to the house, assuming that my mother hasn't burned it down for the insurance money yet. Besides, I owe you lunch at least for almost making you into roadkill pâté. Let me at least get you some lunch."

He took his hands out of his pockets and spread them out in front of him. "My treat."

"I " Jack stopped. Again, something he had meant to say, an everyday excuse that one would use to get out of such an offer, seemed pointless. He was going to say, "I've really got to get home," but before he had a chance to, he again reminded himself that he really didn't have a home. The only thing he did possess that was remotely close to one was nothing more than a house, and an empty, senseless one at that. The everyday routine of ritual silence that awaited him there seemed even less pleasant than usual. Especiallwith this new person, doing something that no one else had done for so long: offering a bite to eat, a bit of time. You're not really planning to go to this guy's house, are you? a voice prodded. He just drove into town, fell asleep at the wheel, almost killed you, and you're considering going to his house for something to eat? This would break the routine, this would be blasphemous. Those ancient gods were upset if you flubbed the ceremonies of silence, so what fate would they rain down upon him if he neglected to show up at all?

All of this simply made it easier to decide that he truly wanted to be heretical. "Sure, why not?" he said finally. He was not surprised to see that Campbell was smiling at him, but he was nearly astonished to find that it was infectious, and he was smiling back.

He could not remember the last time he had done so.

The two young men stood there a moment longer, grinning in the Sunday morning which was hurtling toward afternoon with every passing second. The breeze kicked up so that any interested party could hear a whiff of the singing from the church across the way.

Jack had lived in a small town all his life. His father's practice, his school, along with just about everything else in the town, had always been within walking distance.

As a result, Jack's experience riding in cars was somewhat limited. The Hardin family owned two cars, a Geo Metro and a Honda Civic.

Therefore, no vehicle he had ridden in previously could have prepared him for riding up Fifteenth Street in Campbell's large blue Olds. From where Jack was sitting, he could have sworn they were taking up both sides of the road. In fact, he was quite certain that mailboxes should have been flying up on either side of the tremendous automobile. This made him nervous in a way that he could not quite reach with words.

"Have you lived here long?" Campbell asked him. Jimi Hendrix was tearing out of the speakers all around them.

"All my life," Jack responded.

"My condolences," Campbell said, dropping his voice to a mocking kind of graveness. It rose again, "Well, you know, we're not all perfect." And then, as if he had read Jack's mind, "No offense meant to you, of course, I managed to stomach fourteen years of this." With the word this, he gestured with his left hand toward the houses they were passing. Jack noted that real estate signs had grown up along the street at irregular intervals.

"I take it your experience was less than pleasant," Jack remarked.

"Just a tad," Campbell said. Jack noticed that Campbell appeared to be paying particular attention to his driving. Whether this was to prove to his already doubting passenger that he was indeed a decent driver, or this was the way Campbell normally drove when awake, Jack did not know. He did not ask, either. "I'll tell you about it sometime," Campbell said, then added hastily, "if you'd like to hear it."

"Sure," Jack said. He then braced himself for what he knew must be coming: some kind of reference to parents that would make him dig up the truth about his father, the truth which was somehow easier to handle if it remained silent and buried. Easier, but in a sense, heavier. And for a moment, the regret came. The regret of being around someone new, someone who did not already know that his father was gone, and so would have to be told.

But it was never brought up during the entire ride to Campbell's house, despite the fact that the trip did not take as much time as Jack seemed to spend during it, waiting for the dreaded subject to show itself.

They were moving now into the area of town where all the doctors, lawyers and others who made more money than they knew what to do with, lived. Jack's father had eschewed this part of town, these oversized houses that had more rooms than the owners had members of their immediate and extended families. Jack's father had come from a humble background and felt no need to prove to the world that he had "made it." They had lived in a simple twostory colonial style house that was more than adequate for their needs.

The car pulled up at the front yard of a house that looked quite small compared to the sprawling, reaching houses around it. Other cars had filled the driveway and either side of the road.

Campbell sighed at this, removed his sunglasses and looked around with his ice blue eyes. "Mom's having a party," he breathed with more than a twinge of contempt.

When they had come to a stop, Jack had heard something roll forward and hit the bottom of the front seat. Overcome by curiosity, he looked over his left shoulder into the back of the car.

A wooden baseball bat lay in the floorboard. "What's that for?"

Jack asked.

Campbell followed Jack's gaze. "Oh, that's Homer," he remarked off-handedly. "I keep him around in case of emergencies. I don't think he'll be necessary today, though." Campbell continued after a moment of internal deliberation, "I say we go in and take their hors d'oeuvres hostage until they feed us. What say you?"

Jack found to his dismay that he had no idea what to say to this.

So he merely shrugged. It seemed a safe enough response.

"All right then," Campbell replied, and then opened his door and got out.

Jack followed suit, and then began to make his way over to the paved walk, which led up to the front door, taking the respectful route as he had been taught. Campbell, he noticed, had no desire for this route, and instead made a straight line from the car door to the front door of the house, the canvas of his white Converse hightops darkening slightly with the dampness of the finely manicured grass.

They climbed the three steps to the porch, which spanned the entire front of the house save for the garage. Campbell opened the glass door and studied the brass knocker there for a moment. It had his last name engraved into it. He picked up the knocker, let it fall once, twice, three times, and then stopped.

Jack had felt something tickling his mind, and stopped to try to sort it out. It was a name, and he said it aloud. "Susan Davis?"

For a moment it looked as if Campbell had been slapped.

"What?" he said, not irritated, but rather surprised more than anything else.

"Your mother's Susan Davis?" Jack completed the question, and became worried he had done the equivalent for Campbell of walking into a cathedral and then realizing after you knelt at the altar that you were naked from the waist down. This image disturbed him, but at the same time, he wanted to laugh out loud. He did not. He added, "I only ask because I think she was a patient of my father's."

He had no idea why he had said something like this to begin with, because now surely the questions about his father would come.

"Psychiatrist?" Campbell asked, almost immediately.

Jack was startled. In bracing himself for the familiar onset of questions and condolence, he had not expected a response such as this. The taken-aback look that had been on Campbell's face was gone, replaced by the look of surety and confidence that he seemed to wear almost perpetually. "What?"

"Was your father a psychiatrist?" Campbell explained. He added closely afterwards, "A little slow on the uptake, Jack, but we've got plenty of time to work on that."

Jack was about to reply that his father had been only a general practitioner but realized Campbell was merely joking. He was about to make some comment to this effect when the same Susan Davis whose name had started this whole affair opened the door and stood before them, almost as if the very invocation of her name had summoned her rather than the knock.

At first, Susan Davis said nothing. She looked first at Jack, then at her son. There was a flicker of recognition and then her face broke into a smile that Jack realized did not manage to make it all the way to her eyes.

"Campbell, darling," she said in a voice that almost assuredly was raised just high enough to make it to the room where her company was sitting. "It's so good to see you. You and your friend come on inside and meet the others."

Susan moved to one side, holding open the door for them to do exactly as she had suggested. Campbell made a sweeping "after you" gesture, and Jack stepped in.

The first thought he had upon entering Campbell's mother's house was, I thought it was small.

The house from the front looked small, but it turned out to be twice as deep as it was wide. Immediately to Jack's right after going in the door was a large open space which went down a set of wide, carpeted steps into a spacious den. In the middle of the den was a square couch, surrounding a glass coffee table. Seated around the couch were people who Jack recognized to be several very influential figures in town, all sporting their Sunday best.

Susan Davis stepped behind the two, and amicably placed an arm around both their shoulders. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, smiling at both of them, "I'd like you to meet my son, Campbell, who is home from studying abroad." She then indicated Jack. "And I believe this is..." she studied Jack's face for a moment longer than was actually necessary, "...Jack Hardin, is it not?"

"It is," he replied politely, as he was trained to do.

"Campbell, Jack," she said, "I'd like you to meet Jayson Blair, who's going to be our next mayor," Jayson smiled at this and gave a brisk but corny salute. Susan continued, "Larry Traylor, who has a law practice downtown; Denise Morgan, who..."

Jack let all this wash over him, nodding in all the right places, also exactly as he had been taught. He glanced over at Campbell.

Campbell stood there with the ghost of a smirk playing across his face. He did not seem the least bit intimidated by this gathering of what possibly were ten of the most powerful people in this small city which Jack tried to call home. His hands were shoved down into the pockets of his blue jeans, his thumbs stuck through the belt loops. He looked completely at ease to be among them in his tie-dyed T-shirt. He looked at them all with vague interest, acknowledging them in his own way, but not nodding at them in all the right, polite places.

After all the names were given and hung in the air without meaning, Susan Davis went on to say, "We were all just having a meeting about the upcoming "

Campbell interrupted, deftly managing to sound both ingratiating and yet extremely arrogant at the same time. "Well, mother, that's all very interesting, but Jack almost got killed this morning, and I've been driving for fifteen-and-a-half hours straight now.

Those are the kinds of things that make a man hungry." He pointed this last statement at the richest real estate

developer in the county, who was completely bald on top not to mention more than a trifle overweight. "So we're going to pop into the kitchen for a bite and I'm sure afterwards we'll all have a lot to talk about." He turned his head sharply to Jack and said, "Coming, Jack?"

He then turned and left, going through an archway at the other end of the foyer.

Jack turned and was ready to follow, when Denise Morgan, the wealthy dentist, spoke up. "Aren't you Dennis Hardin's son?"

Here it comes, he thought dismally. "Yes," he said, his voice taking on an instinctive mourning quality. He despised it for the tone it assumed.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," she told him, taking on that understanding face that Jack had seen far too much for his taste. It was not the sympathy he was usually handed everywhere he went that bothered him; it was that it was still being handed out even now, six months later. People would not let him move on. Was it something in his face that caused people to say this? Was it something in his eyes, some black cloud only Denise Morgan, successful dentist, and others like her, could see? Something in his eyes that caused everyone else in the room to momentarily don a black armband only they could see, but everyone could feel, but which meant nothing to any of them?

He pushed all this aside for the time being. "Thank you," he told no one in particular, and then disappeared into the archway to find Campbell.

Jack found Campbell bent over, staring intently into the double-doored refrigerator that dominated one corner of the spacious kitchen. On the large block in the center of the room was a growing pile of various lunchmeats and cheeses. A jar of mustard and a squeeze bottle of ketchup stood at attention nearby.

"Nice house your mother has," Jack said from behind him.

"Well, it's okay," Campbell turned around only long enough to toss a large package of bologna onto the block, "if you have so much money you have nothing to do but sit around your wonderfully expensive house and do just that...nothing."

"Is it just me," Jack observed, taking one of the two plastic tumblers that Campbell had set out, "or are you and your mother very close?" He pushed the tumbler inside the ice dispenser set in the refrigerator door. Nothing happened. He frowned, and looked towards Campbell.

Campbell glanced over and nodded. "Go ahead and fish it out yourself. If you have any communicable diseases, however, let me get mine first and then we'll ask her to come in here and get some for her and all of her guests." Campbell flashed a grin that was just as sinister as he could manage.

Jack opened the freezer door and grabbed a handful of ice.

"I'll take that as a no."

Campbell grabbed a loaf of white bread in one hand and a loaf of wheat in the other and turned around, beaming. "Make your own, my friend, and eat as much as you want." He winked. "She'll buy more."

A few minutes later, they were sitting outside of Susan Davis' grand house in Susan Davis' equally grand backyard. There was a patio area with a table and chairs that would have been more than adequate, but Campbell instead had gone to a rock and sat down. Jack followed his lead. They kept their paper plates in their laps. Jack noticed that the patio area was right in front of the large picture window that covered the back

wall of the den. On the rock, they were conveniently out of sight of Susan and the grand palaver which was going on inside.

"So," Campbell said, after finishing half of his double-decker sandwich, "what do you do?"

Jack had created a very modest ham and cheese model, and found himself working with a large bite from it at the moment when Campbell had chosen to pose his question. This happened so often that Jack took a moment to wonder if it was some genetic code that told his body to make sure and have a mouthful of food anytime someone was about to ask a question during a meal. After clearing his vocal pathway, he responded, "What?"

"You had a pad of paper in your hand when I almost killed you," he explained, giving the words when I almost killed you the same treatment he might when you were watering the lawn, "You had a pen to boot. You were obviously extremely engrossed in something to not hear me coming. What were you doing?"

Jack marveled. "You're very perceptive."

"I'm a writer," Campbell shrugged, and for a moment, Jack thought that would be the extent of his response, as if it explained everything, but then Campbell added, "I have to be."

"Have to be which?" Jack asked, raising an eyebrow. "Perceptive or a writer?"

"Both." Campbell gave a brief smile at this.

"I'm a musician," Jack said, as if this was the only response he could give.

"Were you writing something?"

"Yes, actually I was."

"Out in the middle of the road?"

"Actually just on the side of it," Jack reminded Campbell, "you were the one who was supposed to be out towards the middle." Part of Jack's mind wanted to comment on how well he was taking his near-death experience. The rest of Jack's mind told it to get lost.

"Touché." Campbell took a sip from his tumbler. His sunglasses were still off, and they were hanging from the back of his T-shirt. His eyes seemed fixated on a certain point in space. "Well, I suppose I can't talk. When my muse starts to slap me with stuff, it won't wait for anything. I remember I was in New York, and I had this idea for something, and all I had with me was a pen. Paper you can do without, but a writer without a pen is like a normal person with no underwear, uncomfortable and chafing," on this he returned his gaze to Jack, but it soon drifted away again. "I took out my pen and began scribbling on the wall of the elevator I was in. Almost got kicked out of the building," Campbell laughed absently.

"What do you write?" Jack asked.

Campbell turned to him. "In elevators?"

"No," Jack unsuccessfully repressed a smile, "in general."

"Oh, a little bit of everything," Campbell replied. "Poetry, fiction, essays, you name it. Had a couple of things published, too."

Campbell took another long drink. "What do you write?"

"A little bit of everything. Mostly, I do classical, but I have some stuff a little more modern than that."

"Really?" Campbell looked suitably impressed. "I've got some lyrics that I work on from time to time. We'll probably need to get together on a few of them."

There was a pause. They continued to eat and drink. And Jack waited. Eventually, Campbell would ask the fateful question or make some reference to his father's passing. Denise Morgan had brought up the subject of his father, and now surely the question would come.

In the back of Jack's mind, there was someone with a shovel ready to dig it all up again, just waiting for the word. Jack braced himself, but Campbell never turned, Campbell never asked, and the moment never came. Finally, when he could bear the burden of their silence no longer, he asked something else that had been on his mind, "Your mother said you had been studying abroad?"

"A euphemism," Campbell replied, with his mouth mostly full, "for the truism that she really has no idea where I've been for the past seven years."

"Oh, really," Jack said, trying not to sound as moved as he actually was.

"It's a very long story," Campbell commented, as if he were telling someone that yes, the sky certainly was clear today. "I'll tell you about it some other time. When there's more time to speak."

"What made you come back?" Jack asked, and then deliberated internally for a moment before adding, "If you don't mind me asking, that is."

"Don't mind a bit. To be perfectly blunt, I'm broke as hell. Ran into a problem...but, well that fits into the story I'll be telling you someday." Campbell's eyes studied a place far off in the distance.

Drifting out through a window left open in the house somewhere came sounds of a party breaking up. Susan's voice could be heard bidding farewell to her various guests.

"Well, I'm about to be on," Campbell commented cryptically and somewhat disgustedly. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I have no idea."

"I need your phone number. We'll talk." Campbell stood up then, looking toward the house.

"I can walk home, it's not too far," Jack told him, not exactly sure why it mattered or why Campbell could not drive him. He only knew that it was so.

"I appreciate it," Campbell turned to look at Jack with eyes that for the first time did not seem to be his own. "I'm about to start into my whore routine."

Jack did not ask, for he knew that explanations would be coming in good time.

A few minutes later, Campbell had said his goodbyes and assured Jack he would call. Jack was standing on the sidewalk in front of Campbell's mother's house. He took one good look back at it before he started on his way to his own.

It was around two o'clock, and Jack began to wonder about his new...friend? Is that what Campbell was? He wasn't sure.

Has it been that long? the arrogant voice in his head wondered.

It was a question, even if it still felt like a dagger formed out of words.

"Yes," he said aloud. He could not remember someone calling his house to speak to him; he was sure it would be a strange experience. Now, when the phone rang, which it seldom did because Debra was always on it to begin with, he ignored it. It was never for him. He wondered what Debra would think if the phone rang and someone asked for him. He had the half-crazed idea she would not recognize her own son's name.

As he was walking, he pulled the pad out of his back pocket and flipped open the front. They were still there. He looked at the three good lines he had produced before almost becoming Campbell's hood ornament.

He smiled. Three good lines were better than nothing.

He heard somewhere that after being dehydrated for days, people could actually smell water.

He knew what they meant.

He had an insane urge to suddenly lift the pad to his nose.

He did not. He laughed instead and kept walking.

Chapter One

CAMPBELL

When Campbell heard his mother's party breaking up, he recognized the dread rising in him. Having been essentially on his own since the age of fourteen, asking for something from someone else was an alien concept and he despised it. Since the day he left this town, for good he had thought and hoped at the time, he had been completely dependent on someone else only twice. The third seemed to indeed be the charm, for he could feel a headache coming on, and a deep part of him was crying out for a good stiff drink and a cigarette if he could spare it.

He stood up and immediately tried to put himself into the right frame of mind. Almost on the heels of this was the realization that there was no right frame of mind.

One of the main rules Campbell lived his life by was "Whenever possible, don't deal with assholes." It was a hard regulation to uphold, for the world appeared to have quite a surplus. Even more unfortunate was that his mother seemed to be the queen of them all.

He was glad when Jack volunteered to walk home. He thought Jack was an okay guy, albeit a little uptight. The incident with Miranda taught him just how scarce friends were, so the prospect of finding a new one was a comfort. Despite just meeting Jack, Campbell felt some kind of connection to him. He was aware that Jack probably thought of him as half-crazy, not to mention a potentially homicidal driver, but that would pass.

And maybe he would not have to leave alone this time. That was an important thought, for he would stay here only as long as necessary, and then

He put that thought away for the time being. He was here, and he had to deal with the now before he could get to the later.

He waited for his mother's guests to be gone, and then walked Jack out. His mother had given the polite exit speech and nothing more to Jack. He had gotten Jack's number and again promised he would call.

Jack was gone, the guests were gone, and Campbell and his mother stood there in her vast foyer, looking at each other.

His mother took a moment, that moment she always took to decide which face to wear, and then began. It was a moment Campbell remembered from years before and found positively maddening. What made it worse was the knowledge that his mother knew exactly what type of effect it had on him. She began by walking past him back into the den, in order to make what looked to be a very watered down drink. "Would you like something?" She asked him, indicating the bar. After a pause, she added wryly, "You are old enough to drink now, aren't you?"

He very carefully put that part of him that was already nodding his head yes at arm's length. "No, thank you," he said, straining. He had to divert his attention away from the bottles that were harmonizing invitations at him. "I like what you've done with the place.

It's very Greco-Modern-Overdone." He thought, Christ, she has not changed. She really has not changed at all.

"You haven't called in six years, and you show up on my doorstep looking like something I would step in at a rodeo, allowing of course for the fact I've never been to one, and further allowing for the fact I never intend to go to one. You're still as amusing as you ever were. I'm sure, however, you didn't come all this way to poke fun at my taste in decorating." She studied him coldly, "Skip the small talk, son. What do you want?"

"Okay," Campbell ran a hand through his black hair, and took several steps toward her, repressing an urge to laugh at her dramatics, "let's just dispense with the civilities altogether then, shall we?"

"Oh, why not, Campbell, there weren't that many to begin with." She let the ice cubes rattle in her glass. Campbell knew she wouldn't take a sip. The drink was merely for show, a prop. "You're wasting my time. Why are you here?"

No more dancing, he thought sourly. "I need money," he said, and felt himself slip even lower.

"Oh, this should be good," his mother repressed laughter. "Mr.

Independent is here after seven years looking for a handout."

Campbell's face turned red and he knew, absolutely knew that he was making a grievous error. But by God, she knew all of his fucking buttons and exactly where and how hard to punch them all. And that was the most maddening thing out of the lot, that after all this time away from her, she still knew. "I never said anything about a goddamn handout," he hissed under his breath, struggling to retain control.

Her face showed no change whatsoever, except for something far back in her eyes that showed him what he knew already: that was precisely the reaction she had wanted. She merely blinked once.

"All right then, Campbell, what are you here looking for?"

Campbell took a moment to collect himself, the scarlet in his face.

"Still the same, aren't we?" His mother smiled, and shook her head. "Still very vindictive, and I'll never understand why...after all, you are the one who left me."

"Don't even try to hand me that line, like you were my mother or something," he took great pains to enunciate each word in an attempt to hold onto clarity, "I thought we were cutting through the bullshit. At least be original."

His mother waved her hand that held the drink as if to say, "Granted."

"You don't ask me why I need it, you sure as hell don't give it to me, I go out and I earn it. I just need you to give me something to do to earn the money."

"What kind of money are we talking about here, darling?"

"Darling" was another one. Just another button, small but significant. Weren't they all when his mother got a hold on him, though? He tried to put up a sign on his control panel that said OUT OF ORDER and almost made it. It was enough to keep him from doing exactly what he wanted to do, which was leap across the room and choke the breath right out of her. "I need money to continue school."

"A bright boy like you?" She taunted. "I could have sworn you would have managed a scholarship or a grant or something like that. You are completely on your own, and all."

"I have both, but they don't cover everything."

"Well, surely you have a job up there." She sipped from her drink, watching him dance.

"I had a job, and I can always get another job, it's just " He paused.

"It's just what?" His mother watched him intently. "No savings at all? So typical of your generation..."

"I lost it all," he replied quietly.

Her eyebrows raised themselves. "Lost it?" She waited for a moment, as if she expected Campbell to volunteer a further explanation. "May I ask ?"

Campbell cut her off. "No, you may not. It is not a subject I wish to talk about, it has nothing to do with what we are discussing here."

She waved her hand in agreement again. "Then at least tell me what you need."

"The amount I lost."

"Which is?"

Campbell told her.

"Hmmm," she paused long enough to take a sip of her drink and let her eyebrows settle in place again before continuing.

"That's not pocket change. It'll take quite a bit of effort."

"You know I can do anything you throw in my direction, so don't even imply that I have limitations."

Campbell's mother nodded, and then paced back and forth for a while, considering something. Her face wrinkled up slightly, showing her age despite whatever surgery she had undergone to prevent such visions from occurring. Finally, she took one last sip of her drink and set it down.

"Do you know what we were doing here this afternoon, Campbell?"

"When you introduced the guy whose tie alone cost more than my entire ensemble, I knew you couldn't possibly care a fig about world hunger."

"You're right, we don't care about hunger. Jayson Blair is a very successful businessman in this city, and we I want him in the mayor's seat. I mean to have him there, and you of all people should know what happens when I want something."

Campbell made no response. There was no need.

"The present mayor will not know what hit him. Gathered here this afternoon were nine of his most important supporters. A few of them are on the city council; the others are just significant figures in the community. All of them are defecting to our side because they, like myself, don't feel that the present mayor has done anything to better the community."

"And I'm sure your candidate can," Campbell said, "blah, blah, blah. Right. I wish you the best of luck. Now, what does this have to do with me?"

"I want you to work for the campaign."

"I don't recall asking for volunteer work," Campbell began.

"No, no, no...not volunteer. You'll be paid well. I want you to handle, among other things, all the computer work. You'll get the data, enter it, manage it, and...other duties as assigned. You are still good with computers, I trust. You always were before."

Campbell stood there, hands shoved into his pockets, looking very much as Jack had seen him earlier, facing off with the ten most prominent men and women of the small town which tried to call itself his home. His face was the only thing different, a lost quality on it that Jack would have, in some distant way, recognized. The one thing the look did not have in it, however, was helplessness.

"Does that sound like a deal to you, Campbell?"

"Will it get me to where I'm trying to go?"

"I can assure you of that."

"Then I believe we have a deal."

She went to her purse, which was sitting on the bar. She opened it, rummaged in it briefly, and brought out two twenty dollar bills.

She walked back over to Campbell, and with a smile in her eyes that did not quite touch her lips, gave them to him. "An advance, to help you until you get your first paycheck."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow. I'll get you the address of the campaign office."

We start it up, and Jayson commits officially on Wednesday. I want it all to run as smoothly as possible. After all, I am the campaign manager, and if anything goes wrong it will reflect badly on Jayson, which will, in turn, reflect badly on me."

His mother scribbled the address on a small slip of paper, and handed it to him. He studied it briefly, and then looked up. "I'll be there at eight," he said simply, and turned to go.

"Your old room is gone, I'm afraid," she remarked as she followed him, "but the guest bedroom is still as it was, and I'm sure "

"I'll be fine," he told her, and then opened the front door. "I'll see you in the morning," he aimed over his right shoulder.

Then the door was shut behind him and he felt a great weight fall from his shoulders.

Campbell headed west, and despite his feelings, he did indeed have a destination he was not simply trying to get as far from his mother as possible.

He took a moment from time to time and reassured himself that this was the truth.

Janis was singing to him about summertime in a mournful, bluesy tone that wanted to calm his burning nerves. She was telling him even now how living was easy.

"Bullshit," he snorted, and wondered if he would break into laughter when Janis got to the part about how his mom was goodlooking. This was unfair, however, and he knew it. To those with normal eyes, Susan Davis

would be extremely attractive. She had taken good care of her looks, always one of her greatest weapons in the war against whomever or whatever she decided she was waging it against that day. This good care had included a few nips and tucks where she deemed necessary, and he knew she had paid dearly to get it to look as natural as scientifically possible.

All of this was seen by those with normal eyes, those content to rest their vision on a person's surface.

Campbell saw straight through his mother, straight through her little plastic surgery, and straight through her little scheme.

She had not needed those few moments she spent pacing, back and forth, contemplating his fate. She knew what was going on from the moment she opened the door. Hell, for all he knew, she knew the shot from the moment he had entered the city limits. She had money to post lookouts along the trail, but that idea was both ridiculous and paranoid, and Campbell was neither. At least, not to excess.

She always seemed to know ahead of anyone else what was going to happen, almost like a malignant form of precognition. He remembered that damnable foresight, and how his father had been completely unprepared for the fate she had witnessed for him.

He remembered the look of horrified helplessness that had been branded on his father's face and silently cursed his mother again for her crimes. At the same while, he cursed his father for allowing them to occur. His tired mind detached itself from this line of thought, knowing it would do no good to ponder over the details. He needed sleep.

The trees began to crowd him from either side of the road. Everything was still desolate wilderness here, with only the pavement beneath his tires connecting him with civilization. If he had given it any thought, he probably would have felt very alone. He did not give it a thought, however, and so did not feel in any way close to that. It felt more like home.

The sign was up ahead. MACOMBER COUNTY FAIR-

GROUNDS, it said above the road in its beaten, forgotten letters.

It's nice to know some things don't change, he thought glumly.

He drove in under the sign. The large asphalt plain he was moving over had given way in a loose grid configuration, the congregations of grass pushing their way up to a paradise of sun that was for the moment denied them.

Insanely, he thought, What did that first blade of grass feel when it struggled free of the hellish pavement to find the sun blaring down upon it with heavenly intensity? Either I'm cracking, he thought, or that was an idea. He smiled a tired smile. Or both.

He saw the large shape of the main concessions building lumbering toward him. He guided the car around to the back of the building and stopped. He shifted the gear into park and paused a moment before switching the ignition off.

He popped open the glove compartment without a conscious thought of what he was doing and pulled out a stenographer's pad along with a mechanical pencil. He pushed a needle-thin piece of lead out, and then wrote swiftly, in handwriting only he could decipher:

Behind the hulking dumpster

Past the rusty Dodge

A congregation of grass

Praying for the sun

Free my dying sister

No, it was not a poem. No, it was not anywhere near a poem. It was only the seed of one. He replaced the pad and pencil, and shut the glove compartment. Campbell found it imperative that he be ready to take down notes whenever the muse declared itself ready to speak.

Jack would have understood.

He looked out the windshield at the dilapidated old building he had shared such interesting times with. Sneaking back here once with a girl and making an adolescent attempt at passion that left both parties nervous and dangerously aware of themselves. Being out here with his old friends, smoking and talking about the future. Scott, Brian, Jonathan, and later, Carol was with them. Where were they now? Jesus, he thought, I have not thought about them the entire time I was gone. I left in such a rush I left my memories of them here, where I just found them again.

Later, Carol was with them.

"Never thought I'd be here like this," he said to no one in particular. "How 'bout you guys?"

Carol's high, slightly irritating, yet wonderfully arousing laughter drifted to him over a gulf of seven years of running.

And then, from far off, calling, Campbell, run!

"I did," he told her.

He looked to his left and caught an image out of the corner of his eye. It was a fleeting ghost of himself and those friends, twelve years old, the lot of them. They were racing around the large empty parking lot on their bicycles, trying to convince Jonathan to take the training wheels off of his bike. His father never seemed to have the time to take care of this instruction himself, so Jonathan's friends had decided to take up the lesson.

He tried to clear his mind of this specter, but it lingered a moment longer. He did not want to think of fathers. Not right now.

What he wanted...

What he really wanted was a cigarette.

He almost laughed at this. Old habits die hard, he thought, and almost checked under his seat where he used to keep his coffin nails to see if any ghosts of that sort were down there.

My little nicotine demon, he told himself, you're about two years too late for that particular fix.

He suddenly, desperately, wanted to go around this place, find all of his own ghosts and resurrect them. Learn all he could from the past he had tried to blot out of his mind for seven long years.

Coupled with this was the realization that out of the past seventeen hours or so, he had been driving at least fifteen. With this knowledge in place, his exhaustion washed over him like a wave at the coast that comes in up to your knees and is growing.

I don't remember the last time I went to the coast, he thought absently. As this passed through his mind, he was aware that even larger waves were coming to the shore, and before he went under he had better make some arrangements. His body was beginning to push him out of the driver's seat and into the arms of Morpheus.

First, he reached in the back and produced from the pocket behind the passenger's seat a brass alarm clock. It was the kind that needed winding, had two bells on the top, and a hammer in between them that raised hell when told to do so. It was around three o'clock, so the farthest hour he could set the alarm for was three the next morning. He decided to leave it as such, wake up at three, and reset the alarm for six-thirty. He had been here before.

He wound it up, and set it according to his watch. Fifteen hours of sleep available to him, and he was quite sure he would take advantage of every minute. Sleep, the wonder drug that works wonders.

The next wave, which came in around his thighs, was cool and coaxing.

In a minute, he told it.

He also produced from the back seat a car shade that had no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. Any it might have had were long since bleached away. He put it in the windshield.

Is that all? he asked himself. He checked to make sure both doors were locked. They were.

He crawled into the back seat and removed his shoes. He climbed under the ratty blanket that was left there from his last nap, and laid his head on the wadded up jacket which served as his pillow.

He thought absently of the forty dollars which he now had as he closed his eyes.

Before the next wave could come to him, he rose to meet it, and it swallowed him.

He dreamed of the beach. It was wonderful.

He grabbed the clock and meant to throw it across his room before he realized both that he only needed to move the lever over and silence the hammer, and also that he had no room.

The alarm had been deafening in the relatively tiny space of his car. Thanks to this he was not only stiff in the joints because of his sleeping arrangements, but his head ached dully and his ears rang.

He yawned then checked his watch and the clock both, as if one of them had to be lying. Six-thirty, he thought first, and then, I did sleep fifteen hours. Jesus. He tried to remember waking up at three to reset the alarm and could not. I slept like a rock.

Despite his long rest, he was not filled with energy. He was filled only with suspicion and dread for whatever Susan Davis might have in store for him.

Campbell unlocked the driver's side door and got out. He walked around to the back of the car, feeling the gravel surface of the huge fairground's lot on his bare feet. He dug into his front pocket, found his keys and opened the trunk. He looked through the clothes there for a clean T-shirt and exchanged it for the one he was

wearing. He wadded up the used shirt and tossed it into a plastic bag that also made the trunk its home. The new morning sun on his bare back felt good for a reason that he could not, nor wished to, name.

Once dressed, he closed the trunk, and got back in the car.

He suddenly had something not unlike a premonition, something that told him he should get out of Dodge as fast as he possibly could. Leave the fairgrounds, head straight back to Highway 15, and just go.

"I have nowhere to go," he tried to explain out loud.

But when has that ever changed? answered a voice in his head.

A look of disgust passed over Campbell's face, because the statement seemed to be true. There was no way to refute it. He had certainly tried to find somewhere else. He had called several of his contacts, several of those in New York he thought of as his friends, and none of them could help him. He could understand their inability to assist, but only to a point. There was a recession on, and money was scarce, and so on and so forth. Understanding had always been an independent event from forgiveness, though.

After all he felt he had done for them, the least they could do would be to try something. Standing here at the edge of a dead town he thought he had left behind him seven years ago, he could not forgive. Not today, anyway.

He didn't want to do this.

He had to do this.

Campbell turned the car around and went back out the fairgrounds gate towards town.

He did not look back to the area which had held him so close as a child, at least not with his eyes.

Chapter Two

Jack worked all afternoon with the three lines of musical notation he had scribbled the day before, and was getting absolutely nowhere. Not necessarily nowhere, he corrected himself, those three lines have been perfected and re-perfected five times over. He had them memorized to the point where he could more than likely play them backwards.

Have I eaten today? He looked at the clock on the wall. It was after five o'clock. He could not remember if he had even had breakfast, much less lunch.

He turned his attention back to his sheet music. Its contents had been translated from the scrawl on his pad early this morning.

Jack sighed. He put his hands to the keys and, with raised eyebrows, played the three lines backwards.

In his frustration, he grimaced, struck the keys, and glanced over at Ted.

Ted seemed to slump where he sat in the sunlight coming through the window. He looked as uninspired as Jack felt.

"You, too?" Jack asked his plant, and did not get an answer.

He had tried all day to coax some more music out of himself, but nothing would come. He would improvise another three or four lines beyond what he already had, and then stop, frozen with the knowledge that it was not working at all. He had changed tactics, trying to sneak up on the muse and ensnare it when it was not looking. He would go downstairs and watch some television, then come up and try again. Nothing. He had taken a long walk through the neighborhood, just to get his mind away from the page sitting at attention on his piano. Nothing. He could not go any further with what he had, he could not add to it, and he could not forget about it. Those next phrases were there somewhere, and he felt

There was a knock at the door. Jack turned around and looked at the door, absurdly certain that someone had made a mistake. He was disoriented for a second or two, and suddenly unsure of where he was.

After a moment, the door cracked open and Debra stuck her pudgy head inside. After another moment, she noticed Jack sitting on his piano bench, looking perplexed. "Oh, Jack, you are here," she said, and then, "someone's on the phone for you."

Her voice conveyed all the surprise that Jack wore on his face.

For a moment, Jack merely looked at her, and then to Theodore, who stared back at them both. He had a phone here in the room, yes, but he remembered turning off the ringer long ago after all incoming phone calls ceased to be for him. He had no idea who it might be.

Then a thought struck him, and his face lit up. "Thanks," he told her. He might have even smiled at her.

Debra shut the door. Jack went quickly to the phone. His frustration and depression over the silence of his muse had mysteriously dissolved once the knowledge struck him, the knowledge of who was calling for him. Suddenly, the lack of music did not matter.

Nothing mattered except her, and that she was on the phone, waiting for him.

Jack deliberated only a moment longer before he snatched up the receiver. "Kim?"

"No, but I could be for the right price," a male voice said from the other end of the line. After one long reeling moment, reality fell into place. It was Campbell.

Jack felt one hand steal up to his forehead to grip it tightly.

There was more knowledge now, returning to its rightful place at the forefront of his mind. Did you think it would ever really change? was the thought prodding at him.

This was the truth and no, it would not change, not today, and more than likely not ever: Kim was out of his reach, long gone.

"Sorry, Campbell," Jack took his hand away from his head, "I thought you were someone else."

"No, really?" came the sarcastic response. "What was that a phone sex flashback?"

"Well, I "

"How long ago?"

Jack stopped for a moment. "What do you mean, how long ago?" He felt like staring into the receiver in surprise as if he could somehow read the expression on Campbell's face by doing so.

"The two of you broke up...how long ago?"

This time Jack actually did take the receiver away from his face and gaze into the holes punched in the plastic. He then became dimly aware he never heard Debra hang up her phone downstairs.

"Where are you calling from? And can I meet you somewhere?"

"I'm calling from the pay phone outside Ray's Diner. Yeah, let's go somewhere else, and choose someplace relatively quiet because I've had a hell of a day. Also, without a lot of people, because whoever the chick is that answered the phone, she never hung up and I hate eavesdroppers."

With that, there was a solid click on the line as the phone downstairs was hastily, and Jack was sure, embarrassingly, placed back in its cradle.

Jack had to smile.

Campbell thought the two days before had been long, but this day seemed to be vying for some kind of record.

He arrived at the address his mother had scribbled down for him. The campaign office was hard to miss. A large blue and white BLAIR FOR MAYOR sign had been raised recently. A beaten up ladder stood nearby, and two old men wearing overalls and baseball caps stood back, surveying it. A pickup truck full of BLAIR FOR MAYOR yard signs was in one of the spaces out front, with a short, squat bearded man sitting in the driver's seat. Looking through the windows, he could see people putting BLAIR FOR MAYOR paraphernalia everywhere inside.

A woman whose hair was blonde almost to the point of transparency approached him as he walked in the front door.

"You Susan Davis' son?" She asked, looking straight through Campbell.

"On occasion, yes," Campbell replied, thinking, It's five till eight, it's too early for this. The breakfast danish he bought at the convenience store sat like a lump in his stomach, along with the coffee which had raised his awareness, but at a lingering cost to his taste buds. He removed his sunglasses and looked around the chaos that reigned in the office.

"Oh, good," she said, her grin taking root and seeming to grow across her face. "We've been dying to get the computer up and started."

Computer, Campbell's mind zeroed in on that one word, yes, just get me to a computer. Those things perform on a logical basis, and if I don't like what they're doing I can always go in and fix them. Campbell smiled back feebly.

"But first, Mrs. Denshaw needs a little help understanding the fax machine in back, and your mother said you'd be able to help us out."

He cast his eyes about until he found his mother in the crowd of people. She had already found him; they looked at each other across the office. Susan Davis merely flashed a shallow, warming smile and went to greet someone who had just walked in.

Campbell looked down the hallway and saw, in the back office, a fax machine with its cover removed. An old woman was trying to feed paper into the slot for incoming faxes.

"Good idea," Campbell sighed, and gently pushed past the blonde woman, "I think Mrs. Denshaw could use some guidance."

They met at the bridge in the middle of the town park. Campbell was there first, and he stared through his sunglasses at the steadily sinking sun on the surface of the water. The bridge was red, oriental, and very out of character with the rest of the park. He remembered dimly the plaque which was attached to one end of the bridge, which end he could not recall. It proclaimed the bridge as a gift from a small town somewhere in Japan which Campbell had never heard of. Campbell had often wondered during his youthful sojourn here if his little American town had given anything in exchange for the bridge. Furthermore, he had wondered if Japanese youth sometimes hung around it in a park somewhere, and if they wondered about the small American town whose name they did not recognize which they found on a plaque nearby.

Campbell longed for the days when one could think about such things on a regular basis. When wondering about what Japanese youth did for fun could fill volumes of time. A small peace sign hung down from a gold chain around his neck. He watched ducks float by listlessly, going from nowhere to nowhere.

He had called Jack shortly after he got off work. Though it was only eight hours and a lunch break, it had seemed more like two and a half weeks. To get to the pay phone in front of Ray's Diner, he waded through an entire day of insanity that his mother liked to pretend was under her complete control. On looking back, nothing had gone terribly wrong despite the confusion and uncertainty, so perhaps he was not giving her enough credit. This seemed more likely.

His day had been sacrificed to a morass of confused people who were putting up signs all over the campaign office, phones which were ringing constantly, new phones constantly being put in, upon which they would begin to ring constantly, maps of the city being nailed up and meaningless lines and numbers being drawn all over them, desks and chairs and tables and the like being moved around wherever they seemed right at a particular minute.

Then there was this guy named Ronald, who although two years older than Campbell, resented the fact that he was not in charge of the computer. He was always looking over Campbell's shoulder while he did things,

sniffing when Campbell would mistype something or coughing whenever the paper would jam in the printer. He was always trying to impress people with his knowledge, while Campbell simply sat back and laughed. At least Ronald provided a modicum of amusement during the day.

Then there was Jayson Blair, shaking hands and smiling at people, who shook his hand back and smiled at him, as he walked around his campaign manager's campaign office, looking as if he had no real idea why he was there. Members of the press would come by and ask him a few questions here and there, to which he would respond with carefully scripted answers, written long in advance.

Then there was Susan Davis, giving orders and smiling at no one in particular besides herself, and doing this so often that people around her, thinking she was smiling at them, would smile back only to let the smile die on their faces when they realized they were wrong. She was instructing movers, volunteers, and anybody else who got within earshot, and doing it all simultaneously with an eerie and unnatural ease.

Then there had been Campbell, showing ladies like Mrs. Denshaw why they needed to come to him before punching buttons on the fax machine at random and still expecting it to work. Someone had left the manual at home. He had to clean up after the little girl who managed to open the door to the desktop copier spilling black toner all over herself and the carpet. He had to fend Mrs. Denshaw off constantly. She had apparently grown tired of trying to break the fax machine, or at least, someone else had grown tired of watching her try to, and had been assigned the duty of putting a BLAIR FOR

MAYOR button on anyone who walked through the door. She kept trying to pin a button on Campbell's shirt, and he politely refused her again and again, because he felt the two she had already given him were more than adequate. He caught Stanley Johnson's arm just in time to keep Stanley from knocking a sixteen ounce bottle of blue Cream Soda Nehi into the computer's keyboard.

All around, it had been a strenuous first day on the job. By the time he managed to go down the street to the pay phone outside of Ray's Diner and Grill to call Jack, he knew he had earned his pay.

What exactly was his pay? All that had been agreed between himself and his mother was that it would be enough to get him out of his financial straits by the end of the summer. He knew his mother was a woman of her word, and the only thing you had to watch with her was to make certain you knew what she meant by those words. Susan Davis was a master of verbal fine print. He made a mental note to keep reminding himself of this.

"Jack?" For a moment, after he asked for him, the voice on the other end of the line had seemed perplexed. "Oh, let me see if he's here." There came a clunk as the receiver was absently put down.

Campbell waited there, thinking to himself, This is the right number, isn't it? And then, a minute later, Jack's voice was there on the line.

Now, standing on the incongruous bridge, he had an urge to go lay down in the grass and fall asleep there. It seemed like such a good idea, he was about to follow through when Jack came up and leaned on the railing next to him. Jack waited for a moment before speaking, and Campbell waited for him to speak. "How did you know?" Jack asked softly.

Campbell turned around and leaned with his back against the railing. From here, he could see a young couple sitting on a bench near the lake. They were feeding the ducks, arms around each other, sneaking kisses off and on, going from nowhere to nowhere.

"Your voice said everything I needed to hear."

"Like what?" Jack asked him.

"Desperation," Campbell said after a moment.

Jack looked at him with doubt. "All I said was 'Kim.'"

Campbell turned and looked at him, then held out his hands as if to say, "Exactly."

"Perhaps I was a little pathetic sounding," Jack mused aloud to himself.

"So first of all, who's the bitch who answered the phone?"

"My mother," Jack said with a groan.

"Oh, hell," Campbell replied, shocked. His face twisted in amazement.

"No," Jack said to reassure him, almost smiling. "My stepmother," then corrected himself. "Well, she's only Debra. How'd you know that she's...well, a bitch?"

"Well, I wasn't sure at first," Campbell spoke, growing more disgusted as he thought about it, "but you get your first clue when she answers the phone with her mouth full of something. Didn't even try to hide it or anything. God, what a slob. And then, she was listening in..."

"I'm used to that from her," Jack replied.

"Never really close, huh?" Campbell studied his reflection in the water.

"No, I'm afraid not."

Campbell nodded his understanding. "I'm sure her friends don't care if she answers the phone with a mouthful of cheese puffs."

"So when do I get to hear this story of yours? And how is it you seem to know so much about me?" Jack was watching Campbell carefully, as if he thought Campbell could be dangerous. He did not know where this thought came from, but part of him was busy assuring the rest of him that Campbell was on his side.

"Well, we'll see," Campbell said, looking around towards that patch of grass again. "First of all, I think you have a story to tell me.

Secondly, we go over there, because I am tired as hell of standing up."

They went.

And Jack told him.

Chapter Three

We met in high school.

You have to understand: in high school I wasn't exactly a mushroom, but I wasn't terribly outgoing either. I never had a lot of experience, you know, with girls.

Kim was a very bright girl. Incredibly shy, though, which I could never understand. She would never talk to me about why, either. Social activities she never got involved with—sororities or anything like that. But intellectual things like Math Club, Scholars'

Bowl, Chess Club, anything like that, she was not only involved with, but more often than not, she was in charge. I guess when it was in an intellectual environment, she felt sure enough to talk to people and even be the lead.

I hope that makes sense.

It really seems like a Cameron Crowe movie or something, looking back on it. I wasn't too concerned with the scholarly pursuits of high school...and that's really all she did care about. She graduated valedictorian of our class, and me...I don't even remember where my placement was. I don't think a single memorable thing came out of high school for me except for the fact that we had been seeing each other for a year and a half.

Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was my junior year of high school. She had been in my English class for two years running. So for two years, I had been sitting in class watching her from across the room, and thinking what it would be like to go out with her. Would I ask her out? No, never.

I kept thinking, she's head of the Honor Society, I'm head of the Mediocre Society—what would we have to talk about?

The reason we finally ended up going out together was this:

Helen Bailey, who I'd been seeing all that summer had just broken up with me to start seeing someone else. I kept thinking it was more than likely for the best, and I kept telling myself it was nothing to get upset over, but just like me I got upset anyway. I was depressed, and had no idea what I should do next. One day though, Mark Caldwell, who was a friend of mine, came up to me after school.

Mark—you have to understand about Mark—he was one of those guys who was very...large. Not large as in fat, but just...I don't know...big. And for all of his size, he didn't like to be noticed, which was very odd. He was just quiet and very insecure.

So, anyway, Mark comes up to me, and says, "Jack, I need to talk to you."

And I asked him what was up.

He said, "I've got a date for homecoming."

I said something like, "That's great, Mark, that's great!" I was very proud of him, you know, I had been telling him for some time that he needed to get out more, to ask somebody out on a date.

Who was I to talk, right?

But, anyway, he says, "I hope it's great. I'm not so sure."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "Of course it's great; I knew you had it in you."

Then he said, "It's who I asked out that might not make it so great."

And after he said that, I saw, actually saw it on his face. He didn't need to tell me. I let him, though. It was Helen, of course.

Immediately afterward, he asks, "You're not mad at me, are you?"

I have to admit...it's stupid and it's shallow, but it's the truth: I was a little mad. I think if there was a name for the mindset I was in it should have been called the Post Break-up Stupidity Syndrome.

Something like that. I didn't tell him I was feeling this way because it wouldn't have done any good. It would have made him upset and defensive. I said I was proud of him, and I was. Even if he had asked out Helen, my ex-girlfriend, and chances were Helen would simply use him like she had used me, for a two or three month relationship before moving on to someone else. But I couldn't say that.

Mark had asked out Helen at a great risk to his ego, and I wasn't going to kill whatever it was he had built up inside himself.

I hope that makes sense.

So, I swallowed all that childish bullshit, and I told him no, of course, I wasn't upset. Helen and I had split up, and whatever she wanted to do, and more importantly, whatever he wanted to do, was fine. I had no real say in the matter. I told him I hoped he had a great time, and I meant it. He seemed pleased and relieved.

So anyway, that night I was sitting at home, playing the piano when this thought struck me. It said: "My God, why don't you just ask Kim out to the homecoming dance? What's wrong with you?"

You've been sitting around on your butt for two years doing nothing, so now's the time to do something! You're available, for all you know she's available ask her!"

In the first place, I was surprised homecoming was on my mind at all. I thought I'd been concentrating on Bach.

But anyway, I told myself there was no way in hell I could pull that off, and to just forget about it. So I started playing piano again.

But I wouldn't let myself off the hook like that. The voice in my head said: "Mark Caldwell just asked Helen Bailey out to the dance. Mark Caldwell the shyest guy you know asked out Helen Bailey, who's probably going to use him anyway, but still that took some guts. And you, you can't seem to get up enough of your own guts to ask out Kim, who's twice as wonderful as Helen could ever hope to be."

I had about convinced myself, and was picking up the phone to call, when I came up with a weak excuse not to. "She'll say no,"

I said.

"If she does," I reasoned back at myself, "at least you'll know then. For God's sake, take someone to homecoming."

I looked up Kim's number and dialed it. I already had in my mind to ask out Alison White when Kim said no.

Kim came to the phone and I did five or six minutes of small talk while I was trying to collect myself enough to ask her. Finally, I said, "How would you like to go to homecoming?"

And she said yes. She didn't even skip a beat. She didn't even have to think about it.

* * *

Campbell sat on the grass next to Jack, and listened to him tell his story. More importantly, he watched Jack tell his story.

Jack had a lost look in his eyes, the look one gets when the present world has faded to grey around you, and the past's grip on you has become complete. Campbell could see that Jack had not spoken of this for a long time, if he had ever spoken of it all before.

The act of bringing it back from whatever grave he had created for it in his mind was all-consuming.

He wanted to ask Jack about the assumptions he made, which he almost knew to be facts. His curiosity was also piqued about certain details, and he wanted to interject with questions but always the writer, he admonished himself.

He kept silent, afraid that so long in getting the story out, Jack might not be able to start up again once stopped.

He listened as Jack continued.

She said "Yes." I was stunned. I was sitting there thinking that maybe I should ask Cindy instead of Alison White when she said no, but she said yes. I had been so sure that she was going to say no, that when she did say yes, I had no idea what to do next. Then I realized she must have misunderstood what I meant.

"No, I mean with me," I said.

"Of course," she said.

And that was that.

We went to homecoming. Then we went out a couple of other times. We went to prom, and then so on and so on. We made an interesting pair, she being the smartest person in the school, and me, well...I was just me. Musical guy. Everything was great. We graduated from high school together, and then went to the community college together.

You know, I often wondered if she had lowered her sights on my account, you know? I remember she had gotten a scholarship, a really nice one, too, despite the fact she hadn't done much looking. She was after all, valedictorian of our class. It was for a school up north. She turned it down, though, because she said she didn't like the school. At least, that's what she said. I made sure she wanted to stay, and not just for me. And I asked and asked, but she said no every single time. Sometimes, though, I wonder.

Anyway, we stayed together about three years, dating exclusively. But then things changed, and we broke up.

It's...you wake up one morning and...and I don't know...you used to be spending every single day with this person...and then all of a sudden they've moved out of their house...and...you haven't been able to find the time

to go over and see their new apartment...and they can't seem to find the time to come and see you...and time just gets away from you...

So we broke up.

Jack sat back on the grass. His smile was gone. The look of pleasant reminiscence was gone. The past was withdrawing back into the shadows of his mind, leaving him with only the present, which slumped his shoulders and draped a pall over his features.

Jack was finished with volunteering information. Campbell knew this. He also knew the part of the story causing Jack the most pain had still not come out. Jack might not be able to tell this tale again, not for a very long time, and so Campbell had to drag him through the rest of it. He knew it had to be done, but the task's necessity did nothing to make it any easier.

"You just broke it off?" Campbell asked. "Just like that?"

"No," Jack corrected, "it wasn't just like that, it was..." he trailed off.

"It was what?"

"Like I said, we didn't seem to be able to find time to spend with each other."

Campbell waited. Jack said nothing.

"There's something else. Isn't there?"

"I " Jack stopped. He looked at Campbell. "Yes, there was something else."

There was a long pause before Jack spoke again.

I remember there was this movie that I wanted to go see. To be honest, I can't remember which one. I had been looking forward to seeing it with Kim. And I brought it up one day. We were sitting there; we were over at her apartment. And we were working on homework. It was a class that I had had the previous quarter, and I was helping her study.

So I brought up the idea of going to see this movie. And she said, "Oh, I saw it, it was wonderful."

I stopped what I was doing, and I looked at her. I asked her, "Who did you see it with?"

She seemed uncomfortable when I asked this. She told me she'd seen it with some friends. Some friends from one of her classes. She was very vague with her answer.

She asked me why I looked so disappointed. I told her I felt badly because I had wanted to see that movie with her. She assured me we could still see it together, that it was not a problem, but she didn't understand what I meant.

So, I asked her about going to see another film that weekend.

Just so I could see her. It suddenly hit me that I rarely got a chance to be with her at all. I had never given it much thought before, how she was always so busy with classes and going out with her friends, and I was so busy with my classes, and my work, and...I so rarely got a chance to be with her. And she told me she already had plans. She already had plans she was with her parents Friday night, I believe it was her younger sister

who was having a birthday, and the other night she had made plans to go out with her friends. So I asked when we could have a chance to see each other, and she said...she said we would have to wait and see.

She said she would have to wait and see when she would have time to spend with me.

So I started thinking back over the last six months, among all the other things that had happened, that it had started to get like this very slowly, it had kind of crept up on me, that she was always out late with her friends...but she could never find time for me.

And then I remember...that day I was on campus and I ran into her and a friend of hers. Some guy I'd never met before and they weren't doing anything wrong, not really...and I hadn't spoken to her in about a week, we just kept missing each other when we did call...and she...when I rounded that corner and saw them...they weren't doing anything but sitting there together...but she had this look on her face...and it showed me two things...first that I had caught her...and...it looked like an apology, too.

And I didn't get a chance to talk to her long, because she said she was going to her friend's dorm room to study...and, um...I asked her to call me later...that was at five-thirty.

I called at eleven...eleven-thirty...and midnight. She was never home.

I walked back down to the campus dormitory parking lot... and...her car was still there. It was three o'clock in the morning.

She'd been studying for ten hours.

That's a hell of a lot of studying, don't you think?

She never called.

She hasn't since.

I haven't talked to her since then.

That was four months ago.

I call sometimes to her apartment, and her roommate answers but...she's never there.

Jack grew silent.

"You loved her," Campbell said. It was not quite a question.

"I think so. If it wasn't love, I don't know what is."

"So you didn't love her."

"Yes, I did."

"You're sure?"

"Yes...Yes, I am."

"But it changed."

"Yes."

"You stopped loving her."

"I don't know."

Pause.

"And it's over."

"Yes."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it's over."

Campbell paused. "Is it?"

"Yes, it's over!" Jack cried, and yanked a large tuft of grass from the ground, pulling several clots of dirt free with it. He flung it into the lake in frustration. The ducks retreated from it, going from nowhere to nowhere. "It's over, for Christ's sake! It's over! Whatever I did wrong, I did, and she left me for someone else! She didn't even have the decency to tell me to my face, she just ran off to his damn bedroom for ten hours! What did I do, Campbell? I keep wracking my brains for the answer. What the hell did I do to deserve this treatment? Three years, Campbell. And this is what I get.

She won't talk to me, and her silence is proving me right!" Jack's face was flushed and his teeth were clenched together, but he was not crying.

He was not crying.

Campbell was still fiddling with some grass, very collected, seemingly unmoved, untouched by this display. One walking by him might take a passing glance and think he was sculpting clouds into dragons for all the emotion that showed on his face. They would have no knowledge of Campbell's nature however, for this was far, far from the truth. Campbell felt a creeping familiarity steal over him which he found he could not prevent. I've been here, he thought. Or there, whichever you want to call it. I've been in his shoes.

How strange to be on the outside this time. "You said you found that she didn't seem to have time for you anymore."

"Yes, that's right."

Campbell looked directly at Jack. The younger man's face was flushed and his eyes were angry.

"You also said that you found yourself not having any time for her." It was not an accusation.

Jack let his head drop and muttered something under his breath.

"What?" Campbell prodded.

"I said yes, that's right."

"Why is that, Jack?"

Jack looked up, not at Campbell, but across the surface of the water. Something about the look in Campbell's eyes. It was the truth, and wasn't that what Jack had come here looking for?

And now that he was faced with it, it frightened him. He wished he could leave here without it. He was certain he could not. "I don't know."

Campbell watched Jack say this half-truth, and gave it a moment to hang in the air before he dispelled it. "I think you do know."

"I think you know, but you may not know you do."

Jack made no reply. He kept staring intently at some point on the other side of the water.

"Rather than draw this out, I'll make it quick and painless. Or as much so as I can." Campbell leaned closer to Jack. "You asked what you did, Jack. You asked what was wrong with you. I'll tell you."

On this, Jack turned his head towards Campbell.

"Nothing at all was wrong with you, Jack. Or her, for that matter."

"But she "

"Careful," Campbell held up a hand to shush him. "Careful what you say. You have to think about it from her perspective for a second."

Jack looked away again. He looked for something else to deal with. Something that did not have to be so hard. He saw this quest as futile, so instead, asked, "Can we walk? I'm tired of sitting."

They crossed the bridge and turned left. The sunlight fell on the backs of their necks. The young couple that had been entertaining the ducks apparently finished off their bread and were making their way back to their car.

"All right, Campbell. What happened to us?"

"You changed, Jack," Campbell said simply. "You both...just... changed. You said you loved her, and I'm sure you still do. But is it the same? Does it feel the same?"

"I " Jack stopped to consider.

"You said it yourself, you wake up one morning and realize you haven't seen or talked to her in a week. And you hadn't noticed, had you?"

No response.

"How old are you, Jack?"

"Twenty. I'll be twenty-one in a month."

"Twenty...three years..." Campbell calculated, "you started seeing each other at seventeen, or thereabouts. You both did a lot of growing over three years, didn't you? She was your first serious relationship, right?"

"Right."

"And you hers."

"Yes."

"And she was your first partner."

"What? Oh, yes."

"And you hers."

"Yes."

"She's twenty also?"

"Yes."

"This twenty-year-old girl finally moves out of her parents' house and into her own apartment. She's just made a big step. She loves you but it's not quite the same, and she doesn't know how to break it to you, because of that love. So she takes the easy way out, and doesn't do anything but react to what happens. What happens is she finds someone else."

Jack said nothing.

"This twenty-year-old boy is still living at home, but I'm sure he is going through changes of his own, and making some of his own big steps. You love her but it's not quite the same, etc." Campbell stopped walking. Jack stopped as well. "Do you see? You grew apart."

There is nothing at all wrong with that. It is no one's fault. There is no need to start placing blame at anyone's doorstep. It does no good."

"But "

Campbell cut him off. "No, think about it. She slept with some other guy, why? Maybe because she felt distanced from you because you weren't spending enough time with her. Why? Maybe because you felt distanced from her because she suddenly had all these new feelings and felt left out. Why? Because she never took the time to introduce all of you, and " Campbell had been stacking his hands one on top of the other as each level of blame and reasoning followed each other. "Do you see? It just gets deeper and deeper, and it can go on forever. You grew up and apart and didn't know how to handle it because you had grown comfortable with each other and didn't know how to deal with being apart. It can happen to anyone, and unfortunately it usually happens to just about everyone at some point. We are constantly changing people. You simply changed away from each other. It's a natural thing."

"Natural " Jack sneered, and again Campbell stopped him.

"You take two people who make the most perfect couple in the world, and if they are left all to themselves, they will stay that perfect couple from now until the end of everything, right? Wrong. Even if you stuck them on an island somewhere away from everything, no money to worry about, plenty of food, no disease, they would still not be the same perfect couple they were before. Sometimes, they may not even be the same couple."

Campbell looked at Jack to make sure everything was sinking in. It was.

"Time changes everything. You grow up, for one thing. You become a different person from the person you were last year, last month hell, even yesterday. We're constantly changing beings. It could be that you and Kim just changed away from each other."

Jack said nothing. They walked in silence for a moment, following the sidewalk's circle around the nondescript lake, going from nowhere to nowhere.

"See, that's natural, which makes it right." Campbell reconsidered, then corrected himself: "Well, it doesn't exactly make it wrong." He considered his statement further, and then corrected himself again. "Well, think of it this way, whether it's right or wrong doesn't change the fact that it happened and we have to deal with it." One last thought. "Or something like that."

Jack gave Campbell a look. "Could you be a bit more specific there, Campbell? This is after all going to have a lasting effect on my mental health."

Campbell returned Jack's look. "All I'm trying to say, smartass, is that it's not just you. It's not entirely your fault, and not Kim's fault either."

"I'm listening," Jack said.

"Kim is probably going through the same thing you are right now. She's hurt and she's confused, just like you. If she loved you half as much as you thought, she feels bad enough about what she did. Except she doesn't feel like talking about it, at least not right now. You feel bad about what happened on your end, and want to tell her that. Let it sit for right now. Go on and live your life and don't worry about it."

"Don't worry !" Jack began to protest.

Campbell stopped him. "I'm telling you if the two of you are meant to be together, you will be together no matter what you do.

And if you're not meant to be together, you won't be no matter what you do. It's when you fight what's supposed to be happening that you get into a position like you are now."

"Which is?" Jack asked, flippantly.

"Confused, hurt, depressed," Campbell listed. "Any of that sound familiar?"

Another minute of silence.

"So, I should just stop?" Jack asked.

"Not stop," Campbell said, pretty sure he knew what Jack meant by his words, "just calm down. Coast. Don't worry about what you have no control over. Whatever's meant to happen will happen, and somehow that makes everything all right." Again, he added, "Almost."

Jack made no response, and there was another period of silence.

After a minute or two of this, making the circumferential walk around the park, Jack spoke without looking up. "How come you haven't asked about my father?"

Campbell glanced at his companion. "Should I? We haven't known each other all that long, you know."

"Oh, I know," Jack shrugged. "People I don't even know ask about him all the time, that's all."

Campbell shoved his hands in the pockets of his black pants.

"I figure that if you needed to talk about that, you would in your own due time."

Jack said nothing.

"Do you want to talk about your father?"

"No," Jack said. "Yes...I don't know."

"Well, when you decide, just talk."

Jack nodded. They kept walking. Jack felt exhausted. The past four or five months had been trapped inside him, building up with no outlet whatsoever. The catharsis which he had just undergone left him drained. But it was so good to have someone to speak with.

Jack could not remember having anyone to talk to for the longest time. All of his relatives, after they were done passing out condolences over his father's passing, abandoned him to his fate here in this town that claimed to be a city. Debra had never been accessible to him, a mystery he was never able to shine the light of day upon. The majority of his friends from high school with whom he might have felt close enough for a sharing of such painful information were long gone. They escaped the town before it had a chance to, like quicksand, draw them under the surface. They managed to struggle free before the act of struggling could assist them under. He knew of no one else he could talk to about such important things.

Then there was Kim. Had he tried to talk to Kim about his father? her? everything? He had, but what had been wrong?

Something obviously had been wrong. Not just with talking, but something had been enormously wrong. What the hell had it been?

Maybe Campbell was right.

"Thanks," he said, and was not sure what he was thanking Campbell for. What exactly had Campbell done?

Campbell seemed to know, and needed to say nothing else.

They just kept walking.

It was now around seven-thirty.

"Campbell," Jack said suddenly, "I think I need to get back to my house."

Campbell stopped, took off his glasses, and untucked the Fishbone T-shirt he was wearing from his shorts. He used the end to clean his lenses. "Do you? Are you sure?"

Jack shielded his eyes to look up. "Yes, I think so," he remarked, finally.

"I'll drive you there, if you'd like," Campbell offered.

Jack looked back at him. "Please," he said.

They drove in relative silence. As they turned onto Jack's street, Jack turned to Campbell. "Do you ever walk anywhere?"

"I did a lot of walking a long time ago," Campbell replied. He noted that three different realty offices appeared to have staked claims in this area. Only one or two of the multitude of signs lacked the SOLD addition which the nice woman in the gold coat was putting on them in every realty commercial on television, or so it seemed.

Campbell had a suddenly frightening vision of the woman in the gold coat rushing out of her car and driving the sign home in the ground with one thrust, shrieking, "I claim this house in the name of Macomber Realty!" It might have been humorous, but somehow it fell slightly short.

Campbell tossed this thought aside and continued. "In fact, when I left here, I walked to New York. More or less. Made several stops along the way, some of them for weeks at a time, but got there eventually. Got a few short helping hops from hitchhiking, but most of the way I walked. It was easier and safer that way." Campbell smiled at Jack. "I think I walked all my walking out of my system."

Jack did not ask anything else that evening. He thanked Campbell for listening and Campbell replied by saying he would be in touch. Campbell then drove away, thin tendrils of purplish smoke twisting from the exhaust pipe of his car.

Jack went inside. From upstairs came the muted sounds of prime time network fare. Debra would be in bed already, her favorite bag of munchies beside her, remote control in hand, surfing the channels for that perfect something to spend a few minutes watching. As he made his way up the stairs, he heard one of her flipping frenzies occurring. The Home Shopping Network was cut off, and what followed sounded as if it were a momentary montage of MTV, some movie channel, ESPN, and then the Weather Channel. She lingered on the last for a few seconds, listening to road conditions in Vermont, before returning to the aforementioned movie channel and resting there.

Jack passed the door to the bedroom without a word. He went to his study and clicked on the light. Nothing happened. Jack shrugged. He made his way, soundless, to the piano. He clicked on the desk lamp which sat on the top of the instrument. He made a brief mental note to change out the spent lightbulb in the morning. For now, he opened up the keyboard, closed his eyes, and played his song. His new song.

He went as far as he could, then he stopped, started at the beginning, and played straight through to the same point again. He did not smile, although he should have, but instead squeezed his eyes shut once more and played the piece through yet again.

He grabbed a pencil from the cup that sat on top of the piano next to the watering can and wrote down the fourth line of his current work in progress.

After about five minutes, he felt better and realized he was hungry, so he left to go downstairs and see what there was to eat.

Chapter Four

Campbell studied the directions he scrawled on a page torn from a yellow pad, and then squinted in the diminishing light, trying to make out the numbers painted on the curbs.

5011, 5013, 5015.

He pulled the car over and stopped. He studied the one-story house which looked back at him from twenty feet away. Yes, this is the place, I remember it now.

He had spent part of his meager lunch break that day scanning the maps of the equally meager city. Going back to the fairgrounds had brought to light the disturbing fact that he had no idea what had happened to any of his former companions: Scott, Brian, and Jonathan.

Carol as well, a grim voice in his head told him.

Yes, he replied, Carol as well.

He had gotten addresses for Scott's and Brian's families. By now, they were probably off somewhere at school, but at least he could uncover a lead as to how to get in touch with them. Carol's and Jonathan's families probably moved away, for he had not been able to find a current address for either of them.

It was so hard to remember far enough into the past to reach his former friends. It was almost as if every step he took forward erased a step he had taken a certain distance back in his memory.

He had the sudden wild idea to stop dead in his tracks and look behind him. There he would see a maniacal paint brush erasing his footprints, an escapee from a video game he had loved as a child but could not for his life remember its name.

Earlier that evening, he studied Jack closely before leaving his friend in the arbitrary custody of his home. He had heard of people, and even known one or two, who after divulging some painful portion of their life, seemed fine and, in fact, better off after getting rid of all of that weight from their souls. They then proceeded to walk off somewhere alone and do something extremely self-destructive.

He worried about leaving Jack by himself, but felt Jack was stronger than Campbell was giving him credit for. So he tried to put such energy he was wasting on worry to use for other things. It almost worked.

Now, he reached the front door of Brian's house. A light was on in two of the windows, and it was only eight o'clock or so, so all was well. He rang the doorbell, which glowed with its own sick orange light. After he pressed it, the light began to sputter noticeably. Another second passed, and then the porch light came on, momentarily blinding him. As his eyes were readjusting, the door opened. "Yes?" a voice behind the light asked.

"Is this the Worth residence?"

"Yes."

"Is Brian in?"

"No, he's off at school," the woman said, "I'll be glad to tell him you stopped by. You are ?"

"Campbell Davis."

The woman's face convulsed in surprise and shock. Her reaction might have been the same had Campbell slapped her briskly across her cheek. She opened the glass door that separated them and held it open with one hand as she stepped forth to confront him, her other hand ending in a pointing, accusing finger. She brandished it before her almost like a weapon. "You have some nerve coming back here looking for my son after what you tried to do," she spat at him, "I'm surprised that you even have the gall to set foot in this town again. And you're crazy if you think I'm going to let you get a hold of him again. Now get the hell out of my yard before I call the police."

With this last part done, both doors shut against him and the light turned itself off. The small sputtering light in the doorbell gave a couple of quick winks, then went out forever.

Campbell made his way through the darkness to his car. When he opened the door, the dome light above him came on. He climbed in and swung his door shut, and drowned in the darkness again.

He drove off a moment later.

The remainder of the week was spent much the same as Monday. Campbell spent his week at work, trying to keep all the technical aspects of the campaign under control.

Jack had no job except for his artistic endeavors, which he tried feverishly to further. When these refused to pan out, as they often did for long stretches at a time, he would take walks through the town, trying to find inspiration, with little success. It was not that he was failing to find what he was looking for; it was rather that the town was failing to provide it for him.

Campbell had the constant struggle of trying to keep a lid on his true feelings about the entire business of the political campaign. He had never taken a real liking to politics, and thought of the entire affair as a waste of time.

He never had the chance to prove himself right, until now.

He could give and had given massive speeches on the uselessness of the American government, and they were always extremely lucid, organized, and informed. They had also been, for the most part, pontificated while Campbell was in his cups, so to speak, back when such frivolities were common in his life.

Jack's life during the week had not changed from the pattern set about six months previously, with the exception that almost every evening, Campbell would meet him and the two would talk.

They sometimes met in a public place where they could have a drink and talk about the day's events. Jack would sip his Sprite, and Campbell would drink his cup of hot tea, and they would discuss everything and nothing all at once. Other times, they would go over to Jack's house. Debra would look up from her magazine or Harlequin novel and watch the two hiking up to Jack's study. One night it struck Campbell that Debra might think her stepson was involved in a homosexual affair.

Jonathan Strong had apparently moved away with his family, three years after Campbell's exodus from the town. He had called on the house which he was sure would be Jonathan's, or would have been, as it turned out, if he had stayed. The nice old lady who opened the door told him the Strong's had moved away, and did not seem at all taken aback by his eccentric appearance.

As he drove away, Campbell noticed that her yard sported a sign proclaiming her on the side of the incumbent mayor. He smiled quietly to himself.

It had been a Thursday evening around eight o'clock, with the sun slumping behind the hills in the west, when

he found Carol Williams. He had called on the house which he remembered being Carol's and found he had been off by two.

"The Williams' place is two down," said the man who had opened the door.

"Thank you," Campbell told him, and began to head back to his car.

"Was, I should say," the man remarked, as if to himself.

"Beg pardon?"

"Well, the Williams moved after they got their child taken away from them."

Campbell started to smile at the thought of a court barring Harold Williams from his daughter. "Carol got taken away from them?" he asked, the answer already formed in his mind.

The man had looked at Campbell. "Oh, you don't know about that, then." It was not a question.

Campbell's smile felt very heavy. "Don't know what?" He asked.

And so it was eight o'clock, and the sun was leaving the town in darkness, and Campbell had found Carol Williams at last. The rain fell all around him, and in the failing light he closed his eyes.

"Jack," Campbell began. He was sitting with a blanket thrown around him, clutching a cup of hot tea that Jack brought from the kitchen. The rain and the night air were cold, yes, but not cold enough to produce the shivering that Campbell was plagued with.

He had been inside for going on five minutes, and his inner chill did not appear to have abated in the least. Debra had been in the bedroom flitting through channels, and had not been in her usual perch to deliver glances of indifference with undertones of disapproval upon them as they came through. "You wanted to hear part of the story. About why, and how, and all that other garbage, right?"

Campbell had appeared on his doorstep fifteen minutes previous, being soaked in the rain and not seeming to care. When he said, "Can I come in?" his teeth were chattering. Jack was quite sure Campbell was beyond noticing this.

"Yes, I do want to hear it," Jack replied.

Campbell took a sip of the tea, "I would like to tell you part of it, if you would like to hear it." His eyes were burning an icy blue, and they fixed upon Jack with frightening clarity. "I feel like I need to tell you, like I have to."

"Yes, I would like to hear it," Jack told him.

Campbell continued, as if Jack had not already responded. "I feel like I need to tell someone, and since you're the only friend I have in the world these days, you're unfortunately elected."

Friend, Jack thought, and marveled. Friend. Even in this empty house, he, orphaned first in name and then in spirit, felt the word echo inside of him. Is this what I've been missing? he asked himself.

He did not know. "I don't mind," he said finally.

And so Campbell told him.

Chapter Five

When I was thirteen, I began hanging around with three other guys. We wound up together because we seemed to share the same opinion on a lot of things. We knew this town had really nothing to offer us, for one thing, and we had to get out as soon as possible or this hellhole would swallow us completely. We all wanted to do something with our lives that just didn't fit with the small town mentality. And I know, this isn't supposed to be the typical small town. I hear there's a couple of places called "research parks" now that have a lot of really great, fast-moving corporations that provide a lot of needed dollars, where you can go and get a job that will take you just as far as the company wants you to go. But go ahead and preach to me about how great this town is and how free-thinking and progressive and so forth and then trot over to the community college, and see how many liberal arts classes they offer. I'll bet it's not much compared to the engineering classes. I remember what it was like living here, and it doesn't take but a few days back here to remind you that it was a good idea to leave in the first place.

Anyway, I'm getting off on a tangent here.

My three friends.

First there was Scott, who wanted to sing. Wanted to sing anything basically. He'd sing along with the radio, he'd sing along with the television, hell, he'd make shit up and sing it if there wasn't anything else to sing. He wrote lyrics, good ones too, but his voice wasn't for shit. He was always either writing lyrics or poetry, or turning one into the other. He was quite a character.

Next there was Jonathan, who was fourteen and well built for his age. He was one of those kids who got the hormone hit early and heavy and shot up and out and around and any other direction he could manage. He wanted to play football, and couldn't wait to get to high school so he could bash some heads. But that was his second passion. This is crazy, but this guy actually was certain he would go to work for Marvel Comics someday, drawing something for them. He loved to draw superheroes and shit like that. Loved it.

Would make 'em up out of his head, whole universes full of flying people. His father had one of those old personal computers, and Jon filled up the disk with all of his creations. They all looked horrible when he sketched them out on paper. Didn't look worth shit.

Last there was Brian, who was thirteen and very meek and mild. I don't know if he was planning on inheriting the earth or something like that, but if it didn't pan out, I wasn't sure he would even raise his voice. Brian hadn't exactly decided what he was going to do. He wanted to do something artistic, but what he wasn't sure. For example, he tried painting, he seemed to like it the best, and had done some of the worst landscapes we had ever seen.

So there were the four of us, and we'd sneak off to the building they had at the county fairgrounds, talking about getting out, or getting anywhere but here. Scott and his singing, and Jon and his drawing, and Brian and his painting, and me with my writing.

Comparing notes, constantly criticizing each others' work, and just basically fucking around like all adolescent kids do.

Except we weren't like all adolescent kids. Brian had parents who were ready to fucking disown him if he didn't become a lawyer like his father and grandfather before him. Anytime they caught him trying something they didn't like, they would tell him it was the silliest, stupidest, ugliest thing they had ever seen, over and over again hoping finally he would just stop doing it.

Jonathan's father (his mother had died when he was just a baby) kept pressuring him into football, which wasn't so bad, but also took him and a bunch of his drawings to a doctor at some university, who proceeded to tell Jon that it was the worst shit he had ever seen scratched on paper, and what the hell did he think he was doing calling himself an artist?

You know about my mom of course, or at least, enough to get you through this little story. Let's just say Mom was no picnic, either.

Scott was the only one who had cool parents. He was the only one of us who really was, I don't know...well-adjusted? Is that the word? I don't know. He had the coolest dad who would let him do anything within reason, because his dad trusted him, see? His dad would let him be whatever he wanted. Do you understand?

Jack watched Campbell tell his story, their positions now reversed. Campbell was now the one with his eyes lost in the past. Jack was now the one patiently listening, and thereby helping Campbell rid himself of his burden.

Jack did not mind. Campbell had called him friend, no, more than that, his only friend, and the responsibility this brought with it did not weigh heavily upon him in the least. Instead, he relished it, wondering if he remembered how the whole business of being a friend went. He was sure if he had forgotten, he would learn again quickly.

Then there was Carol. I don't remember where Carol came from. What I mean to say, I can't remember how Carol got mixed in with us. It wasn't really the art, because she had no clue what she wanted to be when she got older, and wasn't really worried about it at the time.

She had lots more to be worried about than that.

Where other girls had to deal with problems like the mysterious way boys were becoming objects of interest instead of cootie transmitters, the onset of acne and maybe like starting the monthly biological carnival ride, Carol was worried about how to keep her father out of her pants.

I don't remember when she joined our little group, but she had been with us a few months before she walked in and dropped the bomb about her dad. I will never forget she came to the fairgrounds and sat down, all composure and everything, and then suddenly started bawling. She just cried and couldn't speak for the better part of an hour. The four of us guys just hugged her and asked what was wrong, but all she could do was shake her head.

Then she told us. And we were all sorry we had asked.

She had been uncomfortable around her father for as long as she could remember. He did some fondling here and there, some touching; I don't need to go into details. I don't want to go into details. If you use your imagination, you'll be halfway there. But he never molested her for the longest time. But it happened. He came to her naked the night before and just crawled into bed with her.

I don't know where the hell her mother was during all this, and I don't think the mother did either. If I remember right she was in a bottle most of the time.

After Carol finished her story, I remember breaking away from her and the other three guys. I walked outside, because I needed air. Her story had seemed to take all the air out of the building, and if I didn't get outside I was going to suffocate with the knowledge of what had happened to her. I had never felt so upset...and sad...and angry, and every emotion you can imagine, all at one time before.

I wanted to kill her father. I know that, I remember thinking it, just killing her father.

But I was fourteen and scrawny, and thought that killing was wrong.

Carol came outside. Her face was red and swollen with her misery, and I remember she walked right up behind me, and stopped.

"You don't hate me, do you, Campbell?" She asked. "You don't hate me, do you?"

Hate her. How in the hell could I have ever hated her? I loved her, you know. Not in a sexual way, maybe later it could have turned into something like that, who knows, but at that point we were just close friends.

Christ, I could never hate her.

And I told her just that. I loved her, I could never hate her; I just hated her father. And it was in that moment the idea came into my head that we had to either stand or run. I don't know where the idea came from, but I knew we had only those two choices. I asked her then; I asked her what she wanted to do about it. She said she didn't know what to do, except that she wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

I know now that there could have been better ways to handle the situation, but we had nowhere to turn. We were fourteen years old; we had no power over anything, especially our own lives. Her mother was useless, my mother was too busy counting money and stepping on my father, and as for the police...

I remember Carol told us she called the police once, and they came and talked to her father about it, decided it was a false alarm and left. All I can say about what happened next is that nothing got broken when he beat the living shit out of her. Bastard was careful, and not entirely stupid.

So we decided to run for it.

Campbell looked straight at Jack. "I want you to know I didn't know any better, Jack. We thought and we thought and all we could think to do was run. Do you understand?"

Jack watched the past torture his friend in the window of Campbell's eyes. Jack hurt with him. "You were only fourteen, Campbell. Decisions like that shouldn't have to be made by fourteen-year-old kids."

"No," Campbell roared, and got up from the bed, marching around the room ranting, "no, lots of things shouldn't happen that happen all the time! Everything shouldn't happen! I've seen mothers killing their kids because they can't afford to feed them!

I've seen guys selling things more precious than their own souls for smack! If I told you about all the women I know that have been raped..." his voice trailed away. "Jesus, we'd be here all night."

Campbell ran a hand through his hair. "No, none of that should have to happen. None of it at all."

Jack shuddered at this outburst. He felt as if he should say something, as if he had to say something, but his mouth hung open pointlessly and so he closed it. All he could think of was that his life had been free from all of these things, all these scarring things that Campbell had been witness to. He had mercifully been spared such events. This was the thought which hung in Jack's mind, that he had complained to Campbell about his girlfriend breaking up with him. What could he possibly say?

Campbell laughed grimly to himself at this point, seemingly back on track with his story. "You know," he said, "it's funny. I remember now that Carol said we were going to make it and it would all turn out all right.

You know how she knew?" He did not wait for a response. "She had always taken an interest in astrology and shit like that. She kept a set of tarot cards hidden away from her parents. She snuck it out to the fairgrounds one time while we were planning the trip, and consulted it. She told us that we were mystically protected, so nothing could go wrong."

Another dry, cracked laugh escaped him.

* * *

So the five of us talked it over. The only one who up front didn't want to leave was Scott, because he had no reason to. He had his parents and his little sister, and a healthy family. We weren't mad or anything, we understood.

Then Jonathan backed out a little later on, because he said he was scared.

So it was Brian, Carol, and I. We were planning to get away, get somewhere, and get lost in a big city. I don't know what we were going to do then; when you're fourteen the world hasn't had a chance to beat all the optimism out of you, so we were sure we'd think of something.

We thought about taking a bus, but there was no way to do that in this town. Everybody knows everybody here. One look at the three of us, and the attendant would say he had to go back in the back for something, and then he would quietly call our parents.

So we pooled our money and had enough to pay for tickets.

We decided to head north to the next town and catch the bus from there. I had a map, and knew the landscape well enough to get us there without taking any main roads. A few calls and we knew what the best time would be to catch the bus. It was four hours to get there by bicycle going flat out, and then get the tickets. Get on the bus, tell anyone that asks we're all related and that we're going to see family in the city. Jesus.

It seemed perfect, but hey, we were fourteen. It would have worked. We had all come up with stories as to where we were going to be, and we had plenty of time to get on the bus before they could realize we were missing. We had plenty of time to get to the city before they could realize we were on a bus. We had plenty of time to get lost before they realized where we had gone.

We were to meet on a Saturday morning and head north. At the appointed time, we rode our bikes to the fairgrounds. Jonathan and Scott were there to see us off, and were to hang around the fairgrounds until the normal time we would go home, which would be around sundown. Then they'd go home, saying, if anyone asked, that they thought we were going home, too. They would cover as best as they could.

But Brian never showed. We waited fifteen minutes, then I decided to leave. If he had gotten caught, or (and I thought about this afterward) if he had turned us in, the longer we waited, the worse it would be.

We left.

The path I took kept us away from everyone. Carol and I were fine. For two hours we went, riding through the woods carefully, so as not to kill ourselves by going too fast into a fallen tree or something. Any time we couldn't go any further on the bikes, we got off and walked them.

At one point we had to cross an interstate, so we waited until there were no cars to do it. On the other side was an old barn; then we would be back away from any roads. We decided to stop at the barn and rest.

It wouldn't have mattered if we had kept going, they would have found us. I don't know if Brian gave up the goods on us or what, all I know is that someone blew the whistle. Somehow they knew. I was trying to find the trail that would take us to the outskirts of the next town, and Carol had gone inside the barn to sit down and rest out of sight.

The state troopers showed up. No warning, no sirens, they just pulled up. I saw them and made it to the trees. Carol was still inside the barn and there was no way to get her out without getting caught. After a few seconds, I heard her screaming. It took two of them to carry her to the car, and they locked her in the back of it.

They looked around for me, but couldn't find me.

She was screaming the whole time, and she was screaming, "They've got me! Run!"

So I ran. I ran from there and kept going for seven years.

"I don't know why they didn't keep chasing me. I've thought more than once that my mother had fixed it somehow. I just was missing. She probably didn't care. She didn't press the matter with the police, she might have told them I was visiting relatives, I don't know, I never asked." Campbell was sitting on the bed again, the blanket discarded, and his head dropped into his hands.

"I went today and looked her up. Carol, I mean."

Campbell paused then and would go no further.

Jack was not stupid. He knew a cue when he heard one, so he delivered the line Campbell needed to continue. "How is she?"

"She's dead." Campbell looked at Jack. "I tried to find her house and talked to this guy who used to be her neighbor. He told me. That's small towns, they love to talk."

Campbell sighed, and then started again, the most painful leg of the course he was running. "She couldn't run the way she wanted, so she found another way. I figure she started doing the shit not too long after they brought her back. Drink, and...other things. You wouldn't think you could get a hold of such stuff, not in the pristine small town south, but you would be surprised. Two years went by before Carol decided to leave for good. By the time the authorities found it prudent to reevaluate the living conditions at her house, it was already too late.

They took her younger brother away from her parents and they're probably both in jail, but it doesn't matter a fucking bit because she died choking on her own vomit. She had gone on a drinking binge and then shot herself up with so much smack that when she finally threw up the booze she couldn't even roll over to breathe anymore.

"I think she knew what she was doing," Campbell told Jack matter-of-factly, "I don't think it was an accident at all. I think she knew. I think she just got tired of putting up with her father...doing things to her." Campbell felt colder than he had in a long time.

And it felt as if tears could find their way to his surface. But he was not going to cry.

He was not going to cry.

Jack sat down on the bed next to Campbell, staring straight ahead just as Campbell was doing. "There was

nothing " he began, but Campbell whirled on him.

"I told you she told me to run, right?" He began, his voice beginning to rise in intensity. His face was flushed with his anger.

"She told me to run. That's what I always thought I heard her say.

For seven years, I could deal, right? Because she told me to run.

But when I got to her grave, do you know what I realized? She wasn't telling me to run; she wasn't telling me to run at all. She was screaming for me to help her, to come back there and save her. All this time, I made myself believe she told me to run, just so I could live with myself. But now "

Campbell closed his eyes. He saw her being dragged from the barn by the two grim-faced state troopers, her eyes seeming to pinpoint him in his hiding place in the bushes. They pleaded from their sockets in agony as she screamed, "Campbell, they've got me!

Campbell, help me! Help me, PLEASE! DON'T LET THEM TAKE

ME BACK! PLEASE!!"

He opened his eyes to escape this. "I left her to die," he breathed.

Jack looked at him sharply. Before he realized what he was doing, he grabbed Campbell roughly by both shoulders. Campbell's face was a mixture of surprise and fury. If Jack had not been in a similar mood himself, he might have seen something in Campbell that would have frightened him, but Jack was just as furious. He couldn't believe he was hearing Campbell speak so. He knew what it was. It was grief. He could have written his own thesis on it. "If you had tried to go after her, they would have taken you back, too," he said harshly. "They were two state troopers with guns and you were a scared fourteen-year-old kid. There was nothing you could do."

Campbell dropped his eyes. For a moment, to Jack, he seemed much older than himself, older than twenty-two, much older than time. It's not his body that's old, Jack thought, it's his soul. God, is that what's wrong with us? Is that what happens when you have all the time in the world to grow up, and then something happens? A something that makes you grow up the rest of the way overnight, like watching your best friend get dragged into hell, knowing there's not a damn thing you can do about it?

Jack knew the answer already. He knew it because it felt familiar. Or losing everything you thought you cared for.

"I could have done something," Campbell said flatly.

"What?" Jack rounded on him. "What could you have done?

Tell me. Name one thing. Gone back and died with her? You couldn't save her, Campbell. There was nothing you could do. Sometimes we can only save ourselves, and we have to be content with it. You know this is true."

With the smile on Campbell's face, Jack realized he had been preaching. "Thank you, Reverend," Campbell told him.

"You're hung up on this now," Jack continued, ignoring him, "but you've got to put it behind you, or you'll

never be able to get on with your life and quit running. You're still running, from her and from yourself."

Campbell continued smiling. It was a thin, wan smile that somehow managed to infect the rest of his face. "You sound like me," he croaked, "I'm always so good at giving advice, but I can't take it worth a crap. I know you're the same way."

"Am I?" Jack asked him, then himself, Am I? But this was not the time for his own questions; it was Campbell he had to think about now. "Well, regardless, you need to listen. You could not have helped Carol. You said it yourself: you were only fourteen and were powerless. I'm sure Carol would not want to see you like this about her. I'm sure she would want you to remember what it was like before...before it went bad."

Campbell thought this over. "That's as may be. I still feel like shit. I still wish there was something I could have done. I I just can't believe that she's gone." The last statement seemed like an acknowledgment of defeat. Campbell sighed, running a hand through his hair again.

Jack looked at Campbell, pleased to hear the acceptance in his voice, and then, surprising himself, hugged his friend.

Campbell surprised himself by hugging Jack right back.

They embraced each other almost as if they were two people who had been stranded on an island, alone for years. They had never been alone, just too lost in themselves to notice each other.

One day, when they managed to look up from their own feet, they caught sight of each other walking in the surf.

After a few minutes, they mutually let their arms go slack.

Campbell looked to Jack as if he were about to fall over where he sat. "Thank you," he said.

"It's a stock phrase," Jack replied, "but that's what friends are for."

Campbell considered it. "Still a good phrase," he said, "not that I would ever use it in a story or anything, but it has a place in real life still."

"Do you just want to crash here?" Jack asked, "It's no problem, I don't think you're in any shape to drive. It's not far to your mother's house, but still "

"I'm not staying at my mother's."

"So where have you been sleeping?"

Campbell told him.

"Jesus," Jack said, shocked, and then, "Jesus, but we'll fix that soon enough." He pushed Campbell back on the bed, and Campbell gave no resistance. "Sleep, and we'll talk in the morning."

Campbell nodded, laid back and closed his eyes. He said something under his breath, but it was unintelligible, and Jack did not bother to ask what it had been. He thought that it might have been thank you, but that was unimportant. Within moments, Campbell was heading into deep slumber.

Jack sat down on the floor and rested his back against the bed. "Can't have my best friend sleeping in a damn

car," he told himself.

He looked up at Campbell who, when awake, seemed completely in command of every situation. Now asleep, he seemed terribly vulnerable with his knees drawn up to his chest, lying on his side. His chest rose and fell, rose and fell.

Jack reached up and touched Campbell's arm to reassure himself that Campbell was here. That Campbell was real. "My best friend," he repeated, and then another thought, Not alone on the island.

He pulled a blanket over Campbell, and then spread a quilt out for himself on the floor and lay there listening to the voices in his head. Nice speech, they said, but were you listening?

I'm trying, he told them, and knew in some inexpressible way that he was lying.

He fell asleep after about thirty minutes, almost at peace with himself.

Chapter Six

Campbell awoke alone.

They were all gone. All of his childhood friends were gone.

They had left him, or he had left them, however you chose to look at it, but the end result was all the same, wasn't it?

He thought of Carol, and if anything swept over him it was not a wave of sadness, but more one of relief.

He would never return to her resting place, he knew that.

He did not want to remember her there. He wanted to remember summer afternoons in an innocent life that belonged to someone who looked remarkably like a younger version of himself. He wanted to remember summer afternoons where five children who were hurtling through their adolescence would sit in their faded castle and dream of getting out of the small town which held them captive by their age. They dreamed, and he was the one who had escaped, but now he was back. And I'm here to tell ya, he thought, it's not all it's cracked up to be. There's opportunity like we thought, but for the most part, it's the same shit on a larger scale.

I loved you, he thought, and I still love you, Carol, and I'm sorry.

He dragged himself into a sitting position, stood up after a moment and walked out of the room, leaving the large, unneeded weight of the past on the bed.

* * *

Jack was downstairs, fixing breakfast.

There were two things in life Jack had found he could do exceptionally well. The first, of course, was music. His piano helped keep him sane, and there were times during the last six months when Jack was positive it was the one thing keeping him from throwing himself from a bridge.

The second thing was cooking. After the death of his father, he had learned quickly that if he wanted to eat anything that did not come in a box with the designation "Microwaveable" on it, he had better learn to make it himself. Debra never lifted a finger, unless it was to write a check for the pizza delivery boy. She preferred fast food, or anything that could be thrown quickly across a counter.

The person in question sat at the table, looking up periodically at Jack, and then back down at the Universal Tribune.

He heard Campbell on the stairs, and turned around. "Good morning," he said, as Campbell entered the kitchen.

Campbell glanced for a moment at Debra, and then at Jack.

"Christ, Jack," he said, eyes widening, "what the hell are you doing?"

Jack had eggs working on one of the stove's eyes, french toast on another, and yet another with sausage and bacon. He had a spatula in either hand. "Hungry?" he asked Campbell.

"I hope I am," he replied, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't know what you liked," Jack turned back to the stove with a shrug. "Sorry."

Over breakfast, they talked about what to do that day. Fearing for their privacy, they packed the feast Jack prepared onto two trays, and took it to his room. Campbell did most of the talking, relating what had led him to search for Carol in the first place: his desire to discover what had become of his childhood companions.

He explained the rest of his experiences—the encounter with Brian's mother, and Jonathan's having moved away. The only one he had not attempted to contact thus far was Scott Wilson.

"Do you know where he lives?" Jack asked, helping himself to a forkful of scrambled eggs, and thinking to himself how well the breakfast turned out.

The night before had been hard on the both of them, but it appeared they had come through it. To him, Campbell looked much better, more alive perhaps. More like himself. This last idea was an odd one, for Jack thought his relationship with Campbell too young to make such a judgement. Still, he knew it was true.

"I wrote down his address," Campbell replied. Gods, he thought, I cannot remember the last time I have eaten breakfast cooked on a home stove. The times before his hectic drive from New York now seemed to be vague in definition, like the diminished details of a dream by the time you've stepped out of the shower. "It wasn't the one I remember, but he might've moved, I don't know. After all, it's been seven years."

Jack's monstrous breakfast behind them, they were back in Campbell's car. Jack was back in the co-pilot seat, Campbell winding his way back into the downtown area. "Why don't you have a car?" Campbell asked him suddenly.

"Well, I do," Jack responded, "but I never use it. I prefer walking."

"I'd like to see this car of yours. Everybody's got to have a car,"

Campbell tried to wax philosophic and almost got there. "It's one of the first signs of independence. It's what separates us from those poor bastards who were stuck living out their lives on farms, working for their parents until they dropped over." He patted the dashboard affectionately. "Big Blue has been a constant companion of mine for some time now."

"Big Blue'?"

"I know," Campbell said, "you're thinking of this really strange movie where this guy gives up Rosanna Arquette for a bunch of dolphins, but you're wrong. Big Blue is my car. It's big and it's blue, so what more could you want? All cars need names. It's a moral imperative."

Jack turned from Campbell and watched the mailboxes, which still weren't being knocked over on either side of the street as they should have been. "Campbell," he said, "you're a great guy, but sometimes I have no idea what in the hell you're talking about."

Campbell smiled. "They tell me it's part of my charm."

They entered the downtown district, turning on Green Street.

Campbell began looking for address numbers.

"What are we listening to, anyway?" Jack asked him.

"Fishbone," he said, and then stopped, as if that was a complete answer. He saw that it was not. "You've never heard of Fishbone?"

Jack shook his head.

"You poor bastard," he remarked. "Well, there's plenty of time to educate you." After a second, he mocked, "And you call yourself a musician."

Jack appeared to take offense at this. "Yes, I do call myself a musician. Just because I don't recognize reggae musicians..."

Campbell shook his head. "It's not reggae, Jack. This is more of a...hardcore-ska-rock-jazz ensemble."

"What's the difference?" Jack asked.

"Reggae makes you want to feel good about yourself, the world, and everything in it. Fishbone makes you want to slam your body into solid objects."

"I see. And because of this, you're the expert on music."

Campbell managed to weave off the street and into the parking lot on their right. He screeched the car to a halt inches from the building they had been trying to find. "Hey, you're the uneducated one, bud. Not me," He remarked. "We're here."

"Uneducated, am I?" Jack said, taunting, "So tell me, if you can, o highly educated musical one, if you are so highly educated, what school did Beethoven, Hayden, and Mozart belong to, and in what century?"

Campbell was surprised. "Are you kidding? What is this, Trivial Pursuit?"

"Consider this your question for the blue wedge."

"Wasn't 'Arts & Literature' the brown one?"

"You're avoiding the question."

"You're not kidding."

"No."

Campbell shot Jack a look of contempt, and paused before saying, "All right, the Viennese Classic School, and it was the eighteenth century," Campbell said, and then opened his door and got out of the car.

Jack sat for a moment, mouth wide open, before getting out himself.

"I am not worthy," he said, upon reaching Campbell's side.

"Just remember that," Campbell replied, looking from the paper in his hand, to the wall. "This can't be right," he said, perplexed. The paint on the wall told them:

RAY'S DINER AND GRILL

4105 GREEN ST.

"This is where Scott lives?" Jack asked, "A restaurant?"

"It's what the phone book had listed for his family," Campbell said. "This is where I called you from that time."

"Maybe it's a misprint," Jack remarked, "they probably know it, and can give us the correct address inside."

"It's worth a shot," Campbell said, and they went in.

The few customers inside Ray's were in a booth in the corner.

A young woman Jack and Campbell's age was minding the counter.

She was on the phone, her back to them.

"Yes...no...no, that's fine. Just make sure it gets here by day after tomorrow...yes, that's Monday, right...tell whoever you send to get here before eleven, cause we won't have time during the lunch rush to sign for anything...no, if they get here after eleven they can wait till one-thirty like everyone else. All right. Okay. Bye."

Then she turned around. She drew the order pad out from the pocket of her apron. Her reddish-brown hair was tied back in a pony tail, and she took a pencil from behind her right ear. "Hi," she said, "how can I help you guys?"

Jack felt something distant and familiar stir in the back of his mind. By the time it woke up enough to speak, all it could say was, God, she's gorgeous, and it seemed incapable of saying or doing anything more, besides staring at the woman. Jack did the same. He was suddenly glad that Campbell was here, for he had the insane idea that if he were to try to answer her, he would not have been able to. He would have just stood there and stared like an idiot who wandered in off the street after breaking out of a sanitarium somewhere. What's wrong with you? he asked himself.

"Excuse me," Campbell stepped forward, "we're looking for the Wilson residence, and the phone book gave this address "

"If you were six months earlier, you would have hit it right on the nose, but now you're about halfway there," she replied.

Then Campbell did something Jack could have predicted with utter certainty would never have happened: he appeared to have been struck suddenly speechless. He tilted his head to the right a few degrees and wore the strangest look on his face, which seemed to scream stupidly, "What?" Campbell felt like going ahead and saying this, and then thought better of it. "Beg pardon?" he managed to enunciate instead.

"We used to live here, in the apartment above the diner, but now we've got a house," she explained.

"We?" Campbell said, still with that look that made it painfully clear he wasn't getting this at all.

"We?" Jack said almost in unison with Campbell. He was still dazed, but his breed of confusion was a completely different animal from the kind Campbell had. He was amazed at himself he managed to hear only one word out of the entire conversation so far. What is wrong with you? he asked himself again.

"Not from around here, are you?" she asked Campbell, then extended a hand. "Karen Wilson," she said.

Realization exploded into Campbell's face. "Karen? Karen Wilson?" he asked incredulously. "You're Scott's little sister?"

"Sister, yes, little, not so much anymore."

Campbell realized that her hand was still hanging in the air, waiting for him. He took it, "Campbell Davis. I'm sorry, it's just a bit of a shock. Last time I saw you, you were...were...well, a little sister."

Jack was glad Campbell took her hand, because he had been repressing a mad urge to take it himself.

This time it was her turn to look surprised, although she did it on a far smaller scale than Campbell had. She merely arched an eyebrow. "Campbell?" she looked at him, studying his face intently for a moment.

"Campbell." This time it was not a question. "My God, I do remember you. Eight years?"

"Seven," Campbell corrected, and then gestured to Jack. "This is Jack Hardin." He then noticed the dazed look Jack had on his face. He very nonchalantly did a small shuffle to his right and kicked Jack in the side of his foot, all of this out of Karen's line of sight.

Jack jerked a little as he took the hint, and went to shake her hand. When their hands touched, two things happened. One Jack expected; the other he did not. The first was that there was a brief race of electricity up his arm. He had hoped for some reason it would not happen, but it did, and somehow he decided he could live with it.

Someone far back in his mind was screaming about someone named Kim, and wanted him to feel bad about what was happening. Later, was the response, later. Let's feel bad later. Let's feel good for right now, all right?

The second thing that happened was Karen spoke to him. This in itself was not odd. The phrase, "It's nice to meet you," would have been perfectly understandable. This is not what Karen said at all, however.

"I remember you, too," she said, looking straight at Jack.

"You...what?" Jack heard someone that sounded a lot like him stammer. Whoever it was, Jack thought he sounded as though he was making a complete fool out of himself.

Karen smiled and then turned to Campbell, as though she had said nothing of great importance. "I suppose you're looking for Scott."

"Yes."

"Well, he's not here. He's off at Berkeley."

"Berkeley? What the hell is he doing there?"

"Going to school. Oh, and singing. He's got a band now and everything. Last time I heard from him, they're doing okay."

"Scott's singing?" A laugh escaped Campbell. "He couldn't ever sing worth a flip."

"Seven years and finishing puberty can do a lot for a boy's voice. It surprised me, too. I thought he was going to become a poet. But, oh well," she shrugged and returned to the present.

"What are you doing back?"

"Sightseeing. That's as good a name as it'll ever get."

"Great," she answered, and then nodded back towards the grill. "You guys need some food? Dad would probably like to see you, Campbell."

"Where is your dad?"

"Out at the house, but he's coming by a little later."

"Food would be great, but Chef Proudhomme here fed the hell out of me earlier." Campbell cocked his thumb back at Jack.

Karen's attention fell back upon him, and Jack felt every nerve in his body leap up. You'd think I just got back from space or something, seeing my first woman after a couple of years in orbit alone. God, he thought, this is not normal.

"You cook, huh?" Karen asked him and then did not wait for an answer. "Well, if you ever need a job, talk to my dad. I'm all right, but I just don't have the knack. He's good, but can't hang around all the time. We need another hand."

"Okay," Jack replied, and then feeling the need to say more, added, "I'll do that." His inner being cringed, "Okay? I'll do that?" God, could we think of anything worse to say? He felt like screaming at that annoying voice, "What did you want me to do, break out into song?"

At that moment, a group of five men walked in. They all said hello to Karen, who nodded and spoke back to them in turn. "Well, I need to get back on track here. Here's five guys who are hungry.

Come back sometime when I'm off work."

Campbell waited for Jack to pick up his cue, and when he did not, Campbell did it for him. "So when do you get off work?"

"Nine o'clock just about every night. I'll see you." She gave one last look from Campbell to Jack. Then she was gone, pencil in one hand, pad in the other, taking the men's orders for lunch.

Campbell slammed the car door shut and looked at Jack.

Jack was looking back at him with smiling embarrassment bordering on trepidation.

"You like her, don't you?" Campbell asked simply.

Jack considered a moment before answering. "I don't know."

"There's nothing wrong with liking her, you know," Campbell stated, and then a thought struck him. "Or is it Kim?"

"I think it's because of Kim," Jack said, with an obvious air of discomfort.

"I thought you had decided that things were finished between the two of you."

"They are, but "

"But what?"

Jack did not know what to say.

"Look," Campbell said, simply. "Don't you think it happened the same way for Kim? She liked some guy, and didn't know what to do about it? Didn't know how to tell you that her feelings had changed, and she liked someone else?" Campbell put a hand on Jack's arm. "There is nothing wrong with what you are feeling. You are getting over Kim and getting on with your life."

Jack cringed from this.

"Look, it's life, that's all. Let it happen and don't fight it."

Campbell patted Jack's arm. "And look at it this way: if you give it time, she may come back to you, as a friend or something more... who knows? If she doesn't come back, then so be it. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen."

"How do you know?" Jack asked. He could feel the hurt in his body, seemingly everywhere at once. He had tried to avoid thinking about Kim, out with that other guy, laughing, happier perhaps with her new suitor than she had been with him. He had always managed to avoid shining a good light on that thought for close scrutiny, but here it was, center stage.

"If she loved you at all," Campbell replied, "she thinks about what happened a lot. She still cares about you, I'm sure. Unless she's the type who can just leave three years of a relationship without looking back. I don't think you believe that."

Jack said nothing. The good feeling he had gotten standing there, holding Karen's hand, was diminishing rapidly in the glare of this. He wanted desperately to go back in and see her again, just for a second, to try to get that feeling back. It had been so long.

Campbell brought things back into the present. "You are going to ask her out, right?"

"Karen?"

"No, that guy in the blue shirt who walked in from the construction site," Campbell said. "Are you?"

"I don't know."

"You have to. It's a moral imperative."

"Why?"

Campbell sighed. "Because, if you don't ask her out, and do nothing but sit at a distance liking her, one day, four years from now, you'll be sitting in a gazebo in a park somewhere, confessing your feelings to her, and you'll find out that she liked you then, but right now she's got a big thing for some asshole that your ex-girlfriend gave a blow job to."

Jack's look was one of total noncomprehension.

"Just trust me," Campbell finished. He started the car.

"What?" Jack finally forced himself to say.

"It's a very long story," Campbell smiled, and backed the car out of its parking space, "and really, not one even worth telling."

They drove back toward Jack's house.

"Listen," Campbell said, "there's this thing coming up Wednesday night, some kind of reception for the press that Blair and my mother are holding. I'm supposed to be there, smile like a completely brainless moron, and wear a large BLAIR FOR MAYOR pin."

"Would you mind coming with me?"

"Here I am trying to ask Karen out, and you're putting the moves on me," Jack replied, seemingly sullen. Then, brightening, "Does your mother have more BLAIR buttons than she does people? Need one more warm body? You're not trying to recruit me, are you?"

"Actually," Campbell answered, smiling, "having you there will help me keep my job, seeing as how I'm going to have to behave."

"Behave?"

"Behave." Campbell explained, "I am allergic to bullshit, and my allergy always seems to act up when I'm around politicians." He shrugged. "Besides, I'll be bored as hell without an outlet for my smartass remarks, and unless you're there for me to whisper them to, I might stand up and start shouting them."

"I see," Jack mused. "Okay, I'll be there."

Campbell turned the corner and, smiling, said, "And don't forget to put it down on your calendar: nine o'clock, every night this week."

Chapter Seven

Wednesday's early evening found Campbell standing in front of the mirror in Jack's bathroom, adjusting his tie. Jack was beside him, brushing his teeth.

Campbell was wearing his idea of a formal ensemble. He had tied his hair back into a ponytail and was wearing a blue chambray shirt and jeans. The black necktie and matching black Converse tennis shoes were the perfect finishing touch. "Well," Campbell asked, "how do I look?"

Jack spat into the sink. "Like the guy mothers everywhere warn their daughters about."

"Screw you," Campbell countered amicably. He went to the bedroom to retrieve his wallet.

Jack finished looking after his dental hygiene and tried to fix his hair. He accomplished this with a few short strokes of his brush.

He always kept his hair extremely short, and the two of them made for an interesting before and after picture. "What about me? Do I look okay?"

Campbell looked. Jack had done nothing really special to his hair. He was wearing a striped denim shirt, and faded blue jeans.

"Like a good American boy. Every mother's dream. Someone give me some apple pie."

"Screw you, too," Jack mumbled merrily.

They looked at each other in the mirror.

"Are we ready to go be bored out of our minds for the next two hours or so?" Campbell asked.

"I guess," Jack answered.

"All right, then," Campbell said, "we're off."

The week had gotten off to a rough start for the both of them.

On Monday, Jack had called Kim's apartment and gotten the same routine as before. They took a message, said she'd call back, and of course she wouldn't. That had put him into something less than the best of moods.

On Tuesday, when Campbell had been getting ready to go to work, Debra came upstairs to finally speak her mind. Jack had been out in the hall, and she grabbed his arm before he could re-enter his room.

"How long do you intend on letting that boy sleep here?" had been the first words out of her mouth in more than a week. Not hello, not good morning, not how are you.

"I beg pardon?" Jack had asked her.

"You heard me," she said, her voice getting rougher with each passing syllable. "I don't know what I think about him staying here." She decided she had started off too harshly, and so changed tactics. "I'm just trying to look out for your best interests, Jack. He's been gone for so long to God only knows where, comes to town, and befriends you just to get a place to sleep. I mean, he's got a mother perfectly willing to support him, and I don't think I want to be playing Salvation Army forever."

Jack was stunned. Thoughts began clicking into his head, one right after the other, like a row of hellish dominoes falling. With each that fell, he could feel increments of hot rage filling him. He thought of his father, and how they had gotten along so well before this...this intruder...had come into their house and in between them. He thought of his mother, whom he had loved without ever seeing, who had been replaced by this...intruder. He thought of how ever since his father had died, from the moment after the funeral until now, she had tried to forget he was even there, not even making the cursory attempts at being a mother to him that she had attempted while his father was alive. No, more than that not even trying to be civil, like he wasn't a human being at all.

That had been the last few months, and now she felt she could look out for his best interests. How in the hell could she have any inkling what they were? And as for Campbell...

For a moment he could not speak, the rage had closed his mouth to all speech. When his voice came to him, it came in a torrent. "First of all," he began, "you don't have to think a damn thing."

Her face went white. He felt a twinge of pleasure at this, and the feeling quickly became a load of coal thrown onto the fire that was now burning, and would not, could not go out until he had flung each hot, hateful ember at her. "What did you say to me?" she whispered dramatically.

"I said, you don't have to think a damn thing," he reiterated.

"Not one damn thing. And I don't care if he's got several members of his family out on the lawn screaming and pleading for him to come home. If he wants to stay, he stays."

Just when she looked as if she couldn't get shocked any further, she did. Each fiery word he said seemed to drive the surprise home even more than the previous one. She recovered herself enough to return, "This is my house, and I "

Jack cut her off. "Secondly, I can't believe you think you can just walk up here and start playing the part of mother, especially after the way you've been treating me. You haven't given one sign that you gave a damn about me since my poor father was buried.

I'm only your son, for Christ's sake." He looked her dead in the eye. "At this point, I have decided that I have no mother except the one that died giving me life, and there is no way in hell you could even dream of filling her shoes. And you're right, this is your house. But it's my house, too, and I say Campbell stays as long as he needs to."

Her upper lip curled in an uncharacteristic, canine gesture.

"You " She raised her hand as if she was contemplating striking him, but Jack caught her wrist.

"Not another word from you," he hissed, "go back to your television and potato chips. When you want to be my mother twentyfour hours a day instead of just when you feel like it, maybe then you can have some kind of say as to what I do, but until then stay out of my way."

She did not speak again, for all the anger seemed to drain out of her. For a moment, she stood there in disbelief, and then a single tear rolled down her right cheek. The lip, which had been so savagely upturned a moment before, quivered. She turned and went downstairs, where he could hear her sobbing and dialing the telephone.

Jack went into the bedroom. Campbell was standing there, shirt in his hands, as if he had frozen in the process of putting it on. His eyes were wide and staring at him. Jack noticed Campbell had one diamond-shaped patch

of hair on his chest, and that was it. "Now the word's going around town about how I'm such an ungrateful son," Jack said with a sigh of resignation and disgust. "I'm sure to get really evil stares in the streets today."

Jack went and sat down on the bed. His head was beginning to hurt. He had taken all of her abuse for so long, both the kind you could see and hear along with the kind you couldn't, that the words had come out of him before he had time to think. Was this a victory for the good guys? It certainly didn't feel that way.

After a moment, Campbell put on his shirt. "Do I need to leave, Jack? Be honest with me."

Jack looked over at him, "No. No, she'll go before you do.

Unless I go." He cradled his head in one hand and sighed again.

"Sometimes I think I really should get out of this house."

"Thanks for what you said," Campbell told him, "it's been a while since I had a roof over my head that didn't have a dome light in it. I just..." he tried to think of something else, but couldn't. All he knew was that he was sure this was the first time Jack had ever vented his anger about his stepmother to her face, and Campbell was glad Jack had been able to get that much out of his system. He understood it was necessary; he just wasn't sure how he felt about being the impetus for the shouting. "...thanks," he finished.

"Don't mention it," Jack said, still holding his throbbing head, "just get to work before your own bundle of joy disguised as a mother decides to fire you."

Campbell's week so far had been less than perfect as well. He was working as unofficial office manager at the campaign headquarters. It was not supposed to be so, but the others were volunteers, and therefore had erratic hours. It fell on Campbell to do many of the menial tasks that anyone else in the office could have done, while at the same time doing the things he was actually hired to accomplish.

Nevertheless, he finished all of these jobs and had done so with dizzying speed. Long used to working for his daily bread, he fell back into the groove quickly and worked with an inhuman efficiency for time. He did not take lunch, lack of three squares a day being par for the course for him, and besides, food cost money.

He also started paying Jack for the supplies he used while staying at Jack's house. It was a point they had argued about, Jack saying that he had plenty of money to take care of his portion. Campbell had insisted it was the principle of the thing, so Jack had eventually relented.

The job that he termed "soul prostitution" gave one small benefit which he expressed to Jack one night: "At least I'm seeing less of my mother than I thought I would be."

Jack thought of asking Campbell exactly what his mother had done to start this blood feud of theirs, but he remembered how Campbell had waited until Jack was ready to speak. He laid his curiosity temporarily to rest.

Campbell would come home, and the two of them would talk, or listen to each other's styles of music, or just read. It was enough to be in the same room with a good friend.

They were sitting in the auditorium of the high school, watching the man of the hour, Jayson Blair. He had no wife to smile by his side, so he populated the stage with his extended family. There was a large burly man with a scar across his right cheek. Then there was a mousy, emaciated woman with hair that was too blonde to be the work of God. The two of them sat apart from each other, giving Jack the impression they were chastised children. Campbell was quite sure they were husband and wife.

In between the couple sat a girl, who looked to be around fifteen years old. Jack noted she was wearing a jacket over a black-and-white checkered one-piece romper. A little warm for all that, isn't it? someone asked in his head. He paid it no mind. She looked about as pleased to be there as Jack felt.

So Blair went on and on giving his speech to the press about his intentions, his goals, his aspirations, his dreams, and for all Campbell and Jack cared, his shoe size and blood type. It could have included that entire catalog of things and more, given its length.

The two sat away from the throngs of people, watching the festivities. A small gathering of press was at the front. Every now and then, a camera's flash would go off at Blair's smiling face.

Jack and Campbell quickly grew bored with Blair's words and passed the time whispering comments back and forth.

"...the interests of the community and community interests?"

God, who wrote this speech? Reagan?" and...

"I want to go after he's through and see if he's standing on a platform. I bet you five bucks he's standing on one to make himself a couple of inches taller. I swear he's not that tall in person."

"I hope it's not the platform he's talking about now, because it's weak as hell; he'd fall right through it." and...

"I hope to God there's free food here somewhere." and...

"You never have shown me any of the lyrics you've written. I'm sure we could write music to go along with it."

"I'll dig some of them out then." and...

"I still haven't asked Karen out. I don't know if I should. I don't know."

"All the more reason to ask her out."

"Well, I don't want to just call over there, I mean..."

"Then show up in person. Phones are the work of the devil anyway. Life's so much nicer up close and personal."

"I haven't been on a first date for three years now..."

"All the more reason to start back, because you're not getting any younger."

It took the modest applause that rose from the equally modest audience to bring them back to their senses and back to the situation at hand. The two friends began applauding politely, and suddenly Campbell began to rise to his feet in a sarcastic flourish.

Jack managed to restrain him, although just barely. He breathed a quiet "Behave...remember?"

Blair answered a few questions from the press gathered before him, then the mingling and the banter began. Jack and Campbell kept their seats at the back.

Campbell watched with distaste at all the smiling and handshaking and base falseness that was being handed around. He couldn't believe that people still had to walk around with masks on. Welcome to the Nineties, he thought dismally. Makes me want to go buy an island, and just start over. I

"So," Jack got up and stretched his back. His spine crackled pleasantly. "Do you want to go check out his platform or not?"

Campbell made no response.

"Campbell?"

Campbell still did not answer. Jack looked at his friend's face.

He was seemingly transfixed, looking at a point out in front of them. Jack tried to find what it was that had so captivated his friend, and could not. "What are you " he began, about to wave a hand in front of Campbell's face. Before he could, Campbell grabbed the shoulder of his shirt.

"Look," he said simply.

Jack looked at his face closely again, and could see that his eyes were fixated on something down on the floor below. Okay, he thought, I'll play your silly game. He began scanning the milling people. He saw only milling people.

"What?" he asked finally.

"The woman," Campbell said, finding himself caught in a writer's least favorite syndrome, that of being at a temporary loss for words, "that woman...there's something about her I don't know, she just seems so...oddly familiar..."

"Which one?"

"You're obviously looking with the wrong set of eyes," he remarked off-handedly, and then told him, "the one in the blue outfit with the white trim around the bottom."

Jack picked her out. "She's beautiful," he remarked.

"You should see her soul," Campbell breathed.

"What?"

"You don't know? Look," Campbell turned to Jack, his attention drawn away from the woman in blue for a moment, "you can look with these," he pointed at his eyes, "and with this," he pointed to his temple, "but then you only get half the story. Now, if you look with this," he pointed to his chest, right above his heart, "and with your soul," he made a quick sweeping motion with one hand that seemed to indicate vaguely all of his head and chest, "if you're lucky, you can see into the souls of others. And that's where all the real beauty is." He took Jack's chin and turned his face back to the front. "Look again," he commanded softly.

Jack tried to follow Campbell's instructions.

He remembered one time he was at the mall, on one of those few excursions he had made out to what he thought of as the Grand Temple of Want. On this occasion he found himself standing in front of the display window of Walls & More, the store that dealt primarily in artwork and framing. There had been a display of

frames within which lived strange configurations of multicolored dots and lines that, so the instructions posted next to the prints said, would turn into three-dimensional pictures when looked at the right way. Jack frustrated himself for fifteen minutes trying and trying to see, and then not trying in case he was trying too hard, but all to no avail. He finally came to the sneaking suspicion that there was a camera somewhere filming his squinting tries at seeing the space shuttle, or the planet, or whatever it was that was supposed to be hiding in those morasses of incongruous dots and shapes that were nothing but the bait in a Candid Camera ripoff.

"I don't " he began, and then Campbell cut him off.

"It'll come to you," he said, "it's not something you get right away, keep trying."

"Okay, I'll "

"I've got to meet her," Campbell said. The next second, he was gone.

He had left so quickly, Jack was sure he could look at the space Campbell had vacated and see a cartoon-esque ball of smoke hanging there.

The man is so odd sometimes, he thought. He shook his head and then trotted after Campbell.

The object of Campbell's quest had her back turned to him while he approached, and was speaking to the center of attention himself, Jayson Blair. Campbell waited at a safe distance until the two finished talking. As she turned toward Campbell, he stepped forward to greet her.

She was momentarily startled. "Oh! I'm sorry. Excuse me." She started to go around him.

Campbell took a half-step in the same direction. "No, please excuse me. I was coming to see you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do I know you?"

"Not as such." He put out his hand. "Campbell Davis."

"Danielle Peterson," she took the offered hand and shook it politely. "So I do know you, sort of. You're Susan's son."

"Yes," Campbell cupped a hand over his mouth and lowered his voice, "but don't say that too loud or someone might hold me to it."

She paused a moment to reflect on his statement, and then, "So have we met before, or "

"Oh, no. No. I just saw you from up in the audience, and wanted to meet you."

Again, that look of uncertainty. "Okay, so you've met me."

She smiled. Campbell was certain this meant that she was either charmed, or thought he was a sociopath of some sort. "So was that all, because I do have to get back to the paper and write this social event up."

She was being honest, Campbell told himself, and not blowing him off. It was not a line she was feeding him, of that he was sure.

Oh, good, this is good, a voice in his head spoke up. So would you believe her if she told you she had to go home and wash her hair? She asked you a question, Campbell, what more do you want from her?

This is horrible, one voice said.

This is great, another chimed in.

"Well," he finally said, "I guess that was all. I just wanted to say hello...I guess."

"Well, hello," Danielle took his hand again, "I guess I'll be seeing you around the campaign trail." She smiled, and then gave a momentary, almost comedic look of confusion before turning away.

Do something. Do something.

What?

Say something. Say something.

WHAT?

Ask her...ask her to...

"Unless of course you'd like to go to lunch sometime," he managed to say.

She turned around, still smiling. My God, Campbell thought, I thought you had to have a license to carry around a smile like that...

That was followed closely on its heels by, What is wrong with you?

"Well, that's very kind, but I " She stopped, and Campbell, although he could see her inner beauty, could not see into her mind, though he would have given everything he had to know her thoughts at that particular moment. The moment lasted forever.

He felt like a gladiator in a Roman coliseum, waiting for the emperor's thumb to ascend or fall. "Well, why not." She reached in the pocket of her suit and brought out a card. "Call me at the paper. I live there, practically."

He took the card from her and glanced at it long enough to ensure that her name was indeed upon it, as if some paranoid sliver of his mind was still concerned with treachery. "I'll do that," he said.

"Talk to you then." She turned and walked through the crowd, eventually disappearing among them.

Jack, who had been hanging back and watching the scene unfold, now tromped down and accosted him. "Are you all right?"

What was that? What did you ?"

Campbell held up the card. Jack read it.

Community Herald Danielle Peterson Staff Reporter It went on to list the address and phone number. Jack looked up into Campbell's eyes.

"I have the strangest feeling that I have just made the biggest and most wonderful mistake of my entire life," Campbell mused aloud.

Campbell had to get to his car. He kept muttering something about a magazine, that he had to find a magazine, and Jack could barely make sense out of one word in ten.

As they were finally making their way out of the auditorium to do whatever task Campbell needed to accomplish in order to hopefully regain some semblance of his former composure, they heard Susan Davis call Campbell's name.

The grin on Campbell's face appeared as if someone had flicked a switch. "Yes?" he asked, turning to face them. Before doing so, he managed to flash a grimace in Jack's direction.

Standing before them were Jayson Blair and his family entourage, including the surrogate matriarch, Susan Davis herself.

"Campbell Davis, Jack Hardin," Susan began with a cheery tone, "I'd like you to meet Jayson's brother, David Blair, and his wife, Judy."

They shook hands all around. David Blair was rather large, all muscle except for the less-than-expertly hidden beer gut he sported. Besides the scar on David's right cheek, the only other thing noteworthy from Campbell's perspective was his red nose, with its minuscule veins standing out on either side of it. He took Campbell's hand and shook it, clutching it hard enough to show the power behind his grip. Campbell watched the man's face when he did this, and saw no sign there that it was a conscious action to impress. It was instinctive.

After David and Judy Blair met with Jack and Campbell they quickly retreated back into the crowd. They carried with them an obvious air of discomfort.

The girl from the stage, Ashley, was standing next to Jayson.

She did indeed seem to be around fifteen. Her brown hair reached her shoulders, framing her freckled face. Jayson stood with one arm around Susan and with one around the girl. Jack and Campbell both had sudden visions of the perfect family unit. Campbell wanted Jayson's left hand to be holding a pitchfork instead of gripping lightly the girl's left shoulder. Then put them in front of an old farmhouse, he thought, and there you have it "Unnecessary Gothic." He felt an urge to start laughing and managed to suppress it barely.

"We just wanted to introduce you to a friend of ours," Susan crooned, and then looked to Jayson.

"Yes," Jayson said, picking up his cue effortlessly, "this is my niece, Ashley, David's daughter."

The girl shook hands politely with Jack and Campbell, going over them with cursory eyes. She spoke her customary greetings, her voice quite restrained. Jack noticed this as well as Campbell, but a voice in Campbell's head actually rose up to pass it off. She's fifteen, of course she's going to be shy, it explained.

After this meeting was finished, they left the Blairs and Campbell's mother. Jack tried to keep up with Campbell as he made his way through the crowds to the parking lot.

Jack was standing in the driveway of his house, holding up a light since the one for Campbell's trunk had gone out long ago.

Campbell rummaged through numerous boxes filled with rumpled paperback books. There were a few hardbacks as well, along with two large boxes full of magazines. Campbell had moved the remainder of his personal effects, such as clothing, to two drawers in the chest in Jack's bedroom, so that these pieces of literature were the only things remaining.

In ten minutes, Campbell had managed to look through the first box of magazines completely, and not spared a moment before plunging into the second.

"I don't mean to pry," Jack said, very patiently. "But what are we searching for?"

Campbell looked up and his face was feverish. "Poets' Corner, March, 1984 issue. It's got a really horrible sketch of a flower on the front of it."

With that Jack had to be content, for Campbell was digging again.

Five minutes passed and Jack could feel himself nodding off despite leaning against the cool metal of the car. The flashlight was about to slip out of his hands when Campbell yelled, "Eureka!" Jack jerked back to full awareness.

Campbell stood up, grasping in his hand a very worn magazine. He threw back the cover, scanned the first page for a moment, then flipped through several pages. He closed the magazine and smiled winningly to Jack. "I've still got it," he said simply.

Jack clicked off the flashlight. "Great, now what the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about this really weird feeling," Campbell blurted, "about her, Danielle, the reporter."

Jack sighed. "What are you trying to tell me, Campbell?"

"Just like you saw Karen and immediately wanted to ask her out, I knew that I had to meet Danielle," Campbell said back. "You can't tell me you've never looked at a woman before and caught a glimpse of her spirit and her soul and knew that your life would be diminished if you neglected to meet her."

"I guess," Jack said.

Campbell rested his hands on his hips and exhaled audibly.

"I'm afraid anything could happen at this point."

"Campbell, you're really beginning to lose me here." Jack was struggling to keep up and he could see he was getting further and further behind.

"You don't feel it?"

"Feel what?" Jack was more than a trifle exasperated, "Look, ever since you saw that girl..."

"Woman," Campbell corrected, "that was definitely a woman."

"Woman, whatever," Jack kept going, trying not to lose his train of thought for fear of never gaining it back again. "Ever since you saw that woman, you haven't made a damn bit of sense."

"You can feel the doors opening all around you if you're careful," Campbell replied cryptically. "Different doors leading to all the different paths you can take in your life. There are always different paths, of course, but you rarely get a situation where a whole bunch of them just open before you."

Jack thought for a moment. "Keep going," he instructed. "I'm afraid I might be able to follow you now."

"It's fate. It's magic. It's life, in all of its wonderful tragedy, in all of its horrible comedy. It's better than a book or a movie, because it's real. For the most part, books and movies only try to show one aspect of life, as if life was always horrible, or life was always a comedy. Life is everything, funny, and terrifying, and ever-changing.

And when the doors start opening, that means that changes are coming. Good or bad, I don't know, but they're coming and even sitting around and refusing to move won't stop them."

"This has something to do with Danielle," Jack offered.

"And you, and Karen, and me," Campbell said, and then held up the magazine, "and this." He thought on this for a moment, and then added, "I think. And fate, too. Remember what I said when we met?"

"When I was almost road pâté."

"Right."

"Fate?" Jack asked.

"I'm afraid so," Campbell smiled, and looked up at the stars.

Jack watched his friend's face. "So what do we do now?"

"Now? We need to be ready for anything."

"Could you be a little more vague with that?" Jack asked, and then, "Anything?"

"Yes, anything," Campbell shrugged, "like I said, this is life."

"Okay," Jack said. "Fine. Right now, I'm really tired, so out of everything we could possibly do I vote for going to bed."

Campbell said, "I guess that'll do for a start."

"I'm so glad you approve," Jack commented. They began to walk inside, and Jack recalled the holy relic which Campbell had been so diligently searching for. "What is the deal with this magazine, anyway?"

As Jack opened the door to the kitchen, Campbell flipped to a particular page and handed the magazine to Jack. Jack held it so he could see the words printed there by the light over the stove.

There were many things rolling through his weary mind.

Many things which he did not understand, such as eyes, and how to use them. And doors, and how they work. And life, and how it is much more than it appears to be. He had all of this and more on his mind. Before, such teeming thoughts might have graced him with a headache instead of inspiration, but long nights speaking to Campbell about all manner of subjects had prepared him for such a conversation as this. One thing Jack had discovered about discussions with Campbell was that you always left with something new to think about.

So as these thoughts were trying to find purchase in his mind, he tried to concentrate on the magazine he was holding.

The title of the poem he was supposed to read was "Another," and a few minutes later Jack thought he might

be beginning to understand.

Part Two

Chapter Eight

On Thursday at eight forty-five, Jack found himself standing outside Ray's Diner.

A trio of men walked out of the diner talking and laughing.

"What am I doing here?" he mumbled under his breath.

The question was meant to be rhetorical, but an answer came to him anyway. He remembered how it had felt, standing there, holding Karen's hand. He recalled how soft it had seemed, how that simple action managed to lift his spirits to a level he had forgotten existed. He knew he would have been content to spend the rest of the day holding her hand, his skin touching hers, because it reminded him of how pleasant and simple his life used to be.

Thinking back, he could almost picture a time when the feeling had been commonplace and perhaps even taken for granted.

I want that back, he thought, as much of it as I can, if it's not entirely out of my reach. Another thought struck him, and it was the rock upon which he built up his courage. And I'm not going to get any happier standing out here waiting for something to happen, so

But something did happen. The lights began to go out in the diner, one by one, as if on cue.

Before Jack realized he meant to do so, he was sprinting up the stairs to the front door. Karen's face was in the window, looking back at him. His rapid ascent to the doorway appeared to have startled her for a moment, but upon recognizing him her expression changed to one of surprised delight. She held up one finger, asking him to wait for a moment, and then she finished turning out the lights. She unlocked the door and stepped out into the night air, which was cooler than usual for summer. "So you decided to come by," she said, as she turned her back on him and locked the front door. "I was worried you had forgotten."

"Well, I didn't forget," he said, "here I am. Closing early?"

"Well, Hank Foreman and the others were the last, and who's going to show up at five till close wanting a burger? No one, I hope, cause if there had been someone, I would have tossed them out."

She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "I'm bushed."

Jack thought the gesture was gorgeous, and had happened far too quickly. "Busy, I take it."

"Busy enough," she answered as they walked down the stairs.

"Do you mind if we walk me home while we talk? I'm sure there's a shower there that's expecting me. There better be, anyway."

"No problem," Jack told her, "talking is exactly what I had in mind. Like for one thing "

"You don't know where I know you from," she interrupted, finishing his thought. With a ghost of a smile playing on her lips, she added, "and you can't remember where you know me from."

Jack stopped in his tracks. He hadn't really given it much thought before now, but it was true. Hadn't there been something familiar about her that first time in the diner? Something dancing just beyond his memory? "I that's right, I do know you, but "

"You really don't remember?" she asked, smiling, one finger touching her lips in a thoughtful gesture.

"Well...no," he stammered.

"Your friend Campbell has quite a history in this town, you know?" she remarked, without even the hint of a segue.

"Yes, I know," Jack said, flustered. "But, about "

She started walking again. "Patience, Jack. Patience is very important." She thought for a minute. "You know his mother told everyone she had sent him away to a private school in New England.

No one believed it for a second. Not anyone with any sense, that is. None of his friends believed it, especially not Scott. Scott knew all the time that Campbell had escaped up north somewhere, and that his mother was just mad he had gotten away." Another pause.

"They hated him, you know."

"Campbell? Who hated him?"

"The parents of the other three. They hated him for trying to take their children away." She smiled. "My father my father is so wonderful he knew that the parents involved never once stopped to ask themselves why their kids wanted to leave them. It's like the parents whose kids listen to heavy metal and other stuff like that, and the kids blow their brains out. The parents never look at themselves for the blame it's always someone else. It's always the record company, or the recording artist, or...Campbell. Do you know what I mean?"

Jack had been so intent on following her line of conversation that he almost didn't make his cue. "Yes, I do. Never experienced it." Then he thought of Debra, chomping Cheet-o's and watching the news, the game shows, Oprah, anything but him. "Well, perhaps."

"That's what's wrong with the world sometimes, you know," she continued. "Campbell was just doing the only thing he could think of escape. And of course, he didn't want to leave his friends behind. Scott loved his friends, but never wanted to leave. I was young when it happened...well, two years younger than Scott...and barely aware what was going on. There's that wonderful bliss-like quality of being young, where you can't seem to remember anything, which generally means that everything must have been all right, because the things you remember the most seem to be the things you don't want to." She paused to close out this thought, and then, "Do you know what I mean?"

Jack nodded, "I'll buy that." He thought about where he was positive his childhood had begun its fiery, spiraling drop out of the sky. It was his father coming up to his room, and sitting down on his bed, and saying, "Jack, we need to talk." Then there was the spot where he knew his childhood had finally exhaled its last, hot breath, that moment when the doctor had come out to speak to him, saying, "Jack, we need to talk." He remembered walking around for weeks, refusing to speak to anyone, certain that any words anyone had to share with him would be more bad news.

"Anyway," Karen pressed onward, "Scott told me that he didn't leave because he loved me and Daddy so much. We've always been a very close family. I mean, even after my mom died, we were still okay.

Well...not great for a while afterwards, but we came out of it."

It seemed to Jack that after that particular phrase, words had stopped coming out of her mouth, and time froze. "My mom died," she had said. He was trying to follow her conversation, and doing a decent job, he thought.

He was trying to understand every word and hope it would give him a clue as to what to do or say next.

Still, these words seemed to take him somewhere else. If any of her words could have hit him in a way akin to having his breath knocked out of his body, those were the ones. It was the way she said them more than anything else. It wasn't flip and unthinking, but it wasn't deep and mournful either. It was quite unlike the way a sentence similar to the one she had spoken always felt when it left his lips on the occasions when he was forced to say it.

"Well, here we are," she said.

Karen was pointing to a modest, skinny two-story house. Jack was surprised their walk was over. He had been so wrapped up in what Karen was saying that he barely paid attention to the passage of time.

"Home sweet home." She looked at him and smiled, and he felt some of the stupor that kept him hanging on every word of her various tirades return. "I didn't mean to talk your ear off. I hope you don't mind," she said. "If it ever becomes too much, just tell me and I'll stop."

They mounted the steps to the front porch. Jack was shaking his head, "No, I don't want you to stop."

The smile lingered, but it had become mischievous, and she cut her eyes at him. "You do want me, though...to tell you where we know each other from."

"Actually " Jack began.

She turned her ear up to the door of the house, cupping one hand over it in a cartoonish listening gesture. "What? What's that?"

She looked at Jack apologetically. "The shower's calling me," she shrugged helplessly, "so I'm afraid I can't tell you..."

"You like doing this to me," Jack told her, laughing, exasperated.

"Yes," she said, "but that's what you get from a girl for forgetting her. We like to be remembered."

Jack immediately felt himself become defensive, though he was able to tone down the feeling before it came barging past his lips.

"Well, you see, these last six months have been kind of "

She shushed him by touching his cheek. Her face had suddenly become very serious, and the playfulness had gone. "I know," she told him, "I know, but don't worry about it. Not right now. We can talk about that later."

Her face brightened, and it was her again, the energetic Karen he had been talking to for the last four blocks. "But for right now, if you ask me out for tomorrow night we'll call it even, seeing as how I'm pretty sure you wanted to do that anyway."

Jack felt his face grow a little flush.

"I'm sorry. I hope I was right," she said, giggling a little, "otherwise I'm going to be extremely embarrassed."

"No, you're right," he told her, smiling, "it's just that...recently I keep running into people who apparently know me better than I know me."

She was smiling, too. "Then maybe you just need to get to know yourself better."

"Maybe so," he agreed. "Seven o'clock?"

"That's fine," Karen said, "I don't have the evening off yet, but I'm sure if I tell Daddy that a nice, respectful young gentleman is taking me out, he'll cover for me."

"So what are you going to tell him about me?" he asked, able to return a smile that mirrored her own.

Karen smiled back, laughing a little as she did.

"What are we going to do?" he asked her.

"Surprise me," she said, and with that Jack had to be content, for she opened the front door and walked inside, smiling at him the entire time.

She waved through the small window by the side of the door, and then she was gone.

Jack felt light on his feet. He knew that the soles of his shoes were not resting on the boards of this porch, but resting on absolutely nothing, two to three inches off the floor. He found he had to sit down on the porch swing to his left to keep from falling over.

This is unnatural, he thought.

Are these the doors you were talking about, Campbell? He tried to feel them, but nothing happened. Almost nothing, he thought for a moment...no, it was nothing. Also, he wasn't sure whether he could see Karen with the right set of eyes, but he knew that whatever set he was using liked her very much.

After a moment, he got up and began to walk home, still carrying traces of her smile on his face.

* * *

Campbell was on the hood of his car, which he had parked in the middle of his favorite field. A large squeeze bottle filled with orange juice was in his hand, acquired from the friendly neighborhood all-purpose convenience store. Above him played out the cavalcade of stars, planets and the rest of the universe that he loved and which loved him, too.

This is where he had always come when his life felt disjointed, years ago. When his mother had tried to pull the strings that were attached to all of his limbs, he would come here to get reacquainted with the rest of the real world, or at least the world he wanted to be real. Not to say that all of these vast cosmic thoughts were on his mind when at twelve and thirteen he would sit on the ground instead of god-fearing Detroit metal, rather that it was here those seeds were planted. So here he was again, trying to find himself among the bigger picture once more. He also came this time, older and perhaps wiser, to give thanks to this place which had watered the flowers which bloomed in his mind over the past few years.

Christ only knows why there's not a set of really scummy apartments here now, he thought. Then he smiled.

He replayed everything in his mind.

He had called that morning to the Community Herald, and gotten transferred over to Danielle's desk.

"Danielle Peterson," came the voice from the other line.

Good, he thought immediately, she's there. Now, if I can only pull off the greatest acting job of my life: that I really know what I'm doing.

"Campbell Davis," he said, "good morning."

"Oh, yes, good morning," she responded, "you're that very interesting person I met last night."

"Wow, I certainly hope that was a compliment."

"I suppose it could be " and then, "hang on a second." There were thirty seconds or so of words exchanged, muffled with the unmistakable quality that comes from a hand over the receiver.

"Sorry about that," she returned, "things are crazy around here twenty-four hours a day."

"How long have you been there?"

"Oh, I got about four hours of sleep," she responded. There was the sound of shuffling papers, and voices again. The hand over the phone. "I'm back, I'm really sorry..."

"No, it's okay, you're at work, I understand..." This is getting me nowhere over the phone, I've got to see her live and not Memorex. "...I was just calling to see about lunch today."

"Lunch, okay, great. Hang on," she said, and then the hand again. This time he was able to hear part of the goings-on. She asked if someone was there, he couldn't hear the name. There was a faint reply that he could hardly distinguish from background noise. She made some kind of comment, and although Campbell could not comprehend it, he knew by the tone used that she was less than pleased.

Crap, he thought, she can't. Tomorrow? Try tomorrow

"I'm back," she said.

"Listen," he began, "if lunch today won't work "

"No, lunch today is great," she said in a voice that was flustered and somewhat irritated. He was not worried, though, for she didn't act as if he was the source of her irritation. For some reason, that made it all right. Not great, but all right.

"Wonderful," he said. Okay, think quick now. You always pride yourself on thinking on your feet and here you are clueless. Come on! "Okay, where?"

"So the prodigal doesn't know where to eat after his absence," she commented.

Then it struck him. "How about Ray's?" he asked. He had no clue where that thought had come from, but at this point, he welcomed it with open arms.

"Ray's?" She considered. "Yeah, Ray's salad is good. Salad's all I have time for, then I've got to get back."

"Salad?" he asked uncertainly, "A diner with salad?"

"Of course," she said, "Twelve-thirty."

"Meet you there."

"Ciao."

And they hung up in unison. Campbell drew in a deep breath and let it go, amazed. It's only a lunch, and yet it's more. I don't know what's happening to me, but I'm going to lunch with a woman I just met last night, who I'm plagued by because I can't seem to stop thinking about her, although I try to, even though I'm not certain why I'm thinking about her, or why I should stop in the first place. He shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs. What a day.

Campbell took a long draught from the squeeze bottle and then placed it beside him on the hood of the car. He laced his hands together behind his head and leaned back against the windshield. Looking up at the stars, he began picking out all the ones he could find.

Ursa Major, of course, the bear. There were the dipper. Of course, there was Orion the hunter, which had always been his favorite for some deep-rooted reason he could never fathom. Even when Jonathan had told him that he couldn't like Orion because it was everybody else's favorite, he hadn't cared. Maybe I've always liked Orion because it's the simplest one to locate, he mused. There was a crab up there somewhere, but he had never been able to find it.

Campbell hummed softly to himself.

He remembered how nervous he had been about going to lunch. He also remembered being completely perplexed about being nervous. It's only lunch for crying out loud, he told himself periodically during the time counting down to twelve-thirty. Despite this constant assurance, he decided he would exit the office for lunch on time by any means necessary.

And unbelievably, it had worked. He slipped out of the campaign office early, and was sitting in a booth in Ray's Diner by twenty-five after, a brown clasp envelope sitting beside him on the table.

Danielle showed up at twenty till. "I'm sorry I'm late," she began, "the editor was screaming as usual." She looked at the envelope. "We're not accepting applications," she said smiling, one eyebrow raised.

"Not my line of work," he told her, "don't worry."

Raymond Wilson himself came over and took their order.

He had come over to the booth when Campbell first arrived, recognizing him despite the seven years' absence. The two men exchanged greetings and started to catch up on things. Ray asked what Campbell had been doing since he left, and Campbell asked about what Scott had been up to, singing and all. Campbell duly noted that Karen was not working.

"She comes in on Thursdays at one," Ray had explained before Danielle's arrival, "she's got morning classes over at the college on Thursdays."

Campbell ordered a burger and fries, and Danielle, as promised, ordered a salad.

Campbell looked up at Ray on this. "Ray, I've got to tell you," he said, scratching at his temple, "This is the first time I've been in a diner where they actually serve a salad. You're unique."

Ray cocked a thumb at Danielle. "We owe it all to Ms. Peterson here."

Danielle looked up at Ray, wincing comically. "You have to tell the story, don't you?" she asked.

Ray appeared not to hear. "I'll never forget," he began, "first time she comes in here, she takes one look at my menu and starts complaining."

"Complaining?" Campbell inquired, very interested.

Danielle had her elbow on the table, her chin placed in the palm of that hand, and turned her face as if she was looking out the window.

"You're never going to let me forget this, are you Ray?" she asked.

"Complaining," Ray answered Campbell, again seemingly oblivious to Danielle's poor protestation. "Not even a hello, howdo-you-do, nothing." He said this with an air of disgust, but the perpetual smile he wore on his face shone through nonetheless.

Surprisingly, he winked at Campbell.

Campbell uttered a small laugh. "Do go on," he prompted.

"Don't encourage him," Danielle muttered to Campbell, and then to Ray: "Don't you have to go place our orders or something, Mr. Wilson?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, and then called over his shoulder to the youth working the bar. "A standard for the gentleman, and the salad special for the lady." He turned back to Campbell. "Now where was I?" he asked.

Danielle giggled despite herself.

"Not even a how-do-you " Campbell offered.

"Right," Ray said immediately, "not even a how-do-you-do, saying that all the stuff on my menu is garbage and how come we don't have one healthy thing on it. She orders a water."

"A water," Campbell gave Danielle a shocked look.

"Garbage was not the term " she tried to say.

"So I confer with my people here, you know, the customer's always right," Ray stated.

"Of course," Campbell agreed.

"And we figured up the way to keep her business." At this, Ray produced a menu from the pocket of his apron, and indicated a selection under the title "SPECIALS."

"'Peterson Special'," Campbell read off.

"Trying to stay in step with the times," Ray said, and then bowed to Danielle. "Your salad will be right up, ma'am."

He gave a gentle clap on Campbell's back and then went behind the bar.

"I take it you eat here often." Campbell could swear she was blushing.

"Yes," Danielle said, turning to face Campbell, "after all, Mc-

Donald's doesn't have a dish named after me."

Campbell nodded towards Ray, who was cheerfully taking someone else's order at the counter and making small talk. "He does that every time?"

"Almost," she replied, "enough for four co-workers and my editor."

Campbell laughed.

"So," Danielle asked, "what brings the infamous Campbell Davis back into town?"

"Infamous?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It's a long, drawn out story," Campbell said cryptically.

"We've got a few minutes."

"I don't know," Campbell lowered his voice, "I am talking to a member of the press corps here."

"Yes," she said right back, "but, no offense, it isn't quite newsworthy."

"Teenage Pied Piper Tells All at Local Home of the Peterson Special," Campbell spat out. "No, I see your point. So...what exactly do you do at the paper? Your card says 'reporter,' but..."

"I do a bit of everything, I've got an editorial slot, I write reports for the paper, typeset my own stuff, you know, the usual."

"Actually, I don't know," Campbell sipped his water, "but I'll take your word on it."

At this point, Ray brought the salad over and bowed again to Danielle after placing it in front of her. The youth who was also working brought over Campbell's food shortly thereafter. They ate in a few moments of silence.

Danielle began again. "Well, tell me this, at least. Why were you so keen to have lunch with me?"

Campbell made no answer. Instead, he touched at his lips with a napkin, and then set it aside. He opened the envelope, pulled something out of it, and laid it on the table.

She looked down at it, at first wearing a look of confusion.

Then when she read the cover, amazement and surprise dawned in her eyes. Campbell looked closely at those eyes, and something was wrong with them, although he wasn't sure what it might be, or why he should worry with it right now. So he thought nothing more about it.

"March 1984," he said, "Poets' Corner." He extended a hand across the fake wooden surface of the table.

"Nice to meet you, Daniel Peterson," he said.

She was far too engrossed in the cheap-looking magazine to see the hand he placed before her. "Where did you get this?" she said in an awed whisper, as she picked it up and looked at its cover again. Then she began to thumb through the pages.

"Page sixteen, if you've forgotten," he told her.

She looked up at him, uncomprehendingly, and again asked, "Where did you get this?" She turned over to the aforementioned page, and over its contents.

"I'll tell you." He placed his hand over hers to get her attention. Her eyes rose to his, and then he added, smiling, "As long as you promise that it's strictly off-record."

"No problem," she whispered, still in a state of shock.

"You know, and so does everybody else in the county, it seems, the details of my leaving here," he began.

"Actually, I asked someone after I met you last night."

Campbell paused. Shrugged. "Okay, so I'm not as famous as I thought. Anyway, I went north to New England, spent some time hopping around Boston, New York, etc. For a while there in New York, I had " he frowned. "Let's just say a bad spell. I forgot what I wanted to do with my life, I forgot why I had even left home...some days I think I even forgot my name." He studied the ceiling for a moment. "Well, we'll leave it at that."

He had tried not to meet her gaze while telling her all of this, afraid he would look up and find her completely uninterested in anything about him, much less his former troubles. What would a beautiful woman who had everything going for her, including what seemed to be a great career, find interesting in the trials of a young middle school dropout, reformed junkie, reformed smoker, and recovering alcoholic? He was afraid he would look up and find her eyes studying the cars passing on Green Street outside. Instead, he saw her meeting his gaze with great interest. She had her eyes upon him as he told his tale, so he found the strength to continue and managed to keep his eyes lifted to hers while he did so.

"After I came out of it, I was kind of a tabula rasa, you know?"

I lacked everything, especially direction." Campbell cleared his throat. "I was wandering through this marketplace down around SoHo or someplace one day, and came to a guy who dealt in old books and other stuff like that. For some reason, I started digging through one of his boxes of old magazines. That's when I found this one," he said, tapping the Poets' Corner, "and I bought it. Had almost no money whatsoever to my name, but I bought it anyway."

He came out of his memories for a moment to address her directly, "Have you ever gotten one of those feelings that you should just do something? I mean, you probably don't even know why, but you should just do it?"

She thought it over for a moment. "Once or twice," came the reply.

"Then you know what I mean," he conjectured. "Well, that's what this was. I went home, or what could pass for home at the time, which was a hole in the wall. I mean, literally it was a hole in the wall. I then read through the magazine, flipping mostly, because none of the stuff seemed to be any good. Then I came to a certain poem, which held me spellbound. It wasn't very long, because it said what it needed to say, and then didn't hang around.

It was enough, though. And the imagery, the words, everything. I mean, it sounds corny, but it moved me, really moved me. I remember sitting there in my hole in the wall, crying because the poem was powerful enough to evoke that kind of emotion in me. I read it three or four times, and it all came back to me." He smiled at her.

"All of it."

"All of what?" she asked, still focusing on him and his story.

"What I wanted to do, who I wanted to be...all of it. All of that. I remembered that what I wanted to do was to write just write, not much of anything else but that. The poem had reminded me of all that, and I thought, 'God, that's what I want to do. I want to make someone else feel like I do, reading this.' So, I got my shit together, got my GED, went to school, the whole nine yards."

He held the poem in the magazine up. "It was this poem," he said. "I looked and it said the poet was Daniel Peterson. I never could find out anything about him, because for some reason the damn magazine never said who he was, where he was from, anything. I even wrote to the magazine trying to get some information, but it had been two years since it had been published, and I got the letter back, saying 'No longer at this address.' All I wanted to do was thank him for setting me back on track."

Danielle was struck dumb with amazement. She did nothing but look at him and his smile for a long time. "It was a typo," she said finally, "for some stupid reason they misspelled my name. I had to enter it as part of some workshop in high school, where we all had to submit to some magazine, and I drew that one. I never thought it would be published, but they accepted it, and then misspelled my name." She looked at him questioningly, "But how did you know that was me?"

He shrugged. "I didn't. I just wanted to meet you. Then I saw your name and it clicked. I don't know how I guessed it was you. It just felt right. I had this fear you would laugh in my face and say I was an idiot."

"God, I haven't even thought about that poem in...years."

"It's very good," he said. He smiled and then laughed, shaking his head. "I can't believe I've been waiting five years to tell you that."

"Thank you," she said in response, and then the smoke that seemed to hang about her eyes cleared. "So do you still write?"

She was more open now than before. She was more relaxed now than before. She was smiling more than before.

"Yes, I still do..." he began.

And they talked their lunch break away, forgetting that lunch was what the break was primarily intended for.

Campbell was watching the stars. Yes, he thought, she has tinted contact lenses. I've definitely got to get past those contacts. I'm curious as to what her real eyes are like.

He had never understood why someone would want to cover up or hide any of their God-given beauty. He had a friend once with incredible fire-red hair that was wonderfully maddening to watch, and deep green eyes. The eyes had always seemed wrong to him. Then one day she came to work without her contacts in, because one of them had torn. The results were extraordinary. Her natural eye color was the most majestic blue he had ever seen. He complained for the entire lunch hour they spent together about how foolish it was to keep those eyes bottled up.

Had she taken his advice? He couldn't remember.

The eyes Danielle had perhaps placed on order at an eyecare establishment downtown were a dark green.

Lovely, yes, but a fa-

cade that held prisoner something even more beautiful behind it.

He absently shook the squeeze bottle and found it was nearly empty. He drained the last of it, and looked around him. His eyes were getting heavier by the moment, and it wouldn't do him any good to fall asleep out here on the hood of his car. It was tempting to do so, despite the many nights upon nights he had slept under the stars, and the majority of them not by choice. He had to go to work tomorrow, and exhaustion there was a given by the end of the day. Starting out that way would not help matters. He dismounted, and tossed his bottle in the passenger seat before getting in.

Campbell unlocked the side door to Jack's house with the spare key Jack had given him, and walked in. All was normal, or whatever passed for normal in this particular house. Debra's television upstairs was parading its stupefying images all around the master bedroom for her enjoyment. The clock on the stove was ticking, and announced proudly that it was ten o'clock on the proverbial dot.

He ascended the stairs to Jack's room. He turned the lights on.

The room was completely devoid of Jack. "Where ?" he asked, and then remembered. Jack had probably gone to the diner to see Karen. Campbell smiled, good for him. He hoped for Jack's sake that it worked out. Jack needed someone, and although Campbell knew he was fulfilling part of that need, there were certain things Campbell could not give him.

"Go, you devil," he told Jack's room.

He turned off the light and got undressed in the dark. He took his place on the chair that folded out into a bed. Jack had brought it in from another room, and it was comfortable. It definitely did not fall within his personal top ten list of worst places to sleep. He preferred not to dwell on this thought, however, so he closed his eyes.

He had no idea how long had passed before he was being shaken rudely back into reality again.

He grudgingly opened his eyes, and looked straight up into Jack's. "Hello," Campbell said, rubbing at one eye, "what's up, other than me?"

Jack paused for a moment before answering. His thoughts weighed heavily upon him. When the answer came, it wasn't even an answer. "Well, I wanted to know how it went with Danielle at lunch."

"Very well, thank you," Campbell said, "although I'm fairly certain that's not what you woke me up to ask me about." He added, "I hope it's not, anyway."

"I'm sorry," Jack breathed, he was up and pacing about in an instant, "you're right, I'm sorry, but...but I'm utterly clueless as to what to do now."

Karen, Campbell thought. "What happened?"

Jack briefly recounted for him the evening he had shared with Karen. This talk lasted several minutes, after which they both retired for the evening.

For a long while after they climbed into their respective beds, they did not sleep. They stared into the darkness, silent, lost in their own thoughts.

Chapter Nine

Jack spent the next day worried about the night to come, despite the talk he and Campbell had before they went to bed. Jack had gotten little sleep.

Campbell had noticed this before he left to go to work and tried to reassure Jack. "Remember what I said last night," he said, brushing through his long black hair. "Don't panic, it'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say," Jack replied, sighing and leaning against the wall.

"Oh?" Campbell asked, pausing for a moment, his brush poised above his head. Campbell's eyes met Jack's in the mirror.

"And why would that be easy for me to say?"

"You're just...I don't know." Jack then corrected himself.

"No, I do know...you're so confident about yourself. You could go out with three girls in an evening and not worry about it for a second."

Campbell turned to face Jack. "One other point of advice.

Don't refer to them as 'girls.' Since you are looking for someone of your own age, or at least I hope you are, and that would be around twenty-one refer to them as women. Young women, if you must, but girls is not a good term." He returned to brushing his hair, then paused again. "It signals to them that you acknowledge their maturity, and some of them frankly find 'girls' demeaning, especially if they don't know you very well. So 'women' is the safest term available."

Jack nodded, and Campbell finished the simple task of grooming himself. Jack noticed that Campbell rarely spent a large amount of time fussing over his physical appearance. He did what needed to be done, and then got on to other things. Jack liked that for some reason.

Campbell was ready to go downstairs, leap into Big Blue, and then light out for his job.

He turned before descending. "One other thing," he said, "nobody, but nobody, is completely confident, especially when it comes to dealing with women, who are more complex than anything else on God's green earth. If you know anyone who tells you they're one hundred percent confident about women, they're lying out the ass.

You just aim for one hundred percent and hit as close as you can.

Shoot for the moon, so they say, if you miss you'll be among the stars." He shot Jack a smile. "Dig it?"

"Yeah," Jack said, and felt better. He smiled back.

"Okay, then." Campbell began tromping down the stairs again.

When he reached the bottom, he turned and looked up at Jack. "As for me, though, don't be fooled. I'm terrified of women. Terrified enough to be absolutely in love with them."

And then he was gone.

He told Campbell the night before why he was worried.

"I don't know what to do about dating anymore," he had said, bathed in the half-light that spilled in from the hallway.

"What do you mean?" Campbell asked, propped up on one elbow.

"I mean, I went out with Kim for three years, right?"

Campbell held up one finger and halted Jack's thought process. "Were you married?"

"What?"

"Were you married?"

"Well, no."

Campbell spread his hands in a "well, there you have it" gesture. "Then, you were dating for around three years. You ought to be a pro at it."

Jack shook his head. "No, I guess I said it wrong. We dated for three years, but that first period, of introductions, of getting to know each other..." he trailed off. "You know what I'm trying to say?"

"I think so," Campbell answered. "You're afraid you've forgotten how to do that first date thing. How to act...how to inspire interest, not, of course, (or at least I hope) to make up interesting things about yourself which will prove to be false later, but to simply let her see the interesting things that are already there. Something like that?"

Jack nodded.

"You don't have a thing to worry about, if you just be yourself.

Don't put on a show, you know? Women can see right through it..." he thought for a moment. "Well, most of the time."

"What if..." Jack stopped.

"What if what?"

"What if...I'm just not interesting?" Jack finished, looking up at Campbell. "I don't find myself particularly interesting."

Campbell got up from his bed at that point, and rather suddenly. He was wearing nothing but some blue boxer shorts. "Follow me," he said.

Campbell led Jack into the study, and went straight to the piano bench. He then began rummaging through it. Campbell decided on a few pages of sheet music, attached with a paper clip.

The music staves which stretched across the page were the only things not in Jack's own handwriting. Jack remembered dimly that he had bought a package of a hundred sheets of blank sheet music at Oliver's Music downtown. He also remembered that Oliver's had closed down about...what...three months ago?

And how many sheets of it have you used so far? a voice asked in his head. Jack had no time to answer the voice, for Campbell spoke to him.

"What is this?" he asked.

"An adagio," Jack said, and then added, almost shyly, "I wrote it."

"You wrote this?" Campbell asked, holding up the sheet.

"Yes."

Campbell studied Jack for a moment. "Tell me what you think of it. I mean, give me your own personal opinion of this adagio that you wrote."

Jack did not exactly understand where Campbell's train of thought was taking them, but he understood music. "Let me see it." Jack held out his hand, and Campbell put the music in it. Jack looked it over briefly. "Well, there are a few kinks in it. It's not my best, but it's pretty good."

Campbell took all of this in. "So it's pretty good," he said aloud finally.

"Yes."

Campbell pointed to the piano. "Play it."

Jack still did not get it. "What, now?"

"No, wait till next month." Campbell remained as he was, pointing to the piano.

Jack smiled, uncertain. He went to the piano bench and sat down. He removed the paper clip, laid it aside and then spread out the sheet music across the piano. After this, he closed his eyes.

He spread his fingers out over the keys, and opened his mind. He played then, played his adagio more from his heart than from the sheet music before him. He played, and the sheer force of his will made the notes that were scribbled on the page in No. 2 pencil do a slow, whirling dance around the room.

Campbell sat cross-legged on the floor and did not close his eyes. He let the music enter his mind, and watched Jack as he played. There were few things in the world more beautiful than an artist at work, in Campbell's opinion.

Jack played while his mind wandered backwards in time. He had written this a year and a half ago, yes, eighteen months ago, before everything had started to go wrong. This had been when only certain things had been going wrong, such as his father, and that new woman who had so suddenly and so recently become a thing that liked to wear the mask of his dead mother. Only certain things were wrong, certain things that could be barricaded off and avoided, certain things that could not be talked about. When it was only certain things and not everything you could pretend that everything was still all right. You could put on that masquerade for everyone—father, mother, neighbors, even your girlfriend. And there had been Kim, of course, so supportive, and so kind, and so loving, sitting on the floor almost exactly like Campbell was now, listening attentively, not seeming to understand this pure world of sound that the love of her life always ran to, but listening all the same, and at least pretending to like it. He played the measures slower now, because with each one that passed, he became more and more rooted in the present, increasingly rooted in this place that had no father, no Kim, nothing but an empty house. He played the adagio even slower than written, and in the final measure he placed an unwritten fermata over the four final chords in a last desperate effort to keep eighteen months ago

where it was, and not to come back to the dismal present.

It did not work.

He removed his foot from the sustain pedal, and opened his eyes.

"Pretty good," Campbell remarked from behind him.

Campbell was here, not Kim. And his father was buried in the cemetery by Highway 15, and not sleeping in the master bedroom.

At the end of the musical piece he was back where he had started; he almost felt like crying. But he did not.

He did not cry.

Instead, he smiled thinly, "Yeah, it's not the best I've done, but it's pretty good." I am here in the present, he thought glumly, so I can at least try to make the best of it. Try, anyway.

Campbell got up from where he was sitting and walked over to Jack. He laid a hand on Jack's shoulder. "Jack, that was a hell of a lot better than pretty good. That was some of the best stuff I've heard in a long time. I'm not saying that just to say it, you know. I've got Shaw doing Orff's Carmina Burana on tape, and I've got some of Mozart's piano concertos, among other things. I know what I like, and this is some good shit. You need to record some of it, just for posterity, and maybe a copy for me, too."

"You like it?"

"I thought I just made that clear."

"Just out of curiosity, how do you know all of this about music?"

Jack asked.

"I was a music minor in school for a while," Campbell told him, "I love music." He noticed the surprise in Jack's face. "What, just because I listen to Hendrix and Living Colour and stuff, I can't listen to anything else? I've got a tape of Disney tunes I love to play full blast while on the highway, I'll have you know."

"Okay, okay, point taken." Jack paused. "So...you do like it?"

"Look, this is important to remember." Campbell grabbed a large yellow beanbag and sat upon it. "This will help you with your art, with relationships, just about anything you do. You take what you do, and if you show it to someone else, whether they like it or not has nothing to do with how you should feel about it. You take yourself, and you show yourself to Karen, or anyone else you may be interested in, and whether they like you or not has nothing to do with how you should feel about yourself. You show the music to someone and say, 'This is what I do. If you can use it, great, if not, there's someone else down the line who can.' You show yourself to someone and say, 'This is who I am. If you like me and want to hang around, great, if not, there's someone else down the line who will.' Do you understand? The line that you have to love yourself before anyone else will is corny and stupid, but it's true. If everyone in the entire goddamn world looks at you and says 'Jack, that piece of music sucks, sucks shit,' if you like it, and you believe in it, you've got to give the world the finger and keep going."

Jack smiled a little. "You sure are set on this, Campbell."

"I am," he replied, "because it took me about four years or more to learn that, and the whole time was absolute hell, and I'm trying to cut the time short for you. You need to be happy, and you deserve to be happy, but more importantly, you need to be happy without relying on everyone else to make you that way."

"So, all I need to do is be myself, and just hope that she likes it?"

"Hope is good. Hope is good," Campbell said, "but don't overdo it, and don't place too much emphasis on whether or not she likes you. If she doesn't, you can be depressed for a little while, but get over it. Just do whatever your heart, mind, and soul tell you to do, and you'll be fine."

With that Jack had to be content, for Campbell turned around to leave. "I'm going to bed now. I do have work in the morning, you know."

"I didn't mean to " Jack began, but Campbell shushed him.

"No," he turned to face Jack, "no, you needed me, and here I am. I'm always around when people need me." Campbell walked down the hallway towards Jack's room, giving an involuntary goodsized yawn as he did so.

"That was quite a sermon you gave," Jack commented once they were back in his room.

"I'm glad you liked it," Campbell replied, crawling under his blanket again.

"Ever consider becoming a preacher?" Jack asked, smiling.

Campbell did not smile. "You'd be surprised," he said, rolled over, and would say no more.

Jack looked through his closet for something worth wearing.

He wanted to wear something that would impress her, something that made him look good, something that was perfect.

It was ten o'clock in the morning and he was standing with his robe open, the blue matching belt dangling down from either side.

At the other end of the closet, his reflection hanging on the wall trapped in a mirror now revealed the smallest trace of a pooched belly appearing around the waistband of his underwear. He noted this with a look of distaste passing over his face, and then turned back to his clothing. He had not been shopping since long before his father died. His father had not lost interest in buying clothing for his son, his son had merely lost interest in going to stores with his father.

Jack, we need to talk...

That was what had started it all, those five words. Those five words, and his father sitting down at the table in the kitchen, the same table where the object of the discussion to come now spent most of her days, eating and doing nothing more.

He refused to think on it. A great evening was ahead of him, and he had no idea what to wear, and he knew he had nine hours to decide, but he didn't care, because it was better than thinking about...

Jack, we need to talk... and there was a pause as his father began to look for words. Son, I've been meaning to mention this to you for a few weeks now, but I never have figured out how. But now...

Before he realized what he was doing, Jack had lifted his arm up, meaning to slam it up against the wall to escape this reality which had broken free and seemed to be rampaging around his head.

Before he could, another idea came with such cunning speed that it snuck up and surprised both Jack and his current line of thought. This was new, fresh reality, and it easily pushed aside his troubling, tormented memories of the past.

If we're going to be ourself, we shouldn't give a damn what we wear.

Jack dropped his arm.

Well, I mean we shouldn't look like absolute shit, but we should look decent. Don't go overboard, it's just a date. Remember what Campbell said, we should just be ourself.

Jack looked in the mirror again, and studied himself, blue robe, pooch belly and all. "All right," he said, and then said it again, "all right. Honesty is the best policy."

He shed the robe and went prowling through the hangers for the final time.

* * *

Campbell arrived home around six o'clock, and fixed himself something to eat. He took it upstairs and found Jack finishing his preparations.

"Looking good," Campbell said, as he took a bite out of his sandwich. "Looking very good indeed."

Jack had chosen a pair of blue jeans, along with a white T-shirt.

Over the shirt was a dark blue button-down, completely open down the front and untucked, with the sleeves rolled up. He was putting on his shoes as Campbell spoke.

"So, son," Campbell continued, deepening his voice, "need to borrow the car?"

"No, thanks," Jack said, fixing his hair in the mirror. "Everything planned tonight is within walking distance." He turned to face Campbell. "Small town ambiance."

Campbell chewed thoughtfully, swallowed. "Tell me again why you don't have a car?"

"I told you, I do have one. It's in the garage."

Campbell was surprised. "Why don't you ever use it?"

"It was a gift from my father in the will, I mean." Jack's voice grew suddenly quiet, almost reverent. "It's not the newest thing under the sun, anyway. Good shape, though. He left plenty of money for her to buy whatever she needed," he nodded his head towards the kitchen, where the television was on, "including another car, but I've never wanted to use it. She uses it whenever she wants, because I don't want to. Memories, I guess."

"Sorry," Campbell said, "I didn't mean to get you all upset before your date."

"Don't worry about it," Jack told him. "Nothing can get me depressed right now." He brightened a little, and smiled. "Anyone who gets depressed on a first date with a positively wonderful young lady needs to have his head examined."

"Good point," Campbell said.

"Besides, walking everywhere gives her plenty of time to talk."

"Talk?"

Jack smiled. "She likes to talk." He thought about it for a moment, then added, "I like to listen to her talk. What she says is kind of rattled around a bit, but it makes sense if you think about it hard enough. Kind of like you, Campbell."

"Thanks," Campbell responded between bites of a celery stick.

"I think."

"What are your plans?"

"Plans?" Campbell held up a dog-eared book. It was Ellison's *Invisible Man*. "I haven't read through this in a while, thought I'd go back over it. Great shit."

"I never do a lot of reading," Jack commented.

"Whenever I'm not writing, I'm reading," Campbell told him, flipping through the pages rapidly. "Ongoing learning process," he said.

"I see," Jack put the brush down on the counter. "I'm ready now."

Campbell held up his glass of milk in a toast. "Go forth, my son, and triumph."

And so he did.

Chapter Ten

He arrived at Ray's Diner at about five till seven. The slight dinner crowd huddled in a couple of booths in the corner. Jack saw a couple of people he knew—acquaintances of his, friends of his father's—and nodded to them. They nodded back.

Jack approached the counter, where a man was wiping up with a dishcloth. The man looked up at Jack. He was a clean-shaven individual in his early fifties with closely cut dark hair. He wore an apron over a T-shirt and jeans. He was slightly older than Jack's father had been; he was still fairly handsome, and although not overweight, he was obviously not starving. A small pot belly protruded under his apron. Well, Jack thought absently, the man owns a diner, what did you expect?

"I'm looking for Karen," Jack told the man.

The man's face immediately brightened with a smile that seemed to wrestle the fluorescent lighting for dominance. "Jack?"

Jack nodded.

The man stuck out a hand, which Jack accepted. "Raymond Wilson, I'm Karen's father."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Wilson." I'm here with her father, and yet, I'm not nervous, Jack mused. How odd. I remember being terrified of Kim's parents; they always seemed to give me some kind of visual inspection every time I showed up.

"Call me Ray, please," Karen's father withdrew his hand.

"That's what it says in the neon outside, and I paid plenty for the sign, so Ray it will be."

I can see where she gets it from, Jack thought, and smiled. "All right then, Ray it is."

"Karen?" Ray leaned back and called past the door at the other end of the counter. "There's this nice young gentleman here asking for you."

Jack shot a glance to the parties eating in the corner. They had an aura of not-listening about them, but Jack knew better. He spent a moment marveling at small-town telecommunications, certain the entire city would know he and Karen had gone out on a date before they had even walked out the door. Jack did not mind, he did not care who knew.

He could have thought of Kim at that point, and possibly fretted about her gaining such knowledge, but it never occurred to him to think of her, so he did not worry about it at all that evening.

Karen appeared in the doorway. She was carrying a box marked FRITO-LAY and wearing an apron identical to her father's. "Well, as long as he's nice and young, I guess I'll see him," she put down the box, "although he's a little early."

Ray smiled a knowing smile. He did not turn around as he said, "It's straight up seven, dear."

She had looked at her watch as he spoke, and the look on her face was quite comical. She immediately half-sprinted to where Jack was. "I am so sorry," she said, leaning over the counter toward him, "I lost track of the time. Give me five minutes. I'll be right back."

With that, Jack had to be content, for she was gone up a flight of stairs at the far end of the diner.

"Sit down, sit down," Ray invited, and Jack did so. "She's a sweet girl, but she never has any sense of time. I got her one of those fancy watches that lets you set reminders for things, you know, gives you a little alarm beforehand...she just forgets to set it. Or forgets to put it on." He laughed. "Just can't get over her problem with time, poor thing."

Jack smiled his reply.

"Can I get you something?" Ray asked him, and Jack politely declined, saying they were about to have dinner.

"She'll only be a minute," Ray continued. "It always amazes me that when you have such a problem with time, you also have the ability to get ready for whatever you lost track of time for almost instantly."

"I don't mind," Jack told him. "So there's a space above the diner," he tried to make conversation.

"Yes, that's the apartment we moved into when we bought and renovated the place. We turned the downstairs into the diner, and the upstairs into living quarters. With Scott gone and my w " Ray smiled, and corrected himself with such ease that Jack was almost certain Ray had no idea he changed the words he had meant to say at all, "With just two of us, we don't need much space. Still, we missed having a house, having a place to get away from work, so we saved up some money and bought one. Apartment sits empty now, I've been thinking about renting it out, but I don't know. With the entrance like it is, opening right into the diner, I don't know many people I'd trust with having a key to the front door of this place."

He frowned for a moment. "Wish I'd thought of that while getting the place redone." His smile returned, as a bobber returns to the surface after first being cast into the water. "Oh, well. Right?"

Jack nodded. He liked this man, who seemed to be the cheeriest person Jack had ever met. Not only that, but the cheeriness was infectious.

At that point, Karen came bounding down the stairs. Jack turned.

He hoped his jaw had not careened off the tile flooring as it might have in a cartoon. It certainly felt like it did. Karen's long, reddish-brown hair was down, something that Jack had never seen before on her, and this certainly would have been enough. With the jeans and the green sleeveless shirt she had on added into the equation, Jack found it almost overwhelming. That wasn't it, though. She was not wearing anything exceptionally spectacular, it was something else entirely. He could not grasp exactly what it was.

Oh, please don't cause a scene, he pleaded with himself. Her father and a council of town judges are in the room. At least wait until you get into the parking lot to completely lose your mind.

He quickly gripped his composure, and looked to her father.

Ray gave no sign of disapproval, was merely smiling at his daughter.

"Okay?" Karen asked Jack.

"Better than that," Jack told her.

"Well, Daddy," Karen walked over to the two of them, "we won't be too late."

"Be careful," he told them.

And with that, Karen took Jack's hand and led him out through the front door.

"Nice meeting you, Jack," Ray called after him, still smiling the entire time.

"And you," Jack barely had time to answer over his shoulder before the front door of the diner swung shut behind him.

"So...I've been very, very patient," Jack was saying.

The waitress had shown them to a small square table with chairs on either side. Jack had pulled out a chair for Karen without thinking, and she smiled up at him as she sat down.

They chatted while looking over their menus. The waitress had come back then and taken their orders. They chatted some more waiting for the appetizers to arrive. The waitress came again, bringing food, so they chatted while they ate, drawing out the meal. Neither of them seemed to mind. They did not so much chat most of the time as Karen talked and Jack listened, inserting comments wherever he deemed it appropriate. He loved listening to her talk.

Now, the waitress had cleared the table. Karen was on her fourth refill of sweetened tea, while Jack was on his third water.

Karen had her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her folded hands, and she was watching Jack intently.

"Yes, you have been," she remarked.

There was a pause. They grinned at each other from across the table.

"I didn't even hint at it during dinner," he said.

"No, you didn't." She took a sip of her tea. "You've been very good."

Jack was trying to act very cool and collected, but inside he was slowly going insane. Spending the last hour or so in this young woman's company had his mind racing, and one of its favorite places to race to was the question: "Where do I know you from?"

His cool-and-collected act was very thin indeed, and he was aware she could see straight through it, because she laughed.

"Eating you up, is it?"

"All right, yes," Jack admitted. "Whatever I did in a previous lifetime to wrong you, I apologize. Just please tell me before I start to literally climb this wall here." He began to get up out of his seat to demonstrate his climbing prowess, but she stopped him.

"Sit down," she commanded, smiling. She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, you did say please." She was turning in her seat now, reaching for her purse. She unclasped it, and fiddled around in it for a few seconds before producing a folded up piece of paper. She looked up and gave a moment of exquisite hesitation before handing it across the table to him. "Look at that," she instructed.

He unfolded the paper and did as she bade him.

It was a page photocopied from a high school yearbook. Things were beginning to click into place. Circled in

blue magic marker was a picture, and off to the side the name: "Wilson, Karen."

"That's page thirty-seven of the Macomber County High School yearbook for 1990." She then produced another page out of her purse, similarly folded.

When Jack examined it, it was indeed quite similar to the first page. Except this was obviously a different page, and the picture circled in the same blue magic marker had a caption off to the side of "Hardin, Jack." The picture looked at him with very familiar albeit younger eyes.

"And that's page twenty-nine of the Macomber County High School yearbook for 1990," she said, and then sat and watched him.

"You I " he looked up at her incredulously, and then back at the pages, one of which he held in each hand. "I feel like an idiot. I graduated with you for crying out loud, how ?" He looked at her again, and she was smiling.

"I don't look a thing like the picture in there," she said, "I was quite a bit chunkier then."

"I am so sorry, I how in the world could I forget you?"

She reached across the table and touched his hand. He felt something like a mild electric shock. "Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

Jack was still shaking his head. He felt as if he had been doing so since they finished dessert.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked, in a bright voice which made Jack's head reel like he was back at the graduation party three years earlier, his mind filled with the fog of alcohol.

They were in the park downtown. Just moments ago they had passed over the oriental bridge where he and Campbell had met.

He stepped off the pavement into the grass. He could see her silhouetted in the lights that lined the sidewalk, and the contour of her body made his own ache somewhere that felt more like everywhere.

"I'm sorry," he said, desperately trying to stop, "but I can't conceive of how I completely forgot about you."

She walked to the edge of the lake and sat down. He followed her example. They sat rather close together. Neither seemed to mind.

"Well, as I said, I was a little bit on the heavier side then," she began, "and you were heavily involved at the time with Kim Meyers, if you recall."

Jack looked away for a moment. He knew this was all the answer she needed.

She turned his face back with a hand that was held gingerly under his chin. "So it's not surprising you wouldn't remember me.

You seemed to keep yourself to yourself for the majority of the time I knew you...well," she considered, "knew of you. We never were really formally introduced, I guess. That was me; I never did much of anything in high school except study my proverbial butt off. Managed to make salutatorian, if you remember that now."

Jack seemed to remember. Everything that occurred before the last two years had taken on that hazy quality

that was reserved for streets just after the first minutes of dawn, dreams, and distant memories.

"It's okay if you don't remember," she was saying, "but I remember. I'll never forget, because I spent my entire senior year watching you."

Jack started at this. "What?"

"Oh, I had a really big thing for you that last year. Really big," she was saying, "but you only had eyes for Kim Meyers the entire time. When she got valedictorian over me, I remember thinking, 'God, I guess I lost out on everything.'"

"Wow," Jack said in amazement.

"I'm not mad or anything," she put a familiar arm around him and gave him a little shake. Jack's heart leapt up as if it had just been pushed out of a third story window onto a trampoline. "Well, I was kind of then, but I grew out of it."

Jack mused a moment before speaking. "I'm just thinking of all the stuff you never know about."

"Yeah," Karen agreed, "you could go for years and not tell someone how you feel, and then when you do, it may not mean anything. It may be too late."

"Had a friend tell me that recently," Jack remarked.

"Smart friend," Karen countered.

They stared out at the water for a while without speaking. The streetlights' reflections did rippling dances for their amusement in the black water.

Karen still had her arm around him, and the hand which lay against his left shoulder squeezed slightly. "Is it too late?"

Jack paused. "No," he said, and then added, "as long as you grew out of being mad, and didn't lose anything else...did you?"

"Don't think so," Karen told him, and she moved her face close to his, so that they were nose to nose, "although you may have to find out for yourself."

Instinctively, his hand found hers, and their fingers laced around each other, almost as if they had been made strictly for that purpose. He held up their interlocked hands. "Would you mind if I held onto this?" he asked. "You can have it back on a loaner whenever you need it, but for the time being..."

"I'm not taking it back, am I?"

Jack smiled, and all was right with the world. "No," he said, "I guess not."

"I can't believe it's almost midnight," Karen was saying, squinting at her wristwatch. The porch light was not on, the windows of her house were dark, and the only illumination available was from the streetlight. They were sitting on the swing, and its chains made the slightest creak as they went back and forth, back and forth.

"Well," Jack told her, "time goes by very quickly when you have a great conversationalist with you."

Karen's mouth suddenly became a large O. Jack was quite sure that if she had been standing, her fists would immediately have been planted on her hips. "Was that a polite way of telling me that I talk too much, Mr. Hardin?"

"No, no," he brushed the back of his hand across her cheek, "I love listening to you talk. Don't stop."

"Well, I kind of have to, it is late. I have to open the diner tomorrow."

"Okay, so I'll walk you to your door," Jack said, but neither of them moved.

Jack could never tell afterwards exactly who moved first, or how, but Jack and Karen held each other. They held each other for at least a full minute, although Jack would have testified before God and whomever else that it had been at least half his allotted lifespan, and then they let go.

They did not let go all the way. They ended up still holding on, with their faces less than an inch apart, similar to the arrangement in the park.

"I hate to be old-fashioned about this," Jack heard himself halfwhispering, "but isn't this supposed to be on the second date?"

Karen thought for a moment before saying, "Well, technically but I've been waiting for four years to kiss you, so let's just call it an advance on next time."

So they kissed. Their lips barely touched, and they withdrew slightly.

"Okay," Jack said, now a full whisper, his eyes still closed.

They kissed again, longer this time, pressing each others' lips with their own.

"I thought you'd feel better," she said.

And again.

"Much better," he said.

And again, this time, their lips parting the smallest amount.

They held the last one for as long as possible before drawing back. They simultaneously opened their eyes, and laughed. Karen made a shushing gesture, explaining quickly that her father was asleep and his bedroom was right above the porch.

"You mentioned an advance on next time," he told her.

They were standing at the front door now, facing each other. He was holding both of her hands in his own with the knowledge that he was going to have to fight himself to let go to allow her to go inside.

"I did, didn't I?" she said, letting her arms swing slightly. She seemed so much younger than twenty, so much more alive than anything else this dying small town had to offer. She was so much more. The light thrown onto the porch from the street gave a gleam to her eyes that kept his heartbeat from slowing down its triphammer pace.

"So, I guess that means you would like to go out again?"

"No," she spat out immediately, "I just throw myself at whatever comes along. For God's sake, if you're not going to ask me out for next weekend, just shoot me, because I never thought I would ever be standing here holding your hands and making a complete fool out of myself." She dipped her head and looked up at him. Those eyes again. "Do you know what I mean?"

He kissed her gently on the forehead. "Next weekend?"

"Wait," she said, "let me check my calendar." Then, a second later, "All clear. Friday night, same drill as before?"

"Please."

"And you can come by the diner before Friday, you know."

"Fine."

"Call, too. You could call."

"Are you going inside, or what?"

"All right," she took her hands away and gave him a playful push. "All right, well get lost, before I make an even bigger fool out of myself than I already have."

He managed to grab one of her hands and kiss it lightly before she said "goodbye" and shut the door behind her.

Jack stood there for a moment, watched the light go out in her front hallway, and then began to make his slow way back home.

And in that moment, walking down the middle of a deserted and darkened street in a town that was steadily being deserted and darkened, he realized that he was doing it. He had used his eyes, and not his eyes.

And for the first time, there were no voices. There was no hesitance at going back to his house. And he knew there would be no lying awake, staring at the shadows on his ceiling, dreaming of sleeping. He knew he would sleep well.

And if he did dream, for once he would dream of something someone that would make him wake with a smile on his face.

Chapter Eleven

"Nothing is working out today," Campbell declared suddenly, then punctuated the remark by putting down his pen disgustedly and giving his iced tea a disgruntled stir.

Jack raised an eyebrow and said nothing in reply. He knew his friend across the table was having problems that extended beyond the poem he had wrestled across the discarded remains of seven napkins.

He had a good clue what those problems might be, but decided to keep it to himself and see if Campbell figured it out on his own.

Campbell glared out the window at nothing in particular, and decided to specialize. He glared down at the napkins which had laid down their lives in his pursuit of poetry. From where he sat, he could pick out pieces of his scrawl...GRASS...STRUGGLE...

FIND...NEED...SUN. He had the words, but could not decide on their order. It was always inches from perfection, and somehow that was worse than miles.

When Jack returned home last night, he had spent two hours working on his latest composition. It had been grinding slowly to a halt when Campbell shuffled into the room near three o'clock.

"Campbell, hey," Jack said, smiling. "Did I wake you?"

Campbell pushed his bangs from his face and peered at Jack through uncooperating eyes. "Go to bed." He walked back to the bedroom, shaking his head.

Jack had complied, and finally dragged himself out of bed at ten-thirty. He made breakfast, and with Debra off shopping it was safe to relate there in the kitchen the events of the previous evening. Jack left some things out, but the most important fact was the look on his face. Campbell offered his congratulations, "Just make sure I'm invited to the wedding," and then took another sip of black coffee. With that, Jack flung toast at him and inevitable chaos had ensued.

From the dark circles under Campbell's eyes, it was obvious he had not slept well. He finished his second cup of coffee only to pour himself a large tumbler full of Coke. After breakfast, he grabbed some paper and started writing lethargically at the kitchen table.

Thirty minutes later, Jack came downstairs again, having showered. "You know, we do have a word processor upstairs," he remarked, looking at the crumpled up pieces of paper, which congregated for some reason on the kitchen floor around the bottom of the waste can.

"Thanks, but you have to do poetry longhand," Campbell replied and lobbed his latest rejected verse toward the waste can with the same result as the last seven. He winced slightly and went back to work.

But the work was not going anywhere. His muse was haunting him again, reminding him coldly that he had not written much of anything since he arrived back in his hometown. His days had been filled up with the job at the campaign office, yes, but his nights were spent, what? Reading? Sitting around with Jack? Thinking about ? No, he had thought firmly, and shook his head, as another line went completely wrong. Instead of concentrating on the writing at hand, his mind was constantly wandering off in search of greener pastures, and disturbingly, said pastures were almost always in Danielle's direction.

He had tried calling her once at the paper to talk. She answered the phone, but was obviously too hurried about whatever it is that reporters are always hurried about to talk, so he told her to call him when everything

calmed down.

That was yesterday during his lunch break, and there was an obnoxious part of him that thought more than ample time had passed for everything to calm down. Twenty-four hours is more than enough time for that to have happened, it assured him.

He put down the pen and rubbed his temples.

Jack had taken that break in Campbell's manic scribbling to pose the question. "I'm thinking of going down to the diner for a bit. You up for coming?"

Campbell let one hand fall to the table. He smiled up at Jack.

"Looking for a burger, I'm sure," he said coolly.

Jack made no reply. He was afraid his face was turning red.

"All right, sure," Campbell began to pick up his aborted attempts at writing from the kitchen floor. "I'm obviously not accomplishing anything here."

That had been close to an hour ago. Jack was disappointed to learn that Karen had day classes at the college, and would be back in an hour or so to catch the tail end of the lunch shift. Campbell was fighting the urge to go back to Jack's house and wait for a particular person to call. He would have called again, but was afraid the woman might think he was stalking her.

So Campbell had made his remark, put down his pen, and was tempted to leave it lying there until it had learned its lesson. Stop putting down such shitty verses, he thought vehemently at the writing utensil.

He glanced up to see Jack, who was beginning to look at Campbell as if he were having an out-of-body experience.

Maybe I am, he thought distractedly.

"Say again," Campbell told him, returning to full consciousness, "I'm afraid I was momentarily visiting the Bahamas."

"Nice weather?"

"A little rain, but hell, it's the Bahamas."

"Right," Jack said, looking out the window of the restaurant again. He wondered for a moment how not two weeks ago such an exchange of words would be alien to him. It was odd how some of Campbell's more eccentric tendencies were beginning to rub off on him. He was worried that his melancholy extremes might be rubbing off on Campbell in turn.

Best to ask, Jack decided, and took a breath before repeating himself. "I asked if you were feeling all right." He paused, and then if by way of explanation, added: "You've been acting strange all morning." He paused again, and then after a brief thought, added further: "Actually, you've been like this since the press conference."

Jack received Campbell's full attention with that last statement.

He cast his eyes downward. "Kind of obvious," he half-asked.

"More than kind of," Jack returned. "You tell me, don't make me guess."

"No," Campbell took a sip of tea, in order to gauge his own thoughts. "No, I'd be afraid of your guesses." Another sip. Oh, for God's sake, Davis, just say it. "I've got a problem."

Jack made no reply. He waited.

"Well, I don't know that it's a problem," Campbell added awkwardly, "it's probably not a problem at all. Maybe."

Uncomfortable silence.

"I mean, it's probably all in my head, anyway. I'm just making mountains out of molehills...or something."

Jack still said nothing.

"I keep telling myself to just be patient, and thoughts like this will go away, you know? I mean, why bother? I " Campbell ran his fingers through his hair.

Jack sat with his arms crossed. "Do you want to say her name, or do I have to?"

"All right, dammit," Campbell hissed, smiling, taking his hand away from his hair. "Danielle Peterson, you asshole."

"Yes," a voice agreed from over Campbell's left shoulder.

Campbell turned to see Ray wiping off the booth behind them.

This was the same booth that Ray had cleaned out over an hour ago.

Ray walked over to them, pitcher in one hand, cloth in the other, and refilled their water glasses. Neither had been drinking that much water. "That Danielle Peterson," he remarked, "a very beautiful woman."

"That she is," Campbell replied, the mention of her name bringing the image of her face to him, which he found he did not mind at all.

"Very intelligent, very talented," Ray continued, returning to wipe at the other booth again. He shot a wink over to Jack.

Campbell intercepted it and remembered Ray and his winks.

"Hey, now Ray, don't get the wrong idea or anything."

"Wrong idea?" Ray asked. "You're among friends here," Ray returned to their table and poked Jack in the shoulder with one elbow. Jack smiled up at him.

"Friends, Ray," Campbell stated, "we're only friends. Okay?"

"Okay," Ray agreed, although unconvincingly, and proceeded to move one booth over, and wipe the table there, which did not appear to need his attention either. "Could have fooled me, though," he mumbled just

loud enough to be heard, and then retreated back behind the counter.

"I can't convince myself," Campbell sighed. "I don't know why I expect to convince Ray."

"Why are you trying to convince yourself of anything?" Jack asked, "Do you like the woman or not?"

"The answer to that is painfully obvious," Campbell picked up his spoon, suddenly aware he was not intending to use it for anything in particular.

"To which question?"

"The latter," Campbell stated, and punctuated it by purposefully placing his spoon back on the table. "Once you answer the painfully obvious latter question, the not-so-painfully obvious former question becomes just as excruciating."

"You dance marvelously," Jack smirked.

"Why thank you," Campbell countered.

"You're welcome. Answer the damn questions." Jack sipped from his water. I can't believe this is the same Campbell Davis. He likes a girl and goes completely to pieces. He paused and then thought, I wonder what he keeps wanting to do with that spoon.

"Okay, the obvious one first." Campbell picked up his spoon again and pointed it at Jack. "Yes. I do have a bit of a thing for the woman, and who could blame me?"

Jack looked around him. "No one at this table."

"Not without serious repercussions," Campbell added.

"Agreed."

"All right," Campbell continued, "even if this is the case, I should be trying to convince myself otherwise simply because it can come to no good in the end."

"And why is that?" Jack stole a glance at Ray, who was at the counter, a portrait of a man not listening.

"Well, think about it," Campbell placed the spoon up to his temple. "She's a fairly successful journalist, not to mention a hell of a poet, right? She's got the career thing going, she's working up the ladder, 'Corporate Woman,' right?"

Jack got his cue. "If you say so."

"Right," Campbell agreed with himself. "So what in the world could she want with a vagabondish, nomadic, artist freak like myself?"

Not to mention that I'm six years younger than her. What could she possibly want with me?" Campbell shrugged. "Answer: nothing."

"Well, if that's the case, then why are we here, discussing this?" Jack asked.

Campbell folded his arms, and placed his chin on them.

"That's the problem, my friend. It should not even be an issue. I'm trying not to let it be."

"Don't let it be," Jack reassured him. "If it's certainly not going to happen, as you have said, then don't worry about it. You've got better things to be doing with your time."

Campbell thought about this for a moment, and then put down the spoon again. "You have a point there."

"Yes," Jack said, "I do. Now give me that damn spoon. You're driving me insane." Jack relieved Campbell of his spoon, and behind him the bell above the door announced a visitor.

Ashley Blair had walked into the diner.

"Ms. Blair," Ray called from the counter. "How are you doing this fine afternoon?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Wilson," She said, and looking to her left, noticed the two young men sitting there. As she did so, both Jack and Campbell took note, almost simultaneously, that in about two years she was going to begin driving young men out of their minds, if she wasn't already doing so.

Ray came out from around the counter and put an arm around the young girl. He addressed Jack and Campbell. "I keep telling her to call me Ray. She never listens. I explain that it makes me sound like I'm in a cartoon strip. She never listens." Ray winked again.

Jack wondered if the man's eyelid ever got tired.

"What can I get for you?" Ray asked her.

She handed him a slip of paper which she had removed from her pocket.

"Ah, I see." Ray studied the paper. "Playing delivery service again?"

"Playing, yes," she managed to smile. "If I was the delivery service, they'd have to tip me."

Ray laughed and went to the grill. "Good," he said, and tore into a bag of frozen french fries. "That's good."

With Ray engaged, she turned her attention to the two men in the booth. "Hi," she said.

"Hello," Campbell gestured to the booth beside him. "Seat?"

She consented and sat down.

"Parents sick of ordering pizza?" Campbell invited.

"It's a small house, and they needed a way to get rid of me for a half-hour," she discarded, and looked past Campbell out the window.

Jack and Campbell exchanged a look.

Ashley took notice. "I'm sorry; I don't know why I said that. I barely know you." Her cheeks had become a trifle flushed.

"Best to call a spade a bloody shovel and get it over with," Campbell replied and then sipped his tea.

Ashley looked perplexed.

"He talks like that all the time," Jack intervened, "you get used to it. What he means is that it's best to call something what it is."

There was a moment's interruption as Ray brought over a Coke for Ashley. "For the wait," he explained, and then was gone again.

Ashley took a preliminary sip of the drink, and then continued.

"Like I said, I don't know why I said that. It's not really anybody's business, I guess. You just seem like people I can talk to." She directed this last statement at Campbell.

"Well, we're equal opportunity listeners," Campbell responded with a smile. "So, let me ask someone else who is involved with this campaign in some form or fashion. Someone honest, shall we say?"

Even brutally so, as you are."

Ashley smiled her reply.

"All right, what is it like to be the niece of the next mayor of the city?"

Ashley shifted a little in her seat.

"You don't have to " Campbell threw out, suddenly afraid that he had gone a bit too far.

"No, it's all right," she stopped him. "My Uncle Jayson well, I love him because he's my uncle, and I have to but he is a bit of an...an..."

Jack thought it, but Campbell offered it. "Asshole."

"Thank you," she accepted, and then more to convince herself than the others, "well, he is. It's the money that does it to him, though. I'm sure if he just didn't have all of that money he would be fine."

"Probably so," Jack said, and then remembered Campbell's mother, who couldn't possibly have learned her charm the way she acquired her wealth: overnight. Such a thing spoke of genetic origins, instead of postnatal education. He also thought of his own stepmother. He just now realized he had no idea what the woman's maiden name had been. He hadn't liked her even before the will came, officially making half of his father's accumulated savings hers. He thought of these things, and then wanted to retract his statement.

She kept going. "He thinks that everybody likes him because of his money. He thinks he can do whatever he wants because of it."

"He and my mother sound like a perfect match," Campbell remarked under his breath, and Jack nodded. Jack was thinking of the way Susan Davis and Jayson Blair seemed around each other, and was unsure about which of them was using the other the most.

Two parasites in a lock of love, he thought distractedly. What a great visual.

Ashley again, streamed past Campbell's comment, "What's worse, he thinks that just because we don't have any money, we should feel like we owe him."

"We?" Jack inquired.

"My family. My father's not a big president of a bank like Uncle Jayson is. My dad's sick all the time, and it's not his fault he can never keep a job." She looked at the two young men across from her with plaintive eyes. "It's not our fault."

Campbell had seen her father at the press reception: a big, burly man who seemed to have no major visible ailments. He nodded in the right place, nevertheless, so Ashley could continue.

"Anyway, since Uncle Jayson has money, he thinks that he can introduce me to people and make them my friends by just saying that we're friends," Her hands, which had rested in her lap, were now clenched into fists at level with the tabletop. "I think the worst part is that they're nice to me only because of who he is. If I weren't his niece, they'd treat me like trash. That's why I..." She stopped to correct herself. "That's why we owe him."

Campbell noticed the small girl was fighting off tears. They were beginning to collect in the corners of her eyes, and her face was a portrait of control that was slipping away. Campbell knew, absolutely knew, that if Jayson Blair were to walk up to them right now with his politician's wax smile, he would probably throttle the man.

"He and Mrs. Davis are constantly telling me that I should get out more, and meet people, and be friendlier. She's not my mother, she shouldn't be able to tell me what to do, but he lets her."

"It's not my fault I don't have a lot of friends, just because I'm not phony like the two of them are. I only want to be liked for myself."

She was openly crying now, and with those last words, Campbell had one thought leap out at him from the darkness in his mind: Please go somewhere, be happy, fruitful, and bear children, because we can't let that kind of idea get swept away in the gene whirlpool.

"You're right," Campbell told her, "you're absolutely right."

Ashley looked up at Campbell. She was obviously trying very hard to keep herself under control. She did not strike Jack as the type of person who would cry openly in public over just anything, so Jack's heart went out to her.

"There's nothing that will get your good friends out of the way faster than surrounding yourself with people who like you for the face that you're wearing that day," Campbell said, looking Ashley straight in the eyes. Her eyes were bloodshot and four years away from becoming as captivating as they would be. "A good friend of mine, by the name of Thomas, said once that we 'prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet.' He was right. And so are you."

Ashley looked at Campbell with wonder. Her eyes seemed to Jack to portray the soul of a girl who had never been told she was right by anyone older than herself. He could not know this for certain, but it was something he felt deep inside.

"I understand," Campbell put his arm around the young girl.

"I didn't mean to bring up all this with what I thought was a simple question, but since it's here, I want you to know you can call me 'friend' without wondering if I know what the word means. People have to earn my friendship, and after they do, I go to the wall for them. Do you understand?"

Ashley took one of Campbell's hands in both of hers. She nodded.

Campbell sat there, and held the girl's desperate hands. Loneliness, Campbell thought. The poor kid's just alone. She seems like she might be okay. It's pretty sad when the only people you feel you can talk to are two guys who you don't know from Adam. What is wrong with this world?

Ray was at their booth then, placing a paper bag in front of Ashley. He put a hand on her shoulder. "You going to be all right?"

He asked her.

"I think so," she wiped at her eyes.

"She will be," Campbell told Ray.

Ashley squeezed his hand in thanks.

The three of them walked down the sidewalk. Some store windows sported faded signs proclaiming such messages to the outside world as LOST OUR LEASE ALL MUST GO, and GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE, and the ubiquitous FOR RENT with a phone number. In front of these storefronts were cracks in the sidewalk which sported small patches of adolescent foliage.

Ashley, after her cathartic speech in the restaurant, had rebounded from her dismal mood with a speed that Jack recalled as being a trademark of youth. Youth? he thought suddenly, I'm referring to her as 'youth' and I'm only, what, six years older than her?

They had decided to walk her home. It was going to be another thirty minutes before Karen returned to the restaurant, and Jack agreed with Campbell's idea that Ashley, though she seemed to be in a better mood now, did not need to be alone again so soon after such an outpouring of herself.

She and Campbell were discussing books they had read which never seemed to translate into movies very well. Jack, for the most part, walked beside the two and had thrown in comments wherever necessary. He, of course, disliked reading, and had not seen a movie in the theater in at least a year. They were discussing the pros and cons of both Misery and The Silence of the Lambs. The former Jack had seen, and so felt qualified enough to join into this segment of their conversation.

"I thought Kathy Bates did an excellent job," he tossed out.

"Oh, yes," Ashley commented, giving an involuntary shiver, "an excellent job of scaring me, anyway."

"Your parents let you watch movies like that?" Jack asked her, half-kidding.

Ashley was walking along with her hands in the pockets of her jeans, shuffling her black flats along the cracked sidewalk. "I didn't see it at the movies," she said. "My parents sometimes get movies to watch on the VCR, and they let me watch whatever they're watching. My father really doesn't care what I watch. Except sometimes, when he's watching some of the tapes he keeps in his closet."

"What are on those?"

Ashley frowned, and Jack instinctively knew he had touched upon a subject which would do without further pressure. "I don't know," she said, and it was obvious to Jack she was lying.

Jack did not feel it prudent to push any more than that. He instead turned, and began to ask Campbell where he had seen Misery, the theater or on a VCR. This seemed to matter to movie buffs such as Campbell and Ashley, so he figured it a nice, erudite-sounding question to ask. He had gotten half the question out of his mouth before he realized that he and Ashley were walking alone on the street. He looked around them.

"Where's Campbell?"

While passing one of the few windows on this side of the street which still boasted a business behind it, Campbell had felt something. It was almost as if someone were tapping on his right shoulder. He turned, looked through the window, and felt his feet stop doing whatever it was they were doing.

He immediately opened the door of the restaurant he had stopped in front of, and walked in.

Danielle Peterson was sitting at the table in front of the window, rummaging in her purse. It was what she was doing when he walked by, so she had not seen him. She still did not notice him there, so intent she was on her searching.

Campbell leaned on the chair opposite her and smiled. "Can I take your order?" he said. It was the first thing that popped into his mind.

She looked up, and for one comedic moment he thought she was actually going to say something like, "Just water to drink, please," or "What are your specials for today?" Instead, she blinked twice in surprise. "Oh," she managed, "oh, hello."

"Is anyone sitting here?" he asked, indicating the chair upon which he was leaning.

"Doesn't look like it," she remarked with an audible sigh.

He shrugged, and then sat down. "So how's the paper business?"

"Grueling, unforgiving, brutal..." she listed off, and counted them on her fingers as she did so.

"Nice adjectives," he mused.

"Thank you," she commented, "I picked them for you myself."

There was a pause. Campbell proceeded to fill it.

"So, how is everything else?"

"Everything else is all right, I guess," she replied, and from her tone, Campbell thought she had been considering this subject a lot lately. "A lot of people have just been getting on my nerves lately, you know?"

He pointed to himself in a quizzical gesture.

"Present company excluded," she smiled and added for his benefit.

He thought of the campaign office. He thought of smiling Mrs. Denshaw. He thought of smirking Ronald. "I know what you mean about the working of the last nerve. Is it your job?"

"That, too," followed by one of those sighs again.

Campbell suddenly knew. He considered prying for a moment, and then told himself that he was asking, not prying. Semantics was a wonderful thing. "Meeting someone for lunch?"

She brought her watch up above the level of the table and glanced at it. "Twenty minutes ago, yes."

"I'm sorry," he offered weakly.

She gave an appreciative look. "Thanks, but there's nothing to be done about it, I guess."

Boyfriend, he thought, and then winced for a reason he could not completely fathom.

Campbell was about to offer to lunch with her, his stomach suddenly feeling very empty despite the healthy cuisine he had consumed not a half-hour previous, but looked out the window and saw Jack and Ashley standing there, peering in.

Danielle looked over and saw them as well. "Friends of yours?"

"Actually, yes," Campbell rose from the table, one finger held up. "One moment, please."

He walked outside the restaurant. "Hi," he said.

Jack gave him a look that tried to be disapproving, but fell somewhat short. "We thought you'd fallen in a hole or something."

"Sorry," Campbell responded.

Jack looked in the window, at Danielle, who was checking her watch. "Although I can see why you ran off," he remarked. He turned back to Campbell. "Should we go?"

Campbell was not sure at once what to say, but then realized the right thing to do. "No, I "

At that moment, Danielle came out of the restaurant. "Campbell, I really need to get back to the paper. I've got a deadline tomorrow I'm working on." She smiled and waited for a moment before saying, "Just going to stand there and not introduce me, huh?"

Campbell wore a horrified expression for the better part of a second, after which introductions were given all around.

"Well, I've gotta go," she said and turned back to Jack and Ashley. "Nice meeting you." Back to Campbell. "I'll call you."

She was three paces off before Campbell caught up with her.

"Listen," he was saying, "I realize you're extremely busy, so I would like to ask you a question now and save you the trouble of calling me."

She arched an eyebrow. Something in Campbell's chest skipped a beat. "All right, Mr. Davis. Ask."

"Dinner."

"That's a word and not a question," she scolded, "not very impressive for a student of literature at NYU."

His jaw almost dropped. "How did you ?"

"I'm a reporter," she explained simply, "and in small towns like this, there's always someone willing to tell you things."

"Who ?"

"Tell you my source? Sorry, but that's confidential."

"All right," Campbell said, "all right, I'll put it in the form of a question. Who are you, Alex Trebek?"

Danielle stood there, unmoved.

"All right. Would you like to go to dinner with me?"

"Yes," she said.

Good answer, he thought. "When?"

She thought it over and then said, "Tuesday night. Is that all right?"

"Perfect," he said immediately. He had no idea whether he had anything planned for Tuesday night or not, but it still sounded perfect.

She began to walk off again, and this time Campbell let her do it alone. "I'll call you," she called back to him, "this time I promise."

"If you promise," he replied, uncertain if she could hear it. She did not turn around. A moment later, she disappeared around a corner.

Jack walked up to Campbell. Ashley soon followed. "So, how's it going?" Jack asked.

"I have no idea," Campbell responded, and it almost came out in a sigh. But what he said was true. It was also true, however, that though he was not sure, he at least had a hunch. He told himself in his mind, You know quite well what you are doing, and I won't stand for it. You are not going to get involved with anyone. Not in this town. You have an agenda, and the agenda calls for you to get your ass back up to New York just as soon as you can and finish your damn education. The agenda does not, however, say anything about getting involved with beautiful women in towns that are ten steps away from vanishing off of McNally's Atlas.

He brushed all of this aside for the moment.

Ashley piped in, "She sure is pretty."

Campbell sighed in resignation. "That she is."

Chapter Twelve

"So, do you ever go to church?" Karen asked.

They were sitting in the deserted apartment above the diner.

Jack had his back to one wall in the far bedroom, and Karen was lying with her head in his lap. Before him played out the rest of the apartment, which was not much. She had given him the dime tour. The place consisted of this bedroom, another smaller one, a bathroom, and a living room area with stairs leading down into the diner. All the rooms were empty. He had one hand playing with her hair and loving it.

He thought about her question for a moment, and then answered, "No, I don't. You?"

"Sometimes." Her eyes went back and forth from the ceiling to his face as she spoke. "I go with my dad to the Baptist church downtown. I'm not real crazy about it, so I don't go very often. Too much spectacle and not enough substance, I guess. I remember growing up in that church, and when I was younger I loved it, but now...now that I'm an old maid, I just don't get that much out of it anymore. Do you know what I mean?"

"Actually, no," Jack remarked. "I've never really been to church. I mean, I visited other peoples' churches sometimes, but I never really had one of my own. My dad was never really into that kind of stuff."

"So what do you do on Sunday mornings?" she asked, and then proceeded to answer her own question.

"Usually, I sleep. I figure it's easier to serve God if you're well rested, that's my argument."

Jack paused a long time before answering. "I go and visit my father." He was not sure how she might take this, so he braced himself for her response.

Karen did not seem taken aback. Instead, she sat up and looked at him very seriously, studying his face carefully before asking, "Would you mind if I came along one Sunday?"

Jack was surprised. Out of all the possible reactions he had foreseen, acceptance was one, yes, but accompaniment had been way out in left field. He was not sure exactly how he felt about her coming along, but he could find no problem with it, either. "Sure, you can come next Sunday," he said.

She appeared pleased with this, and settled back down in his lap again, smiling.

The smile brought him back from the direction his thoughts had begun to take him, which was to his father, and the trip to the cemetery he had made that morning. He was glad of the retrieval.

"So you and your father lived here?"

"Yeah," she said, "Scott went out to school in California not long after Mom died, and we had to get out of our old house. It had too many memories for Dad." She thought for a moment, then added, "It might have been that way for me, too. So Dad decided the best way to get back on his feet was to do something he had always wanted to do — own a diner. So he got the building, redid the whole downstairs, and setup the upstairs as a place for us. We did most of the work ourselves." She looked out toward the rest of the apartment and then back to him. "It's small up here, but it's comfortable. Take it from one who knows."

"It does look nice," Jack remarked. He frowned slightly. He began to think of the confrontation between him and Debra over Campbell.

With this thought, he absently forgot to continue stroking Karen's hair. After about three seconds, she looked up and noticed his face. "What are you thinking?" she asked, her own brow creasing.

"Just thinking about my stepmother," he replied.

"What about her?"

"I've been thinking off and on recently about getting out."

"Moving out of the house, you mean." Her immeasurably brown eyes looked up at him, haunting him from his lap.

Jack nodded.

They sat there for a few minutes in complacent silence, Karen with her eyes closed. Jack's hand was in her hair, slowly massaging her scalp. Jack leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His thoughts wandered to sleep, and he wondered what Karen would feel like, lying next to her in a bed somewhere, the two of them curled up together.

"Where would you go?" she asked him without warning.

Jack admitted after a second or two that he had not thought about it that far yet.

She nodded sagely. Then, she switched subjects with a complete lack of grace which was a staple of her conversational talent.

Jack liked it. He felt it kept the listener on his or her toes. "So what do you do during the week?"

He brought his head up from the wall where he had been leaning it and looked down. Her eyes were still closed, he noticed.

"Write music," he said, "or try to write music. I've hit a brief dry spell recently. It's been coming out very slowly."

"That's all?" she asked, one eye opening.

"That's not enough?" he inquired.

"No, no, no, that's not what I meant," she gave him a light elbow to the ribs. "I mean, you don't have a job or anything?"

"No "

"Have you ever thought about having a job?"

Jack looked down at her. "No," he said and caught on slightly, "why do you ask?"

"You could come work at the diner," Karen invited, grinning.

Then, as if an explanation were warranted, "Campbell said you could cook."

"Debra "

"Who gives a crap about Debra," she interrupted harshly. Then she smiled again, continuing, "Why don't you? We'll be " the word came to her, and her entire face lit up. " co-workers!" She sat up again, obviously picturing the whole vista in her head, and began gesticulating, acting out her vision. "That would be great! You cooking over the hot stove all day, sweaty, grease spattered all over you..."

"Sounds great," Jack remarked from his seat in the audience, watching Karen bring her fantasy into reality before him.

"You'd be wearing an apron," she scolded, "anyway...you're doing that while I'm working hard, dishing out all the stuff that you use your culinary talents to create for hungry customers who have come from far and wide to taste of your cooking prowess!"

Her eyes were bright with wonder now, but Jack still had to comment, "I can slap down a mean burger. Wonderful. I suppose Liszt had to have a day job, though."

She crouched before him. "Quit your groaning," she scolded.

"We've got a great benefits package."

"Oh, really?" he asked. The light from the window fell across her face and made her look simply angelic.

"Yes," she answered, and then confidentially, "you'll get to help me close up the diner."

"Oh, really?" he asked again, and then kissed her lightly.

"Yes, really," she said, not missing a beat, "and then when Daddy retires, we'll take over the business and "

"Whoa!" Jack stood up suddenly, and then with mock nervousness, "Not planning ahead or anything are we?"

She looked at him sternly, and sat up and away from him, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "You're not playing along," she told him, pouting almost like a child whose parent has said that no, they'd love to play tea party right now, but the game is on. "And if you're not playing along, it's no fun."

"All right," he apologized, "I'm playing." I'm playing, he continued in his head, because this feels good, this feels right. Playing/planning this future here with you, it all seems to feel right. This feels like what I'm supposed to be doing, this feels like this is where I'm supposed to be, here with you. I have no idea what comes tomorrow, but today I hope it's this tomorrow we have here. He thought for a minute about where to take their game.

"Okay," he began, trying to get into her fantasy, "now that we have the business, what do we do with the apartment up here?"

"You'll have already moved in a while back," she answered. "So when I move in with you, it won't be that big a deal."

"So we'll be married?" Jack asked, although it sounded more like a statement.

"Perhaps," she smiled. "Who knows? After all, it is all only a game." And she kissed him again.

"All of it?" He cocked one eyebrow.

"Maybe," she countered, walking to the opposite side of the room.

He leaned against the wall, thinking about what contribution he could make to the lives they were planning out in this deserted apartment which they might or might not share one day. Then, it all came to him clearly, and he was there in their apartment, there in that future she had conjured. "How many children?" he asked her.

She turned around, surprised. "What?" she asked, although he knew she had heard.

"How many children?" he repeated, smiling. He was standing with his arms folded over his chest.

"You tell me," she smiled.

He thought for a moment. Serious thinking. "One."

"Just one?"

"Hey, it was my decision," he defended.

Karen shrugged her concession.

"Boy or girl?" he asked her.

She sat down on the floor on the opposite end of the room, cross-legged, thinking. After a moment or two, she replied, "A girl.

A girl with the most wonderful naturally curly blonde hair. My mom had blonde hair, so it's possible."

He walked over and sat down next to her. He ran a hand through her straight hair. "Where did the curls come from?"

"Genetic mutation," she stated without hesitation. Before his eyes, Karen linked her arms together in front of her, and cradled their imaginary someday coming child. "What's her name?"

Jack looked down into his daughter's eyes, which looked back at him from somewhere far away. "She's got my eyes."

He could feel her watching him, him watching the baby that she held. Jack felt good to finally have something to stall about for her benefit, to have something to make her wonder for a change.

This was good, yes, this game was good, but it also made him nervous by the sheer pleasure it gave him by playing it. He found he did not mind at all.

"Well ?" she asked.

"She's got your nose." He looked up at her for a moment with a huge smile on his face.

"I don't want her going to the hospital nursery with 'Girl Hardin' on her little bracelet."

"All right," he conceded. He considered the possibility of names. Whatever he named this child, she would have to live with it for the rest of her life. After much internal deliberation, "Laura."

"Laura..." she repeated, thinking. "Laura Hardin, it's not bad."

"Laura Davis Hardin," he corrected.

"Oh, I see. And where did Campbell come into this?"

"Actually, it's an old family name. From the Old Country."

"Explain," she persisted.

"Well, if it hadn't been for him trying to find your brother, we never would have met again."

"I disagree."

"How so?" he asked.

"Well," she began, "I think if people are meant to be together, as I hope we are, there's nothing in the world that will prevent them from being together in the end. I mean, it may take a long time...several lifetimes even, if you believe in that kind of thing, which I'm not sure if I do or not. But nothing, not even our own stupidity, or own stupid bodies which just quit on us...I don't think anything can stand between two people if they both want to be together."

"And if they don't?"

"Well," Karen mused, "if they don't, they just have to get over it, because they're stuck that way." She looked down at Laura Davis Hardin. "Hold her," she commanded gently, handing over the child.

Jack took her reluctantly. "She always cries when I hold her," he said, seriously disturbed. And suddenly, this was all true. He loved to hold his daughter, he knew that, but he seemed to lack that certain something the little girl's mother seemed to have. No matter what he did, she always cried in his arms, just as she was doing now. "See?" he indicated to Karen, holding Laura out to her as if to return the child.

"Well, of course, silly," Karen told him, making no sign of accepting her daughter back, "you're holding her away from you.

Bring her in closer to your chest, so she can hear your heartbeat."

He did so, rocking her softly, and then, miraculously, her cries softened and died out.

"See, she knows her daddy," Karen observed, straightening out the blanket that wrapped up their daughter, "Going to be a regular daddy's girl."

"Look at her hair," Jack marveled. "It's going to be light blonde just like you said."

The two watched as their child slowly drifted off to sleep.

"When " Karen began, and Jack made a slow shushing sound.

He was almost afraid she would tell him that playtime was now over, and that would mean this apparition he held would go away. He could still see her, if not more than in his mind's eye, the blanket rising and falling, rising and falling, the small lungs doing their work with Laura Davis Hardin's almost imperceptible breathing.

"Don't wake her," he said softly.

Karen started again, following Jack's example of volume.

"When are you going to move up here, then? I can see what I can work out with my father."

She leaned over and kissed him, running one arm around his neck. He responded by wrapping his arms around her and drawing her to him, and by doing so, returned their child to whatever future she had come from.

When Campbell arrived home, he was tired, and at that moment he could think of nothing he wanted to do more than go directly to bed. He should have known better.

"So what do you think?" Jack was asking him now.

Campbell's head had been hurting him. It still did not relent despite the fact he was on friendly soil now instead of inside the madhouse of the campaign office. Maybe it was from the fact he was blamed for the printer breaking down. Was it his fault they had invested in a no-name brand which he had found in a box with the price tag still on it, proclaiming it to be from the drug store downtown? Maybe it was the fact that the people he was working for were asking him to do things with the software it was simply not written to do. Considering it was a shareware database that cost them more than likely nothing, he was not surprised at its limitations. The fact that Ronald was there to pass judgment on everything he did and talk about what a terrible job he was doing was not helping matters.

It was only a matter of time before he punched the little twerp.

Maybe that would be his celebration for his last day on the job.

He was pretty sure, however, the main reason his head ached dully was that his mother had not had a single press function, nor breakfast nor lunch, nor a television spot, nor anything else that might perhaps take her out of the office for an extended period of time. As a result, she was there the entire day, constantly piling more and more material in his in-basket. Never speaking, merely smiling.

He bowed his head for a moment, rubbing at his temples.

When he looked up, Jack was still watching him intently, asking for approval with his eyes. "Let me get this straight," Campbell straightened himself up. "You want to move out of the house."

"Right."

"Okay," Campbell continued, trying to sneak logic past the barbed wire that was encircling his brain, making it cry out for Advil, "let's take this one thing at a time. You would live where?"

"In the apartment above the diner."

"Okay," Campbell responded, "what does Karen think about it?"

"She loves it," Jack said with jubilant anxiety. "In fact, I guess you could say it was almost her idea."

"Great," Campbell frowned momentarily before asking, "so what does Karen's father think about it?"

Jack looked almost sheepish. He began to stutter about for an answer. "Well, she "

Campbell reached across and gripped Jack's shoulder. "Listen," he said, "I'm not your father. I'm your friend. You don't have to act like I'm going to disapprove and say, 'No, Jack, what in the hell were you thinking?' You asked for my opinion. Moving out of the house is serious business. I'm just making sure you've got your shit together, okay?"

Jack nodded. He hadn't realized that he was trying to convince Campbell what a great idea this was, but looking back, he saw that perhaps this was true. He felt better, knowing this act was unnecessary. "I don't know, but Karen said she would check with him."

"Okay," Campbell mused, "that's fine. What about money? Do you have enough to get out of the house and support yourself right now?"

"Yes," Jack replied, "and in a few weeks when I turn twenty-one, I...get the first part of the trust that my father left me." He dipped his head. "I'll be fine."

"All right," Campbell said.

"And I'm thinking about taking a cook's position over at the diner." Jack lifted his head again. It was the thought of being close to Karen that seemed to drive off the evil spirits which hung around him, called up by the mention of his deceased father. Just one thought of her smile, and they were cast out.

Campbell leaned forward, one eyebrow raised. "Have you ever really had a job before, Jack?"

Jack thought about it. He considered for a moment, and decided very quickly that his lemonade stand in the fourth grade and the paper route in middle school did not qualify. "No," he finally said, "not really."

Campbell looked Jack up and down. You're almost twenty-one, he thought about his friend, and you've never really worked a day in your life. You may be blessed in some respects, my friend, but in others you are handicapped more than you know. This will be good for you. A bit of a shock, perhaps, but it will be good for you. "All right," Campbell found himself saying, "well, if that's your decision, I guess I can go and sleep out "

"Oh, no." It was Jack's turn to grab Campbell by the shoulder.

"You're not going anywhere."

"I can't stay here," Campbell protested.

"No, you're coming with me," Jack told him. "It's a two bedroom apartment. I wouldn't have seriously considered it if I thought it wouldn't fit us both."

"Jack," Campbell tried to explain, "I'm here to make money because I'm totally broke. Every penny that I earn that is not geared toward putting food in my body goes to my college fund. That doesn't leave any room for rent. It's not long before the summer's over, and then after that, not long until the election, and then, I'm out of here. The car's not that bad, trust me, I've done it before on many occasions."

Jack was shaking his head.

"Jack, you don't understand "

"No," Jack corrected, almost angry, "you don't understand. You are the only friend I have in this town "

Campbell cleared his throat.

"Well, Karen, yes, she's a very good friend," Jack revised his earlier statement. "But she's more than a friend, it looks like " he shook his head again, this time in frustration at his own inability to master control over the English language. "Regardless, you're my best friend, and I'm not going to let you sleep in your damn car."

"That's ridiculous. I'm taking you with me, unless you don't want to go..."

"Jack," Campbell reminded him gently, "I just told you I can't help with the rent, and you're telling me to come anyway?"

"Yes," Jack told him.

It was Campbell's turn to shake his head. "No I that won't work." He stood up and began to pace. His discomfort was growing rapidly.

"Why not?"

"Jack," Campbell sat back down and wondered absently if he was turning red, "being your friend means that I don't want to turn into a charity case. For example, I don't want two months down the line for you to be saying, 'Jesus, if I didn't have that damn Campbell hanging around, leeching off of me for room and board, think of all the stuff I could do with my money.'"

"You're not a charity case, dammit," Jack felt himself getting agitated. "Do you understand what I'm trying to say here? You're the writer, you're good with words, I'm not so give me a break.

What I'm trying to say is...you're...like a brother to me, Campbell.

And I wouldn't have let my brother sleep in his damn car."

Am I saying this? came the voice in Jack's head. This is the man who made his entrance into my life by nearly running me over, and now I'm giving him a free place to stay and calling him my brother? What is wrong with me?

Nothing, came the reply.

"Jack " Campbell began.

"No buts," Jack cut him off, "you pay for what you can, even if it's nothing, and I'll handle the rest. I'm good for it. All right?" And then, before Jack was aware he was going to do so, he added "I'm not taking no for an answer."

Campbell opened his mouth and when nothing came out but silence, he shut it again. What else was there to say? Here was a young man willing to house him, but when you came right down to it, he had no idea who Campbell Davis was. Sure, they had spoken for hours and hours about each others' lives, but did Jack have any idea who he truly was? Do any of us have any idea who each other is? he asked himself, and almost instantly received the answer, I don't know. I wonder if anybody ever understands anyone else. Nevertheless, here he is, Campbell. A guy who has called you brother. He has to have heard the gossip around town about how you're using him to keep a roof over your head. He has to have. Still, he risks my companionship. It's almost enough to make you believe again, even after what happened in New York.

"If you want me around that badly," Campbell said weakly.

"Are you with me?" Jack asked him.

They clasped hands. "Whither thou goest," Campbell told him.

Chapter Thirteen

Campbell shuffled into work the next morning bleary-eyed and vulnerable to whatever the day held in store for him. As it turned out, however, the day made no offensive maneuvers towards him upon his arrival, and continued to hold an uneasy truce with him throughout its reign. His mother was off doing whatever it was that a campaign manager did, and even Jayson Blair was off doing whatever it was that mayoral candidates did. The office itself was quite deserted. Campbell spent the majority of his day peering out from under discontented eyelids at a computer which was printing out letters to what seemed to be every Tom, Dick, Harry, and Sue in the town.

Unexcitedly, he read over the contents that bore Blair's signature, but no doubt were of his mother's devising, and yawned.

Thank you for your support...be there on election day...we will take back the city... and so forth. Campbell looked around him, debating on whether or not to go pull a novel out of his trunk to read. Richard Wright would be good, or Donald Barthelme perhaps even more apropos. He decided against it, knowing that it would get back to his mother that he was reading on the job. Why take chances?

Not that I'm doing anything else of much worth right now, he thought grumpily, except watching these damn letters print.

He had not gotten to sleep the night before until late. His original plan had been to crash immediately after he and Jack were through talking. That idea was derailed mere moments after they had shaken hands, and Campbell was to blame for its detour.

"Well," Jack breathed an involuntary sigh of relief, "I feel better. Sorry to keep you up, Campbell. You better head to bed."

Campbell did not move or even acknowledge what Jack had said.

"Campbell?" Jack asked.

"Jack, I need some help," Campbell spoke softly.

There was a pause.

"It's her, isn't it?" Jack inquired, although it was more statement than question.

Campbell simply nodded.

Jack sat down on Campbell's makeshift bed, and folded his hands in his lap. "I was wondering when this would come up," Jack remarked off-handedly.

Campbell was looking out the window, into the darkness beyond.

There was one streetlight in the view he was offered, and it stuttered its orange incomprehensible message out into the void. It would be nice to find an answer from some outside source, he thought to himself, but that never seems to work. He returned his attention to Jack.

"So, talk," Jack invited.

"May I pace?" Campbell asked, standing up.

Jack gave him a be-my-guest gesture, and Campbell began to move back and forth across the carpet as he spoke.

"Okay, let me tell you a story. This is a story that comes in two parts. The second part needs to be told first. All right?"

Jack nodded his consent.

"Once upon a time, there was this guy," Campbell began, "and this guy came back to the not-quite-so-magic kingdom in which he was born, seeking a fortune. You've been to college, right?"

"The community college," Jack responded.

Campbell nodded. "So you have some idea. Take that and multiply the cost severalfold, and you'll have some idea what I mean when I say 'fortune.'" Campbell resumed his tale. "So, anyway, he came back seeking a fortune, and that's all. His quest was to obtain the necessary funds to go back to school and finish what little he lacked of his university education. He had nothing else in his plan, you understand," Campbell favored Jack with a glance.

Jack nodded his understanding.

"So, in the course of our hero's adventures in this no-quite-somagic kingdom, he happens to run into something unexpected."

"The fairy princess," Jack prompted, smiling.

"Yes," Campbell cried, "exactly! The fairy princess. Keeper of all beauty, fairest of the fair. You've read C. S. Lewis and Tolkien, I hope, so you can add all the rest in. Anyway, our hero is struck by her...enchanted beauty." Campbell wheeled around and held up a finger. "The conflict, as all stories must unfortunately have one, is that he's not sure he wants to be. Enchanted, that is. After all, he wanted fortune and not a princess."

"A fairy princess sounds like a pretty good fortune to me," Jack piped up.

Campbell involuntarily responded with a thought that made him wince, Sure it does, when your father was a wealthy doctor and you don't have any money problems to worry about. But that was unfair, and he gave himself a good mental slap to quiet such thoughts.

"True," Campbell said aloud, "but now you have to hear the first part of the story."

Campbell laced his hands behind his back, and bowed his head. Here comes the fun part, he thought. "Once upon a time, there was a kingdom far away from this one, called New York. And this kingdom was a tad more magical than this not-quite-so-magical one that you and I are in right now. And in this kingdom, our hero found himself a princess, the most wonderful person in the world, so he thought. He would have done anything in the world to be her prince, and the princess assured our hero that he would be. They started their own little castle together, just the two of them, and everything was pointing toward happily ever after."

Campbell sighed audibly and rubbed at one temple with his hand. "Except it wasn't happily ever after. It wasn't even close. The princess said that she had a problem, and that she needed part of our hero's fortune to help. Our hero, blinded by his enchanted love for this enchanted princess, consented, and handed over the fortune.

"The enchanted princess then hauled her enchanted ass out of town with our hero's fortune, never to be seen

again."

Campbell grimaced at the memory. It had happened like a professional hit. No, it actually had been a professional hit, come to think of it. During Campbell's hazy period of semi-existence in the Big Apple, he had found a friend who had been able to supply him with all of the essential vitamins and minerals that he needed to inject to get him feeling just fine. The friend's name was Marty.

And when Marty and his entire entourage had been busted just five minutes after Campbell's departure from their clandestine place of business, Marty had called Campbell a rat and sworn revenge. Campbell never heard anything from Marty or any of his "associates," despite Marty's promise. Campbell had gotten his act together after that near brush with several years consisting of being a number behind concrete walls, and found his princess.

He remembered coming home, he remembered finding the note, he remembered his legs failing him and sitting him down against his will in the middle of that crumbling castle. He remembered reading the note, looking around at the empty spaces where Miranda's personal belongings had used to sit and would never sit again, and then read the note one more time.

Marty sends his best and says that the score's settled. Nothing personal, hon you were great. It was strictly business. Have a great life.

M

There was no need for these details to be told to Jack, so they never left Campbell's lips.

"Jesus, Campbell." For a moment, Jack wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't sure there was anything he could say. He debated whether or not to ask. It did not matter, Campbell knew he would.

"How much, Campbell?" he asked in a low voice.

Campbell told him.

"Jesus," Jack said again.

Again, the memories refused to lie down. Campbell shut his eyes, helpless to stop them.

He had no hope of getting back the money, for he knew how the police would handle it.

You were an associate of Marty Kowalski? Mr. Davis, we've got some questions...

The day after, he began checking and conveniently, no one seemed to know a Miranda Stephenson. The lease had been entirely in his name, there had been nothing for her to sign, no reason for any to debate her story, nothing at all. Identities were cheap to acquire and easy to shed like a second skin. He had been so stupid, so foolish. That was what had been the worst part of it all not the fact that he had to leave town because he had no more money to live on, not the fact that his place at the university was in jeopardy, not even the fact that Campbell never squealed on Marty's operation but still had gotten punished as if he had. What hurt the most was that he had been fooled. His pride had turned red and swollen, with Miranda's stinger still left infecting the wound. Nothing personal.

He knew he should count his blessings. The cops must have known he had been one of Marty's customers. Why they hadn't arrested him, too, he would never know. Not only that, but Marty could have had him killed. Apparently, Marty shared Campbell's view of such things: Physical scars heal, emotional ones linger, and

death is a release.

He had called all of his friends, and none of them had any jobs that could help him. He had to borrow from some of them just to pay off the rest of his rent, and closed out his odd jobs just to get enough gas money to make it back to the no-quite-so-magic kingdom.

"Anyway," Campbell concluded, when he was finally able to wrest control of his mind from memories which refused to lie still, "you understand my predicament." Campbell sat down again, a sudden weariness passing through him.

Jack stayed where he was for a few moments in thoughtful silence and then indicated the floor. "May I?"

"Be my guest," Campbell answered. He rested his head in his hands.

Jack stood up and began to pace, speaking as he did so. "Your basic problem is (A) you don't want to have any problem with leaving when it's time to go and (B) you recently had a very traumatic experience with women. Close enough?"

Campbell lay back on the bed and nodded.

"Well," Jack continued, "offhand, I'd say that (B) not all women are scheming and evil and out to get us. That's easy for me to say, I know, but it's still true."

Jack stopped in front of Campbell as another thought struck him. "As for (A), do you know yet if she even returns your feelings for her at all? I mean, it's real easy to misinterpret the way someone is acting."

Recognition filled Campbell's face.

"It could be you're worrying for nothing," Jack concluded.

Campbell sat up. "That's true. I could be just making the whole thing up in my head."

"You could be."

"She just wants to be friends."

"It's possible."

"Then I'm worrying for nothing."

"There's no point in worrying when you can't do anything about it now."

"I'll just wait and see what happens."

"Good plan."

Campbell smiled at Jack. "And you know, now that I think about it, she probably just wants to be friends. That makes sense.

I'm worrying about nothing."

"Like I said, it's possible that's all it is." Jack shrugged. "Better to sleep now and be ready for what happens."

"You're right," Campbell stood up and clapped Jack on the shoulder. "You're right," he repeated. "What am I worried about?"

We'll go eat dinner tomorrow..."

Jack glanced at his watch. "Today, actually..."

Campbell paid no mind. "...and everything will be great. No worries."

And so, both of their minds relieved, they had gotten ready for bed.

Despite this, Campbell was still awake for an indeterminate amount of time after Jack's breathing had become slow and steady, his thoughts pacing the floor where his body could not.

The addresses flashed across the screen as the computer inserted them in the appropriate places in the letter and then pushed them out to the printer. Campbell's eyelids fluttered, and he decided to get another punch in his coffee achiever charter membership card.

It's always possible you're having some kind of rebound effect, he mused. You and Miranda were in very tight, it's possible this is just some kind of aftereffect. Nothing more.

Like we said last night, it's more than likely nothing at all, another voice in his head chimed in.

We're going to go out tonight and you are not going to do anything stupid, a very authoritarian voice intoned.

Five minutes later, he was checking the wall clock again, and fighting off an insane urge to call and make sure the date

Dinner, the authoritarian voice corrected.

Campbell made no response. He sipped his coffee and watched the clock.

Chapter Fourteen

Danielle opened the door of her apartment and Campbell felt his heart leap up, something which he cursed himself for at the same time that he found it completely forgivable.

"Good evening," he bowed slightly.

"Well, good evening." She looked him up and down. "I'm glad I dressed for the occasion."

Campbell had decided, with Jack's approving eyes looking on, to go with a less casual shade of attire than normal. He was wearing black pants, with a chambray shirt and black tie. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The only touch that told you immediately it was definitely Campbell Davis you were looking at were the black Converse, which Jack had decided Campbell would not part with for anything in the world. The outfit was so incongruous that it worked and worked well.

Danielle was wearing a pair of jeans, with a silk blouse. Her hair was tied back as well.

"Should I go back in and dress up a little bit more?" she asked.

Campbell smiled. "If my opinion is of any merit, I think you look wonderful."

"Well," she smiled back, "since I am spending the evening with you, I think your vote has highest priority."

"Why, thank you." He motioned towards the stairs. "Your chariot awaits."

Campbell patted the dashboard affectionately. "Big Blue has been a constant companion of mine for some time now."

"Big Blue?" Danielle asked, eyebrows raised.

"I know," Campbell said, "you're thinking of this really strange movie where this guy "

" gives up Rosanna Arquette for a bunch of dolphins,"

Danielle finished for him. "I've seen that film, yes. I never did understand why a guy would want to do that. Beautiful movie, odd ending."

Campbell looked at her, stunned.

"What?" Danielle asked. "What is it? That was the movie, right?"

"Yes," Campbell said. "It was. But the only reason I named the car that was because it's just big and blue." He looked over at her for a moment. "You're the only person I've ever met who remembers that movie," he considered aloud. "I always have to explain the joke to everyone else."

Danielle shrugged. "I didn't quite get the ending. I guess I just missed something."

There was a moment of silence. Campbell was glad for it, for he felt he needed to recover from his surprise.

"Do you always name your cars?" she asked.

"Since this is the only one I've ever had," Campbell replied, "I can't say for certain. But I don't see why a car shouldn't have a name. It adds character. It's a moral imperative."

She nodded her understanding. After a moment of no one speaking other than the tires on the pavement, she asked, "So where are we headed to, o Captain of the Big Blue?"

He turned to face her long enough to say crisply, "It's a surprise," and then he was watching the road again.

"I see," she mused. "Is that a moral imperative as well?"

They pulled up to a red light, and Campbell remarked expressionlessly, "Close enough."

Danielle crossed her arms and looked content with the answer.

She peered through the windshield that Campbell had made a point to clean thoroughly both inside and out that afternoon, almost as if she were trying to catch a glimpse of where Campbell was taking them. The passenger's side sun visor was down, and in the mirror on the back, Campbell watched the reflection of her eyes.

"So, what have you been writing recently?" Campbell asked.

Campbell had taken no chances on where the best place to dine would be. He had been gone for some time and was quite unfamiliar with the restaurants in town. He went right to the source and asked his resident expert on the subject, Raymond Wilson.

Earlier that day, Campbell had been sitting at a booth in the diner. Ray was leaning on the back of the seat and projecting an air of one who was considering a very complicated and serious algebraic equation. "So you want to raise your standards a little bit from our establishment here?" he asked finally.

Campbell smiled. "No offense meant, of course."

Ray tried to maintain his serious air. He waved Campbell's comment away. "No, no none taken. It's always good to have a change of pace." He hummed to himself for a moment. "So, you want to have a nice dinner, in a nice atmosphere, in a restaurant that is nice but not so nice that it gets on your nerves?"

Campbell smiled. Ray always knew how to use the language.

"Yes, I think that about sums it up."

"Charlie Weems opened a place last year called The Tavern,"

Ray slapped down one palm on the bar of the diner, to show his decision had been made. "If you feel you have to elevate your taste in food above our little greasy spoon cuisine here, check it out, it's on 17th Street." He gave a quick wink. "Trust me," he said, and was gone, taking someone's order down on the far end of the bar.

Ray had not lied. Charlie Weems had managed to create a scaled down replica of the actual Tavern on the Green from Campbell's beloved magic kingdom of New York. The place was wonderful, and being a Tuesday night, not crowded. The plate which had borne them the fruit of fried mozzarella sticks had long ago been retrieved by their waiter, a smart-looking young man about Campbell's age who had introduced himself as Walter.

Everything about him had talked of the student working his way through school.

Brother, I relate, Campbell found himself thinking.

Their dinners were finished as well. Danielle had ordered a white Russian, and Campbell asked for iced tea.

"Not a drinker?" she asked when Walter had gone to the bar.

"Can't," Campbell shrugged, "had a problem with it, so I had to give it up."

She frowned. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "I can tell him to get me something else, let me " She tried to get Walter's attention.

Campbell reached across the table and laid one hand on top of hers. Her hand was so pleasantly warm. She looked back to him.

"Please," he told her, "it's not a problem. That was a long time ago, and I'm fine with it now. Thank you."

She smiled and sat back down. After another second, he withdrew his hand and was struck with the sudden insane idea that he could use it to heal the sick.

That had been fifteen minutes ago, and now Danielle's drink was reaching for the bottom of the glass, while the ice in Campbell's were naked and huddling together for warmth.

"I haven't had a lot of time for my own personal writing; most of my creativity goes into the paper."

He picked up his glass of water and took a sip. "From what I've read, you're very good."

She smiled. "Well, thank you. It pays the bills." She took a sip from her own drink. "You work for your mother full-time, right?"

"Full-time and then some," he answered, unconsciously surprised to find that the mention of his mother's name did not dampen his spirits or make him defensive. Nothing could seem to affect him this evening. Perhaps it's the company, he thought absently.

"When do you find time to write?"

"You have to make time to write." He settled back in the easy chair that was his favorite subject. Friends from New York he had made after going clean, friends who did not equate the amount of chemical stimuli in your body with how friendly they acted towards you, would have groaned when they heard him begin to wax philosophic about his muse. But here was a fellow practitioner, and no one to be afraid of. "Writing for me, is like well, to be blunt about it, a lover."

He made what he hoped was an inconspicuous glance at his companion's face, hoping he had not pushed the envelope too far.

She was still watching him the same way as before, with no change that he could see. He continued.

"If you don't give a lover attention and caring and, well, love, she," he gestured to Danielle, "or he, will leave you." He drank from his water again, letting the thoughts collect themselves. "Writing for me is a very jealous lover. If I don't listen when she's ready to speak to me, sometimes she doesn't come around for months. I've learned to be a very attentive...writer." He smiled and put down his water. He had come very close to saying

that he was an attentive lover, but that sounded way too forced. It fit the extended metaphor he was using, but the last thing he wanted to do was to...

Scare her away? Scare her away from what?

He looked at her and she was still watching him, saying nothing. "I'm sorry." He felt suddenly quite embarrassed. He felt like running his hand through his hair but did not. "Writing's everything in the world to me, and I kind of just ramble when I get on the subject."

"No," she said kindly. An emotion passed over her face which Campbell could not fathom. "No, it was fine. It's an attitude I probably need to adopt," she added more to herself, it seemed, than to Campbell.

These thoughts behind her eyes which Campbell could not read perplexed him, and he tried to escape them with words. "Well, care for a walk through Central Park?" he asked.

Behind the Tavern restaurant was a small, fenced-in grassy area. A sidewalk wound a convoluted circle around the perimeter, and spaced out around the inside of the pathway were five small streetlamps. For a touch of class, there was one small park bench on the far side.

A sign by the back door read:

Welcome to CENTRAL PARK

(Guaranteed Mugger-Free)

The miniature version of the park was quite nice, Campbell decided. He would need to remember to thank Ray profusely for the recommendation.

"I can't believe I've never been here before," Danielle commented as they walked slowly around the park.

"Ray tells me its one of the town's only good best-kept secrets,"

Campbell responded. He had his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, and his eyes had the almost-annoying habit of trying to find hers.

"So, big traveler," she grinned at him, "how close is it to the real thing?"

Campbell thought for a moment, walking, head down. "Well, for one thing, there's no 'mugger-free' in the real thing. Being there at this time of night is not wise."

"Is it really that bad?" she asked.

"Not all of New York," he answered, "but only certain parts.

Central Park, though, is a wonderful oasis of green in a desert of gray during the day, but it's an ambiguous oasis of black in a desert of lights during the night."

Danielle's mouth dropped open. "That's beautiful, Campbell." She elbowed him playfully in the ribs. "You should become a poet."

"Too late," he shrugged.

They reached the park bench and she sat. She set her empty glass down on the pavement. "So when do I get to read some of your poetry?"

He sat next to her. "You'd like to read some of it?"

"I believe I made that clear when we had lunch." She smiled, then added, "Besides, you read one of mine long before I even met you. That's got to entitle me to something."

"I suppose so."

They had started sitting on opposite ends of the small park bench, and on some distant level, Campbell became aware that they seemed to be edging closer to each other ever so slowly. "I don't mean to be very forward," he began, not entirely certain of what he was going to say next, "but you seem very familiar to me.

Almost like we met before that press conference. I'm fairly certain we couldn't have, but it still feels..."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" she asked softly, turning to face him.

"I believe in a lot of things." Somehow his arm had snuck around her shoulders and seemed quite content to stay there.

"We probably met in a previous life." Her eyes did one maddening hop from his eyes down to his mouth.

"That would explain it," he said, and their faces were leaning towards each other in a way that was almost against their will.

His voice was operating on a different plane from his body now, and one hand moved up to touch her cheek. It was unbelievably smooth. "Like I said," someone with a voice that sounded amazingly like his own was saying, "I believe in a lot of things."

She closed her eyes, he did the same, and Campbell let himself go.

He was close enough to feel her breath on his lips when she half-whispered, half-moaned, "Oh, please don't do this to me."

He wondered if she was talking to him, or to herself. Part of his rationality took over, bidding him to back away and see what the problem was.

There was one fleeting thought, and it was the voice of reason—the voice which had told him that all he wanted out of this town was the money and that was all. It suddenly seemed to wake up and panicked, Campbell, what are you

But it was too late, the deed was done. He barely had time to move back an inch before her lips came out of his darkness and met his, in a union that seemed to sing in his soul.

It was one kiss, just one, but human instruments of time were not adequate to measure its duration. Campbell reached through her, into her, out of his self and into the light that seemed to fill her entire being. He felt as if he were floating through some large corridor, one that was so large he could not see the floor, ceiling, or walls, but yet he knew the space was finite. There were only colors, colors beyond description. They streamed from a point before his eyes, and flowed through him, disappearing down the path he had come. After an eternity of being lost inside of her, he reached the point he was seeking. It was the source of the colors, the feeling, the warmth, all of which he felt energizing every nerve ending in his body. He reached out for it,

though he knew the gesture was futile, impossible, for he was reaching out to touch her immortal soul, a thing that was too large to be fathomed by his frail human brain, and yet too small to be perceived by his limited human eyes. Touch it he did, and when he did, it was if he had tapped into the source of everything. He was sent hurtling backwards down the corridor and their lips parted.

It was one kiss, just one, but human instruments of time were not adequate to measure its duration, and human instruments of speech were not adequate to measure its meaning.

One tear rolled down his left cheek.

She looked at it and wiped it away. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm " and he wanted to laugh, but he feared breaking the joyous solemnity that this moment held for him. "Shall we go?" he asked instead.

"Yes," she agreed, and they went.

* * *

One paid bill, one tip for Walter later, and they were sitting in Campbell's car outside the restaurant. He had both hands resting on the steering wheel. They made no movement to indicate they were going to go anywhere. Neither of them made any movement to show that they minded.

"Well," Campbell said finally.

"Well," she echoed.

He took one hand down from the steering wheel and she met it halfway, taking it, holding it. "Now what?" he asked, looking into her eyes, which seemed to hold more luminescence than the streetlights could ever aspire to.

"That is a good question." She dropped her gaze. "I have to tell you, Campbell I have a boyfriend."

Damn! Damn! Damn!

"I had kind of figured that you did," he said, wondering absently if the disappointment showed on his face. He would have bet good money it stood out like a cardigan sweater in an alternative nightclub.

"You're not sorry that we " She could not seem to form the end of her question.

He looked at her incredulously. "No. No. God, no." Satisfied he had made his case plain, he asked, "You?"

She shook her head, smiling. "You know, we...had said we were going to start seeing other people," she offered casually.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

"Is that so?" he intoned, giving his worst nonchalant impression.

She nodded.

"Well," he took her hand and held it more firmly, "I would like to see you."

"That could probably be arranged," she said.

"That's very good," he replied, raising her hand to his cheek and then kissing it lightly.

For the first time in as long as Campbell could remember, he actually did not want to drive anywhere. He felt like dancing home.

He had walked her up to her apartment door and given her one brief kiss before saying goodnight. His head had been swimming. It still was. What an evening.

He forced himself to get into Big Blue and drive off. He had no idea what she thought of his mental well-being anyway, so doing a jig beneath her window might not help matters.

He knew he had to get back inside. He had no idea what exactly had happened, but he reached into her innermost being and caught a glimpse no not just that but actually reached out and touched her soul, had held it in his hands, if such a thing were possible. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

I've got to get back there, he thought, got to see it again, feel it again, be one with her again. I've got to.

He looked around. He turned on the dome light. He drove home with it on.

With her gone, he could not get the world bright enough.

Jack was shaken awake by determined hands. "What?" he demanded of the darkness finally. "What?"

Campbell came looming into his vision. "Jack," he said and then louder, "Jack."

"What? What is it?"

"We were wrong, Jack. We were wrong."

"Wrong?" Jack asked sleepily. What the hell was he talking about?

And why is he smiling like that? "I'm sorry to hear that," he said, trying to stifle a yawn.

"No, don't be sorry." Campbell's insane grin seemed to shine on his face. "It's good. It's very good."

"Oh, good," Jack breathed, "that's good. I feel better." He sat up.

"I thought you would." Campbell laid down on his bed.

Jack took a hard look at his prostrate friend. "I'll be right back," he said and then went down the hall to the bathroom. He made use of it, then ran cold water into the sink, splashing some on his face. He had no idea what Campbell was talking about, but he was fairly certain he could face it better when fully awake.

He spoke as he came through the door. "So, tell me again, what are you talking about?"

Campbell was lying, fully-clothed, on top of all his blankets. His eyes were shut. His chest rose and fell, rose and fell.

"Campbell?"

No answer but breathing.

"Campbell."

Breathing.

Jack sighed, removed Campbell's shoes, got a blanket from the closet in the hallway, and spread it over him. He then lay back down himself.

"It better be a hell of a story," he remarked to his sleeping friend, and then rolled over and tried to work on getting to sleep himself.

Chapter Fifteen

"All he said was, 'I see,'" Karen finished.

Jack was leaning forward on the brick steps, waiting for what came next. Considering the silence, there didn't seem to be a what coming next. "And then?" he prompted.

"And then nothing. He just said he wanted to talk to us about it talk to you about it and we'll see what can be worked out."

She shrugged. "That's it." She studied his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nervous," he replied simply.

"Nervous?" Karen smiled. "Whatever for?"

Jack looked at her as if she had utterly lost her mind. "You're joking, right?"

She gave no visible response.

"We're about to walk in there and talk to your father about getting me the apartment above the diner," he said. "I've never done this before. I've never considered moving out of the house before."

"This is all new to me; I think I have the right to be a little nervous."

"No need to get defensive," she commented, still smiling. She touched his cheek and kissed it lightly. "My father's a wonderful man and very reasonable. He just wants to work out any details. He likes you." Karen apparently did not find something in his face to convince her his worries were allayed. "Trust me," she finished by putting an arm around him and giving him a gentle shake.

Jack nodded and swallowed heavily. She was probably right, anyway. It wasn't as if they were trying to live together or get married or something. There was an apartment presumably for rent, and he was checking into its availability. That was all, right?

Perhaps it was involuntary guilt he was feeling, when he considered the plan he and Karen had come up with in that deserted apartment. That was so far in the future, though, why be worried? Was it wrong? This was all happening so fast, he could only hope he was making the right decisions as he went along. They all felt right, being here with her felt right, and that seemed to help everything else.

"Shall we?" She considered her watch. "We'll have to head to the diner pretty soon to open."

He took her hand, and in it he found his strength. He stood up, and she followed his example. "All right," he said.

They walked inside.

"Well," Ray leaned back in his recliner, "very shortly, I'm going to be losing one of my people. Frank is going to be going back to school at the end of the summer, so I'll be short a cook. Karen can't boil water, and I'm good for whipping up an odd burger, but I've got too much other business to take care of concerning the diner to keep taking orders and filling orders, and so forth. Having a person doing nothing but the cooking would sure make a lot of things easier."

They were in the Wilson living room, Ray in his favorite chair, Karen and Jack sitting next to each other on the modest couch.

Jack was still nervous, despite all of Karen's reassurance and Ray's friendly manner. Jack was seeking to overcome his fear, and trying desperately to keep from reaching over and grasping Karen's hand to find his strength some other place than within himself.

Relax, a voice was telling him, relax.

"I have it on good authority that you can cook," Ray continued.

Jack gave an inquisitive look.

"Well, if you must know," Ray answered the unspoken question, "your friend Campbell is always coming in and bragging about how much of a better cook you are than I am, so that's one thing."

Jack smiled and hoped to whatever agent of heaven might be listening that he was not blushing.

"Secondly, my daughter there says that you're a wonderful cook. That's a major point in your favor."

"Thanks," Jack said, not sure exactly who he was addressing.

"And, I guess thirdly is the fact that I think you can do whatever you put your mind to."

"Thanks." Jack said it softer this time, and definitely directed at Ray.

There was a pause.

"So," Ray remarked, clapping his hands together to ward off the silence, "I guess what I'm asking is when can you start?"

Jack reeled. He understood the parameters of Karen's master plan well enough; he had just assumed that something would surely stand in the way of his happiness. It had always seemed to before.

The first step was here in front of him, and he was suddenly very afraid. He still managed to keep it all under control and answer, "Whenever you'd like me, I guess."

"Why don't you come with us today and just let me show you the ropes, let Karen show you the way around a commercial kitchen, and let you make the transition from a private one. Does that sound okay?"

"Sounds great," Jack smiled. He still felt a little uneasy, and he hoped it wasn't too obvious.

"Perfect," Ray said, and then turned to Karen, "Do us a favor, would you sweetheart? Run on down to the diner and start opening it up, so Jack and I can talk. If that's okay."

"Sure, Daddy," she replied, and then gave a warm look to Jack, which verbalized nothing, but still left him with a thought he felt had leapt from her eyes to his mind. Everything's fine. Relax, she was telling him.

Then she left the room, and Jack and Ray were alone together.

Ray looked at Jack from his vantage point in the recliner.

"Things not going well at home, I take it," he offered after a period of silence which felt much longer to Jack than it actually was.

"Which is why you're trying to move out of your house. None of my business, of course; if I pry, just tell me so."

"Debra and I have never been very close," Jack replied. It seemed the nicest way of conveying his point.

Ray nodded and considered this. He got up from his seat and leaned against the mantel of the fireplace. "You know," he began, "that's a shame. I just don't know what's become of the family, do you?"

We're just talking, Jack thought, talking, and that's all. No accusations about Karen, no wondering about my motives, nothing. What is going on here? A voice inside of him assured him all of his worries would soon be justified. This was just window dressing, it hissed. He'll drop the bomb soon enough. Jack remained braced for it.

"I'm sure I don't know," Jack responded weakly.

"Look at Campbell's situation," Ray offered. "Terrible."

"Yes," Jack agreed.

Ray looked at Jack for a moment, and then went over to the couch to sit down next to him. He turned to look at Jack. "I think you may be wondering what I think about you and Karen," he stated, "and I think you're worried about it." He raised one eyebrow.

"Am I warm?"

Jack nodded.

Ray sighed. "You have to understand something about the way I deal with my children, and to do that you have to understand something about where I came from." He began picking at his fingernails, all of his attention on them as he spoke. "I suppose by now Campbell has told you about Carol."

"He has."

"I grew up with Carol's father," Ray returned his gaze to Jack for a moment and then went back to his nails. "Junior high, we were best friends. I had a father who never let me do anything. Not only was he a strict Baptist of the highest order, but a minister who was a strict Baptist of the highest order. I hardly left the house. Do you understand?"

Jack merely nodded.

"Bad as my situation was, I always felt bad for Harold. Harold was Carol's father. Harold's father would beat the living crap out of him for the smallest thing done wrong. He was a bad drunk to boot, so Harold was getting it all the time." Ray looked up and seemed to get that nostalgic look that is unique to memories about pain. "I remember we swore that we would grow up to be better fathers than ours had been."

Ray stopped playing with his fingernails, and now leaned back in resignation. "Well, you know about what happened to Harold.

He turned out worse," Ray sighed again, as if to dispel the memory of his childhood friend, and Jack

wondered how many sighs it would take before such a thing were accomplished. "So, before that happened, but especially after that happened, I wanted to be the best father I could possibly be. And the best way I knew to do that was to let my kids be what they wanted to be, and let them do and see everything that they wanted to do and see. And it was to let them do that, with me there to teach them the best that I could about life, so they could decide for themselves what they shouldn't be, what they shouldn't do and what they shouldn't see. Let them communicate with me. Never let them think that I wouldn't understand their problems. Let them know that I was always there. So, I've always tried to teach them what I thought was right, and then stay out of their way. If they need me, I'm always here, but otherwise I'm not riding their cases. Do you understand?"

Jack nodded again.

"So," Ray was grinning now, "Karen tells me that the boy she liked back in high school has finally noticed her, and how excited she is, and how she's certain she's crazy about him.

"I think you need her," Ray said, "and I think she knows that.

And I think you both are very happy. And I would be a poor father to stand in the way of what my daughter wants. She's my daughter, and I raised her, and I trust her completely. I've never given her a reason to mistrust me; she's never given me a reason to mistrust her.

"I think you deserve to be happy, and if you need an apartment away from your wicked stepmother, and I can help you get it, I'll be glad to," Ray finished.

Jack was stunned. The only thing he could think was that he was pretty sure he wasn't worried anymore.

"I...don't know what to say," he finally managed to stammer out.

Ray stood up, and motioned for Jack to do the same. "Well, for one thing, we can hammer out the details for rent and so forth. We need to do it while walking to the diner, though, or we'll be late."

They shook hands.

They talked without ceasing the whole way to the diner.

When Jack returned, he went from room to room in his house, simply touching things. He sat in the easy chair in the den that his father would spend Sunday afternoons in watching the game on TV. He touched the coffee table which he remembered falling and banging his chin on when he was six. He examined the lamp in the corner, and you could only tell it had been broken by an indoor baseball game if you knew where to look for the mended crack.

He felt a gnawing sickness in his gut. Despite the fact they were nothing but the ordinary objects one would find in a house, they had still shared his life. He felt as if all of them were watching him angrily, accusing him of desertion. Maybe that's just what he was doing.

Debra was at her place in the kitchen, reading another dogeared romance. He could not tell if it was the same one she had been reading a week before, they all seemed to look the same to him. She either borrowed them from her close circle of friends or bought them from the huge bins of three-for-a-dollar romances at the Bookworm Used Book Store.

He pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down.

Somewhere in the background, his mind checked its inventory of memories. He saw his father, sitting at this table, going through taxes, or balancing his checkbook, or some other routine he always performed. His

glasses would be perched on top of his head, his eyes studying the paper in front of him.

She looked up from her book.

Here was the moment. Jack could think of no suitable preface for the occasion, he simply began speaking. "I thought you should know that I've decided to move out of the house."

Debra put the book down on the table quickly, still being careful not to lose her place. She looked at him, and her response would not have been complete without the dramatic pause as her eyes searched him for the answer to the pointless question she was about to ask. "Why would you do a thing like that?" she inquired incredulously. After another moment of supposed contemplation, she accused, "It's that boy, isn't it? What kind of ideas has he been putting in your head?"

"Campbell has nothing to do with it. This is my decision." He knew the passion play she was performing was for his benefit, but he wanted no part of it.

"So, when are you moving out?" She asked, her voice brisk.

"As soon as possible."

"And where are you going to live?"

"I've got a job at Ray's Diner and I'm going to be living in the apartment above it."

Her eyes blazed false fire. "Raymond Wilson is in on this?" she snarled. She was up and at the phone with a speed that seemed to be alien to her pudgy figure. "We'll soon put a stop to that."

"Sit down," Jack commanded softly.

She began to dial, oblivious to him.

He raised his voice. "I said, sit down."

His tone appeared to get her attention. She hung the phone up and stared at him, wide-eyed. "How dare you speak to me like that," she breathed.

He made no reply. She could make her shocked faces and act surprised all she wanted, and he could come up with trite answers to all her questions until they ran out of daylight. It would do no good, and only serve to depress him further. The conversation, short as it had been thus far, had already made him very tired.

He made no reply to her statement. Instead, he simply continued.

"This is not a subject to be debated. This is not something you have any say in. I have made my decision. Ray has been nice enough to help me, and if you try and hold it against him, I will get on the phone myself and tell some of your choice friends exactly what's been going on in this house. Exactly how our relationship is. Sure, some of them might believe your 'suffering mother' routine, but they'd begin to doubt if they heard me tell the story the way it needs to be told. Don't threaten me with the small town gossip network, Debra, because it goes both ways."

She switched tactics. She was good at that. "You won't be able to support yourself, even with the job at Ray's, you "

" will be receiving part of my trust in a little over a month.

"I'll be fine." After a second, he could not help but add, "Thanks so much for caring."

She said nothing else but merely stood there, one hand absently touching the phone. She glanced at it as if it were a sacred object robbed of its powers.

"I just thought you might want to know." He got up to leave.

"Campbell's going to live with you up there, isn't he?" She sneered from behind him. "You're going to board him again, free of charge, right?"

Jack said nothing.

Again, the tactics switch. He had this insane idea that if he were to be immensely quiet, he would hear an audible click when she shifted gears, akin to the noises the streetlights made downtown when not a soul but himself was walking there. There would be a click when they went from red to green and back again. "He's using you, Jack," she said kindly. "He'll use you for whatever he can get, and then drop you. That's all."

He stopped. He did not turn around. "He's not using me anymore than you have been, if he's using me at all."

He waited for a moment, then started moving up the stairs. He was halfway to the top when she appeared at the bottom, looking up at him with plaintive eyes. He could feel them on his back before he turned to face her.

"Jack, you can't go." Her eyes were wide and pleading. "I'll be alone."

In that instant, all of his hatred for her vanished. In the two years since she had been so rudely forced into his life, he had built up a layer of hatred which he wore like a patina against his skin. It was only now he felt all of that being washed away by the water of his newly-won freedom, and he realized how heavy the weight of that unnecessary emotional burden had been. He looked down at his stepmother, and now felt nothing but a rising tide of pity for her. I'm free, he thought, free from you and you can't hurt me anymore.

"No more alone than I've been for the past six months," he replied softly, and then walked up to his bedroom.

Chapter Sixteen

Jack glanced over and watched as Karen brushed the hair from her face. Her hair seemed to be the only thing singing of life in the cemetery. No birds sang now, and the wind was not up to carrying any gospel that might have been floating around.

They walked down the narrow roadway, neither of them speaking; Karen looked around her with mute interest. The morning sun was shrouded in a haze, giving the entire dome of the sky a sickly gray pallor. The wind gnashed its teeth at them, and Karen drew her jacket around herself tighter, tighter.

He had taken one look outside and called Karen to suggest she wait until next week to accompany him on this trek. His reasoning was that it might start to rain while they were out.

"But you would go anyway?" she asked him.

"Yes, I would " he began, but was immediately cut off.

"Well, then I'm going anyway too. I'm not going to melt if I get hit with a little water, you know." She set aside the humor for a moment. "You did say it was all right if I came." The words emerged from her in the form of a friendly accusation.

He had said it was all right, and it was still all right. So here they were, passing the last of the large headstones, this one towering marble. SMITH, it told a disinterested world.

They entered the newer area of the graveyard, where the plaques longed for the sky and the names they bore hugged the ground. Jack and Karen left the pavement and crossed about fifty yards of grass before Jack stopped. He said nothing. He stood over the grave and looked down at it. Over it. Around it.

DENNIS HARDIN, it said. December 25, 1942 December 28, 1992.

Nothing new. No answers to any of the questions that Jack was plagued with but had no words to give voice to. Nothing at all.

He kneeled down and performed the swift ceremony of weeding without thinking, pulling the shoots up with his quick, careful hands. With this done and no answers still uncovered, he looked up at the sun which still remained hidden behind its translucent veil.

Karen put a quiet hand on his shoulder.

He changed his glance from the sun to her. The sun was covered in the overcast, and Karen too was bathed in clouds of his own making. He had fallen into the same pattern he followed every time he came here, and there was no place in the pattern for her. He had almost forgotten she was here. Her hand rested there on his shoulder, patient, understanding, waiting. It was waiting for him, but not demanding.

The feeling began to dawn on him that something needed to be said. He had no idea what at first, but it began to come to him in fits and starts. The silence was beginning to bear down on him, and Karen gave no clue that she would make any attempts at breaking it. He could not try to wait her out. Her stance implied she could remain that way all day and possibly longer if necessary.

The responsibility fell to him, and no one offered to shoulder it in his place.

"You know," he began, "my mother died when I was born. And you hear about these people whose mothers died giving birth to them, and how their fathers secretly blame and hate the child. My father was never like that. He loved my mother very much, and thought just the opposite. He saw me as a piece of her, and because of that, loved me even more, I guess, than most fathers do their sons." Pause. "I was never supposed to be born. I think I was a bit of a mistake." He forced a weak laugh. "They never even meant to have kids, it just kind of happened. I just kind of happened."

He looked up at her again. She had not moved. Her hand still rested on his shoulder. Her eyes still gazed down to him.

He continued. "And you see these people on TV talking about how families with single parents are bad, you know. They don't have the slightest damn idea what they're talking about. I never really looked at the kids I went to school with and said, 'They have mothers and I don't. I am missing something in my life. I don't have a complete home.' It was never like that. It was...it was like I still had a mother. He would constantly say, 'Your mother would have liked this,' or 'This would have made your mother proud.' He kept her with us constantly, so that there was still, in a lot of ways, I guess, three of us. I never missed my mother because she was always there, right beside my dad. He loved her very much. Very much."

His voice dropped away and his brow furrowed.

"So when he told me about her, when he sat me down and finally told me about her...I didn't understand, you know, I wanted to ask him 'What happened to Mom?' She was my mother for eighteen years and now you want to replace her? My beautiful mother, whom you taught me to love and respect as if she were alive everyday of my life, and now you want...want HER? The home that we had was not good enough, and so we have to include her to make it complete?"

He found he was shaking his head. Weight began to collect behind his eyes. Better there than on the shoulders, he thought absently, as he kept going. It was rolling downhill now; he felt he could not stop if he wanted to. Only a small part of him wanted to, but it was quickly engulfed in the ensuing avalanche forcing its way down the hillsides of his mind.

"I couldn't really talk to him after that. I felt like he had betrayed Mom, betrayed ME. I mean how could he do this to us? To love her for so long, and then " He cleared his throat. "I never seemed to want to do anything with him anymore, and just generally went about doing my own thing. It got worse and worse until I wasn't sure what direction I was going. Kim slipped away from me, or rather I slipped away from her, and my father had slipped away as well. Or rather," he sniffed, "I slipped away from him. When he remarried, that was more than I could take. I would come home and eventually I thought it was no longer my home, but just a house that happened to have my last name painted on the mailbox."

"And I come here, and I come here, and I can't stop coming here. It doesn't get any better; I was still all alone in that house with her after he died. He just...died. No warning. One minute he was with us, and the next he was gone. He let her take over my life before he died and then afterwards, he left me with her to keep on running my life. And worse than all of that," he whispered, a single tear beginning to wind its way down his cheek, "is that I never...I never got a chance to say good-bye, because it happened so fast."

And I never got a chance to tell him I loved him. It wasn't like in the movies where you know it's going to happen and you gather the family together, and sit around comparing notes and laughing about the good times. He went into the hospital and I never saw him again." He looked up at her again, the tears making their way down his face in storming rivulets. "I know he died thinking I hated him, which wasn't true, because I loved him, I just didn't understand, and he never could seem to make me understand, and..."

He felt the emotions crowding each other for space inside him and could do nothing more but look to Karen as

to what to do next.

Karen shifted position. She knelt down beside Jack and gripped his shoulder tightly. "Jack, my mother died not long after I graduated high school. It was sudden, unexpected. I have a pretty good idea what you mean about not being able to say goodbye. And that was the worst part of it all, I think.

"But my father refused to die with my mother. He refused to let go of his own life. He mourned my mother and then went on.

He got himself back on his feet, opened the diner. Don't think that he didn't love my mother—he loved her an incredible amount. If you had just seen the two of them together in the same room, you would have known. He just knew that it wouldn't do any good for him, for her, or especially for us two kids to sit around and wish for the past, when the past, as we all know, is not coming back to us.

"Perhaps your father didn't understand, or couldn't accept your mom dying. It sounds to me like he didn't know how to let go of her, and taught you to hold on the same way that he had. Then one day, he woke up, and it hit him that he couldn't keep living his life the same way he had been, pretending that it was still eighteen years ago. He decided that he loved her, she was gone, and he had to get on with his life. He just made a mistake by not sharing with you his discovery. So, you didn't understand why he had decided to go on. You were angry."

"Why?" Jack asked in a trembling voice. "If that's what happened, why didn't he tell me?"

"I don't know," she said kindly, "parents are not perfect.

They're human like everybody else. But as kids, we look up to them as our heroes. They look perfect to us. We see them as superhuman. That lasts for years until one day we see something happen that our parents can't control, and it hits us square in the face that they are only human. I remember when it happened to me. It was in the hospital, when my mother died, and I blamed my father at first for not using some kind of healing touch and saving her life.

"It never happened," she concluded. "My father could not save her, and almost as soon as it had begun, it was over and she was gone."

"I see." Jack was still trying to retain his composure.

"How did it feel when you told Debra you were getting your own place? Or rather, how did you feel?"

He sighed. "I felt...freedom. I felt like some weight was being lifted off of me."

Karen turned him around to face her. His bangs hung down and tried unsuccessfully to hide his tears. "Listen to me." She gripped him by the shoulders. "That weight that you felt, is it all gone?"

She did not give him a chance to answer.

"Because I can still feel it on you, Jack," she told him, and he noticed she was crying with him now, "When you touch me, when you talk to me, when you just look at me—I can still feel the weight. Let it go. Learn the lesson your father did sooner than he did. Let it go. Forgive him for what he did, and most importantly, forgive yourself. You made a mistake, now stop making it over and over. You've overcome your father, and your stepmother, now you've got to overcome yourself." She gave him a brisk shake to punctuate the end of the sentence.

He looked at her, wild-eyed. No one had ever spoken to him that way before, in advice that seemed suspiciously like an outright command. He knew it was not compulsory, though. He could very well go on just as he had been. It was still a viable option. But this was a lie. He knew that he had to change, and he knew also that it had to be now.

"But where will I go?" he asked finally. "My father's gone, my mother's gone, Debra doesn't care, and I I don't have a home anymore." He began to weep. Blinded by his own eyes, he held out his trembling arms to Karen. "Help me," he moaned, unable to stop the feeling that he could not help himself.

She took him into her arms and held him there.

"I want my father," he cried, "I want my life back."

"Shhh," she told him softly, "I know, baby. I know what you mean."

"I want my home back," he sobbed, "I want to go home."

She began stroking his hair, ever so slowly, ever so gently. "I'll be your home now, just let it go."

And so he did. The better part of two years' worth of anguish came streaking toward the surface of his soul and broke from him in waves. She held him until the tide began to drop again, though it took a long time. He cried what seemed to be an ocean, but part of him knew he would not drown, for she was there, holding him up.

Chapter Seventeen

Karen stood behind Jack, her hands on his shoulders. "See, you're doing it perfectly. The trick is to keep in mind how long everything that is on the grill has been on the grill, and remember when to take it off, or when to flip it, and so on."

He could feel her eyes on the back of his neck. He could feel her waiting for him to miss something. He took the spatula he held and used it to flip the hamburger patty.

"Very good," she offered.

Jack smiled. It was one of the best smiles he had worn in sometime, because it did not stop at the surface but reached to his core.

Even there, he was smiling. His reasons were simple: this woman had helped him in a way he might never fully understand, and not only was he grateful—he was in love. And she was here with him, her breasts, hidden behind the V-neck shirt she wore, pressing lightly into his back. Her hands were on him, her breath was gently warming his neck, her voice came to him from just behind his left ear, and the wonderful perfume of her drifted all around him. The feeling was exquisite. It seemed so simple, and perhaps that's what made it most important. "Reward?" he asked, half turning.

She kissed him, removing her left hand from his shoulder and holding his face into hers. Their kiss was deeper than any they had shared previously. Jack felt his knees give an involuntary shiver.

She seemed to take note of this, and smiled. "Is that an okay reward for flipping a burger on time?"

He studied her face. "What do you do to me?" he found himself asking.

She kissed him lightly, smiling all the while. "I just love you, that's all." She told him this without nervousness or embarrassment. It was stated as fact, as if she had told him the sky was cloudy or she was two inches shorter than he. He compared it to the first awkward moments shared with Kim, when they had exchanged words which passed for promises. This felt like more than simply words, though.

"I love you, too." He moved forward, meaning to kiss her again, wanting to seal these new promises with the most precious thing he felt he had to give.

She let him draw near again. With her eyes half-closed and a half-smile playing on her lips, she whispered, "If you loved me, you'd take out those fries, because I want them with my burger and they're quite done."

He stopped. His lips were almost to the point of brushing against hers. "Has anyone ever told you you really know how to ruin the moment?"

"Once or twice, I think." She touched the tip of his nose and then pointed, "Now take care of those fries, I'm starving."

There was a knock at the door.

She clapped him on the back, and turned around to look.

"One second," she announced to the caller. "It's your bud," she said to Jack as she made her way around the counter to unlock the door.

Jack turned around to see Campbell peering through the glass.

Karen walked up to the window. "Sorry, sir, we don't open until noon on Sundays."

Campbell responded with a look that made her laugh and turn the deadbolt.

"What the hell are you guys " he began as he entered the diner, and then stopped, sniffing the air. "And what is that?"

Karen indicated the grill, where Jack was dealing with the barbeque he had decided on. "Lunch. Hungry?"

"No thanks," Campbell replied automatically, although he knew he was lying. Bumming food from Jack was bad enough, but the idea of eating free on Ray and Karen's bill was enough to convince him he had no real appetite. "I am familiar with the work of my good friend, Jack, when it comes to the world of culinary delights, but I am afraid that I must decline."

"Your loss." She indicated the grill, the source of the amazing aromas. "I don't know what he did to that meat; he added some spices or something. All I know is that it smells wonderful." By this time, she had returned to Jack and hugged him around the waist.

She turned and smiled at Campbell. "I won't be a guinea pig for just anyone."

"Trust me," Jack told her, barely looking around, keeping his eyes on the grill to ensure her favor, "I wouldn't give you a single thing I hadn't already tried myself."

"Okay, then. Whew," she replied in mock relief. She kissed him on the back of the neck.

Well, aren't the two of us happy? Campbell thought with an inner smile that peeked out of his face. It ran through his mind sporting a sarcastic edge he wished he could deny, and Campbell hated himself for it. He had no right to be jealous of them, but the fact he hadn't heard back from Danielle yet kept an undercurrent of anxiety in his mind. Deep in the darkest, most cynical recesses there, he was beginning to wonder if what happened to the two of them was some kind of fluke, or worse, some kind of poor joke. He told himself that was ridiculous, and as Jack said, despite the trauma he had undergone with Miranda, not all women were like that. They couldn't be. She's a very busy woman, he reminded himself yet again, everything's fine. He recalled the experience he underwent during that first kiss and reminded himself that he had to get back there again. That was all that mattered. Regardless, he was extremely happy for Jack. Negative energy coming from him could only botch up everything, so he tried his best to brighten his mood.

Jack was looking at Campbell as if he expected an answer to something.

"I'm sorry," Campbell replied, "what did you say?"

Jack sighed and shook his head. "Bahamas again?"

"No, Pensacola."

"Weather nice?"

"Overcast, but who wants a tan anyway?"

Karen leaned against the counter and looked at Jack. Her stare made it evident that she wanted an explanation for this last exchange.

Jack smiled. "Campbell likes to ignore me, and then tries to pass it off as some kind of out-of-body experience."

"I was just asking you," Jack turned back to tend the grill, "if you're sure you wouldn't like something to eat."

"No thanks," Campbell repeated.

"Well, that's what we called you down here for," Jack accused.

"What did you come for, then?"

Campbell shot a smile at Karen. "To see the apprentice get his ears boxed."

"Thanks for your support," Jack grumbled, then turned around to wield his spatula.

Campbell had lied. He was not exactly sure what had urged him to accept their invitation, but he was more than a little sure it was the something different he had heard in Jack's voice over the phone. It sounded older, more confident, less burdened and yet more. He wanted to come and see what change had occurred, for every sense in his body was telling him something had altered in Jack, and more than likely for the better. First, his ears had reported discrepancies in Jack's voice, now his eyes were telling him that Jack seemed to look freer, happier. He wanted to sit back and view for himself, then to perhaps ask Jack about it later.

"These are about done," Jack reported, "want to check?"

Karen walked over and peered at his handiwork. "Very good," she commended, then checked under the counter. "We've got no buns up here," she stated. "Jack, be a dear and run back and grab a thing of buns from the shelf."

"Where is it?"

"Back and to the left."

Jack trotted into the back.

Karen turned off the grill and then faced Campbell. "We went to visit his father this morning," she said immediately, her voice pitched very low.

Campbell was taken off-guard. It did not happen very often, although with increasing rapidity these days it seemed. He was not sure if he should reply.

"He told me everything," she continued, "and I think he managed to put his father to rest."

Jack's voice drifted to them from the back storage area. "Back and to the left?"

Karen turned her head slightly and yelled back, "Did I say left?"

"I'm sorry, I meant right."

They watched as Jack made his pass by the doorway, going back and to the right.

"He will probably tell you all of this later," she told him, dropping her voice low again, "I know how close the two of you are. But I wanted to ask you to please keep an eye on him, and make sure he handles everything all

right. I would hate for him to have a relapse.

I think I was able to help him. I hope I was able to."

"He sounded different over the phone," Campbell found himself saying, "that's why I came down here...to see."

"Now you know," she stole a glance over her shoulder to see what progress Jack was making, "but please keep an eye on him."

Campbell felt the sudden weight of guilt settle upon his shoulders. I was angry at the two of them for being happy, he scolded himself.

And look at her, worried about him like that. The look in her eyes told Campbell everything, and he understood how Jack could have fallen so quickly for her. "I will," he told her and then without knowing he meant to, added, "and thank you."

"There's no need to thank me," she told him, her eyes revealing a kind of magic that Campbell knew, under different circumstances, in a different parallel universe somewhere, might have made him fall for her right then and there. "I love him."

"I know," he managed to say.

The two of them watched each other for a moment, that moment broken by Jack reentering, holding the package of buns like a trapper presenting a captured rabbit. "Back and to the center."

He glared at Karen, trying his best to look cross.

She gave a comedic shrug. "So color me forgetful." She blinked her eyelashes innocently.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Jack set about the task of arranging the food. He looked over his shoulder at Karen, who was watching him.

"So are you going to sit at the counter and let me do this right, or do I get to serve you standing up?"

"Well," Karen huffed in mock exasperation. She made her way around the counter, taking a stool next to Campbell. "Better?"

"Better than flawless," he replied, and then turned around.

Jack put down a piece of wax paper which held a rather large hamburger and an order of french fries. "Lettuce, tomato, and no onion," he read off an imaginary ticket. "We create to specifications."

Karen picked up the sandwich in both hands. "Here goes nothing." She took a deep bite. Her eyes rolled in a grimace of pleasure.

"My God, Jack," she said through a mouthful of food, "this is incredible." Still either unaware or uncaring about what a scene she was making of herself, she thrust the burger at Campbell. "Try it, and don't argue."

Campbell gave her a weak smile and looked to Jack.

Jack gave a look back that told Campbell he was helpless to give aid.

"Go on," she persisted.

Campbell did so. He did not have a knack for food like Jack did, so he had no names to give to the amazingly wonderful spices Jack had mixed in with the ground beef. He simply knew good food when he tasted it, so he merely forewent the speaking with his mouth full, and gave Jack a thumbs-up instead.

"Well, thank you." Jack smiled. He felt good. The only way he could feel better is if he was composing music instead of hamburgers.

He had the feeling he could go home, sit in front of his piano, and actually make some progress. He could not wait to try this theory.

There was another knock at the door. All three looked up.

Ashley was peering into the window.

"If this place gets anymore popular, we'll have to start doing business on Sunday mornings," Karen remarked as she went to open the front door.

Ashley walked in and went straight to Campbell. She seemed rushed and out of breath. "Campbell, can you help me?"

Campbell looked from Ashley to his other two companions and then back. "What's wrong, Ash?"

"Could you drive me home?" she asked. "I'm running late, and my dad will be real upset if I'm late. Please?"

"Sure, sure," he said, trying to calm her down. "We'll go right now."

Within a minute, Campbell and Ashley were inside Big Blue and headed down Green Street towards Ashley's house.

They had left Karen and Jack to attend to the diner. Both showed obvious concern for Ashley's frame of mind, and there was an unspoken burden of responsibility placed upon Campbell to take care of her. I feel like the Good Shepherd, he thought, but I guess there are worse fates.

"I was going out to the drugstore to get a couple of magazines,"

Ashley began without prompting. "I told him I'd be right back, and I lost track of the time. I...don't like getting home late."

"Where are the magazines?"

"They didn't have them in yet," she responded quickly. "Turn left here."

He did so.

"See that gray house at the end of the street," she pointed, "that's ours."

Off to the left side of the car, a child with haunted eyes pedaled his Big Wheel slowly through the gutter.

Campbell swung Big Blue around and pulled up to the curb.

Ashley looked out and breathed a sigh of relief. She smiled weakly at Campbell. "They're not home. Either of them."

Campbell studied the house for a moment. The gray paint was peeling off to reveal gray paint underneath, and the driveway was cracked in several places.

"I thought you said you told them you'd be right back. Why did they leave if they were expecting you?"

"They said they were going to have to run to the store, they'll probably be back any minute." She opened the car door quickly.

"You'll be all right?" he asked her.

"Yes," she told him, "I'll be fine. Thank you, Campbell."

And with that, she was gone and running up the front walk.

She shot a look back to Campbell and then shut the door. Her glance had been almost apologetic.

Campbell looked back down the street. The boy on the Big Wheel must have turned into his own driveway, for now the neighborhood was deserted. He sat there for a moment, considering.

"Now, what the hell could all of that possibly have been about?"

Campbell finally asked no one in particular, and no one in particular answered him.

He began to drive toward home.

"Ashley, my fine young friend," Campbell thought aloud, "next time we meet you had best hope that drugstore has some fresh answers."

Chapter Eighteen

Campbell put down the phone receiver. He was sitting by himself in Jack's room, a copy of *The Color Purple* in his lap. The only things which appeared to be assembled were the two beds.

Boxes were stacked around the walls, half-obscuring the only window, which looked out into the nothingness of night. He set the book aside without thinking, and then leaned back on Jack's bed against the wall, lacing his hands behind his head.

The week had passed quickly and without incident. Jack officially started at Ray's Diner on Monday and seemed to be doing well enough. Campbell figured Jack always had a knack for cooking, and Jack was proving him right. Jack was proving everyone right except for Debra. Campbell had accidentally overheard her telling one of her friends that the idea of moving out was just a lark and so was the job. When they discovered Jack could not cook to save his life, he would come back just like the good son she knew deep down inside he actually was.

Campbell had not seen much of Debra this week. She always was out playing bridge or doing whatever it was people like her seemed to do that kept them out of the house for long hours. He wanted to see her, just once however, out of some sadistic desire to witness the disappointment dawning in her eyes that her stepson was making something out of his life. He also wanted to see what new story she would create about her son, or Campbell for that matter. It was of no real consequence, but he did find it amusing.

Campbell continued to bear the cross of his job at his mother's campaign office. Mercifully, she had not been around much. He went into her office on one occasion to leave a printout on her desk. He had taken the opportunity to glance at her calendar and noted she would be out for most of the next week as well. He smiled quietly to himself for the rest of that day.

One thing weighing heavily upon his mind was the fact that Danielle had not called. On Tuesday, he had struggled with whether or not to call her, but knew she was extremely busy, and that pestering her about it might label him desperate. Aren't you? he had asked himself honestly. He was not quite sure how to answer that and so did not. All he knew was that he seemed to hurt in some undefinable way when he was away from her, and the simplest way to ease that pain was obvious enough.

On Wednesday, Danielle finally called. They made plans to go out to eat on Friday. She had a special story she was working on, and it would take some time, but as soon as she got done, she would call.

So then came Friday, with Campbell sitting by the phone reading, lost in the literary universe, though still close enough to the real world to hear the phone. The call had finally come at nine twenty-five, almost two-and-a-half hours later than she had given as an estimate. Ordinarily when reading, he would not have any sense of time, but his internal clock on this particular evening seemed to chime with every five minute interval that would pass.

Then came the call, waking him out of his other world. Before he knew exactly what was happening he had already said hello and tried with all of his might to not sound as desperate as he actually felt.

"Campbell?"

Yes, it's her, calm down for Christ's sake, he told himself. "The same," he returned.

"I'm really sorry " she began, and for the first two seconds, Campbell thought she was apologizing for being late in calling.

Then, the tone in her voice told him what she was going to say before the actual words left her lips. She can't make it, he thought.

" but I can't make it tonight, I'm going to have to reschedule for some other time. I just got handed something else to do before tomorrow and, well, you know..." she trailed off, expecting that to explain everything.

Campbell had not really been sure what the definition of the word "crestfallen" was until that moment. He was never even really sure he had a crest to begin with, but he could feel it falling now.

"Oh." He tried to keep his spirits up and not sound like she had just given him a tremendously traumatic experience, which it felt like she had. "Well, that's all right. I'm sorry to hear they've got you working that hard."

"I'll make it," she replied. She had an air of gratitude in her voice, as if she had half-expected him to be upset. It was hard to tell with her, though. The true minds and emotions of women always seemed to be closed to him.

"Well, that's good." Campbell's words would not come to him, a very bad place for a writer to be. He could almost feel the sheer silence on the phone, was sure if he went outside he could hear it humming along the wires. Or perhaps, not humming. He was not sure which.

She made no sign as if she was going to offer relief. For the moment, Campbell felt too depressed to do anything about it. "Well, just give me a call," he heard as his feeble answer, "I mean, whenever you think you can."

"Well, all right," Danielle replied. He could not tell if it was relief he heard in her voice, or disappointment. He found himself unsure of everything. "I'm really sorry," she offered again.

"It's all right," he lied more than just a little. "Really. Just make sure you call me."

"Okay." There was a brief pause as if she were looking for something to say herself. "Goodbye, Campbell."

So he sat on the bed, with the book by Walker in his lap and the receiver placed back in its cradle.

He sat there, stunned. It was true then, and he knew it. It was all true: there was no chance of anything, and why should there have been?

What the hell are you doing? a voice in his head demanded to know. Campbell snapped to attention as if he had been slapped across the face. Why are you just sitting there? Do something about it, you stupid idiot, or you deserve to have it fall down around your ears, whatever silly thing it was you thought you were building here.

"What the hell am I doing?" he asked aloud.

He grabbed the phone receiver again and dialed. As he did so, he snatched the phone book up and began flipping madly to the yellow pages.

"Danielle Peterson," she announced after the second ring.

"Do you like Chinese?" he asked immediately.

"What?"

"Just answer me, please. Do you like Chinese?"

"Campbell, why are you "

"Food, Chinese food."

There was a pause. He could almost feel her uncertainty and confusion on the other end of the line. Someone inside him crossed his fingers and lit a candle designated as Hope. I only hope that I'm not burning it at both ends, he thought wildly.

Finally, she responded. "Yes, I like Chinese food."

"Okay, good. That's all I wanted to know."

"Campbell, what are you "

"Just work," he told her, smiling. "You're busy, remember?"

Work on your story. I've got to run."

"Campbell, why "

But the phone was already slammed home. There was another rushed phone call made, an address hastily written, and then Campbell's steps bounded down the stairs to his car.

Twenty minutes later, Campbell pulled up to the offices of the Macomber County Herald, Big Blue's passenger seat carrying two rather large white paper bags. He parked in one of the three spaces marked VISITOR and walked up to the front door, a bag in each arm.

He looked around him for access. To his right there was a button on the wall marked AFTER HOURS VISITORS, and an intercom. He pressed it and waited. From deep within the building a buzzer rang out.

"Yes?" The voice was garbled and warbled by the aged speaker, but it was her.

"Miss Danielle Peterson?" he asked.

"Yes?"

Campbell cleared his throat. Here goes everything, he thought.

"There is a Mr. Campbell Davis here to see you; he says that the two of you had a dinner date."

There was silence.

"I could tell him you don't wish to see him, if you'd like."

"No," she said, "please tell him I'll be right there."

The intercom shut off.

God, he thought, if only I could figure out what she's thinking. She sounded like she was smiling, but it could easily have been aggravation in her voice. What did he think he was doing, coming here and disturbing her at

her job? This is what she does for a living, and here he is bringing

The front door opened, and she was there. She was dressed in nothing but jeans and a dark shirt, but she was beautiful. She was beautiful, and she was smiling. "I believe Miss Peterson will see you now," she said.

The building's only two current occupants were residing in the island of light which surrounded Danielle's desk. The desk shared the room with six others.

The Chinese take-out containers were spread all over the top of it, amongst her pencil holders and stacks of paper. Campbell had no idea what kind of Chinese food she liked, so he brought two different samplers, and in doing so had squeezed a tiny buffet into two bags. She set down a container of egg-fried rice and looked at him. A ghost of a smile haunted her face. "So," she said.

She was sitting in her chair, while Campbell was sitting on the desk, his legs hanging off the side. "So," he repeated.

"You got your dinner after all, Mr. Davis."

"I didn't think I was asking for too much."

She nodded. "No, not too much." She sighed, and leaned back in the chair.

Campbell looked around her desk area. "So, this is where the magic happens."

"Some magic," she sighed again and waved an imaginary wand at the small bullpen. "Bippity-boppity-boo, indeed."

Campbell laughed and almost choked on his egg roll. When he regained his composure, he noticed the phone which was sitting next to him. Attached to the phone was a tape recorder. "Fascinating," he remarked off-handedly. He gestured to the device with his chopsticks. "You don't have any tapes of me, do you?"

"No, no. That's for on the phone interviews. That's when someone tells me something, I write it, and then they deny it later."

"Pretty devious and ingenious," Campbell smiled. "I respect that." He took another sip of his drink. "Ever need it to back you up?"

"Once or twice." Something clicked in her mind, and she leaned over to get her purse. "Oh, before I forget, how much do I owe you for the dinner?"

"Nothing," he said flatly.

"No," she began to fish through her purse, "I have to give you something "

He leaned over to her and kissed her on the lips, very lightly.

Just once, and he began to pull away. However, one of her hands came up to touch the side of his face, so he was compelled to do it again. He straightened back up and smiled. "Okay, we're even."

She crossed her arms in front of her. "I don't suppose it would do any good to argue."

"Many have tried..." he shrugged and let his voice trail off.

Defeated, Danielle let her arms fall to her sides. "So, Mr. Davis, what now?"

"Well," he began, massaging his chin in the classic pose of the intellectual, "how about a real dinner in a real restaurant and then a real movie? You do like movies, I trust."

She laughed and stood up directly in front of him. "Campbell, you " she raised an eyebrow. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," he replied.

"Twenty-two?"

"Yes."

She paused, arms folded, one finger to her lips. "You don't act it."

"Thank you."

"Twenty-two..." she mused. "Do you know how old I am?"

Guess."

He looked at her, studied her, still stroking his chin, studied the shape of her body, and almost forgot what he was supposed to be determining. "Twenty-three."

She leaned down and looked into his eyes. "I am twenty-nine."

He frowned slightly.

"I graduated high school when I was eighteen." She began to pace back and forth as she continued. "Where were you when I was eighteen, Campbell? You were still here, weren't you? Let's see," she calculated in her head for a moment, "you were ten, right?"

What were you, in middle school?"

"Finishing sixth grade," he said dryly. "I must be missing your point."

"The point is, you're twenty-two and I'm twenty-nine and..."

She stopped, thinking her point was clear.

The look on Campbell's face did not change. Noncomprehension.

She threw up her hands. "You don't get it. Campbell, I am almost thirty years old."

He slid off the desk and advanced toward her. "No, I don't get it, and it doesn't matter, listen "

She held up her hands as if to ward him off. "Little boy," she threatened without malice, "don't you come over here."

"Don't make me chase you," he kept moving to her.

She stopped backing up; he halted in front of her. He put his arms around her and drew her close. "Little boy," she whispered.

"Little girl," he responded, and then kissed her again. She did not resist, and instead laced her arms around his back, pulling him in tighter, returning the kiss despite herself.

After a few moments, she pulled away and went back to her chair. Her eyes watched her hands as they fidgeted in her lap. "You have to understand, Campbell. About "

"Your boyfriend," he finished. "I know about him."

"Campbell," she let her eyes meet his, "I'm in love with him."

"I know," he answered quickly. He did know; he supposed he had known from the moment he kissed her. There was something inside of her which stood out from all else, and pointed to another.

The pitch of her voice was raised in exasperation. "Then why "

"Danielle," Campbell stopped her. He walked over and knelt in front of her chair. He took one of her hands in both of his. "All I want is to spend time with you. Whatever happens, happens. I want to spend time with you." He accented each word, "I just want a chance, that's all."

"I can't promise you anything." There was an apology hidden in her voice.

"I'm not asking," he replied. "Just being with you makes me happy."

Campbell had the strange feeling she was hoping for what he thought of as the "typical male" reaction: jealous frustration, accompanied by a him or me attitude. Then, that could be it. Maybe there had been a time when Campbell was that way, but he could not recall it now. All that mattered now was having a chance to get back and caress her soul. That took priority over all else.

Danielle studied his face for several long moments. With an air of resignation, she breathed, "All right." She ran a hand through his long, black hair. "You've got your chance. How about lunch on Monday? We can talk about dinner and a movie then. I've got to get back to work. All I need is somebody to come in here and find us, and that'd be wonderful."

Like your boyfriend, Campbell added internally, and then winced.

He must be a fool to even let me get near you, he thought. If you were mine, I would not leave you for a second. Now I have to show you that. More than that, I have to make you believe.

He rose up and kissed her. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Yes, yes," she pushed him away and tried unsuccessfully to mask her smile. He hoped that she was kicking him out more because she was afraid of what might occur if they stayed here than because of the work she needed to get done. It might have been a selfish thought, but he couldn't help himself. "Now let's get you out of here before you get me fired."

When asked, he told her to hang on to the leftovers. She put up a brief resistance which he withstood. She walked him back out to the front door. Before she could open it, he wheeled on her and took her head quickly, but gently, in both of his hands. She gave out a long exhalation in surprise, but all he did was stare fixated into her eyes. "Contacts," he stated. "You wear contacts." He released her.

"Campbell, you scared the crap out of me," she blurted. She laughed. "I thought you had suddenly gone psycho on me. Yes, I wear contacts, so what?"

"Are you nearsighted or farsighted?"

"Neither," she replied, "I just always wanted to have green eyes.

Why?"

He hesitated for a moment, then forged ahead. "Just do me one favor: I'd really like to see your real eyes, just once."

"Okay," she agreed readily, but her look could have been construed as an accusation of insanity.

She opened the door for him, and he walked out into the parking lot. He turned around to face her. "Thank you."

"Thank you," she corrected, "for dinner."

They stayed exactly where they were for at least a minute, watching each other intently.

She broke the freeze. "Go," she pointed, smiling.

Campbell gave a bow, and then went to Big Blue. He looked in his rear view mirror and saw she had already retreated away from the glass front door. He smiled. All right, a voice warned him, you've got your chance. You got what you wanted. Don't screw up.

"I won't," he answered aloud. "Not this time. And not with this one. It's too important. She's too important."

The voice appeared placated, for it did not speak again.

He left the parking lot and made his way through the deserted streets, his thoughts flying faster than Big Blue could possibly match.

Chapter Nineteen

"O kay," Jack huffed, "okay, break."

Campbell looked up at him from the other end of the bed. "You've got to be joking." His face was turning a nice shade of scarlet.

"Really," Jack breathed, "I've got to get a better grip. Can you brace it up against the rail?"

"Hang on." Campbell shoved the mattress to the wall, pushing on it to keep it from slipping. "There, get your grip."

Jack felt around underneath and got a better hold. They continued the trek up the stairs to the apartment and let the mattress fall with an audible thud. Campbell sat down and ran a hand through his sweaty hair. The air conditioner was going full blast, but both of them still felt uncomfortably sticky. "Whoever designed that staircase to be so bloody narrow ought to be arrested," Campbell complained.

Scattered around them were the boxes containing the contents of Jack's room. Jack had spent considerable time going through the various keepsakes he had collected over the course of twenty years. He only threw away a few things. He was a pack rat and admitted it freely.

His father always told him he got it from his mother. When that memory came to him this time, he was pleased to find it did not accompany an onset of involuntary sadness like it always had before.

Jack looked around him at his various treasures and noted, this time with a touch of regret, that none of the boxes he and Campbell had been moving had Campbell's belongings in them. Campbell had come down from New York with some clothes thrown in his trunk and his books, of course. Everything he owned was in his car. The small bit of furniture that we do have, both beds, everything in here is mine, Jack thought. Campbell told Jack that upon leaving his apartment, he sold everything he could to pay for the last of the lease. What that couldn't pay for, he had to borrow.

Jack thought it rather ironic that here he was not exactly set for life financially, but with enough in the bank and more coming from the trust fund. He had the means, but up until recently no drive to do anything with them. Campbell had no means whatsoever, but was constantly working at his goals: writing in his notebooks, taking notes of things that interested him, writing on anything that he could. In Ray's Diner, on several occasions, he had seen Campbell pull out a pen and start writing down ideas on napkins if nothing else was available. He had seen Campbell's drive and been inspired by it. He swore now to use his means to the fullest and to succeed.

Campbell had fretted over this as well. "What are you going to do about your music when we finally get completely moved?"

Jack had gone to his closet and rummaged around for a while, talking as he did so. "I thought about that as well, but then remembered this." He pulled out a large box that had the word ROLAND on it along with a picture of an electronic keyboard. "It's not the newest thing around, but it works. I always preferred working on the piano, because it, of course, sounds more natural, and I'm not the synthesizer type, but...it'll do."

Campbell had nodded, relieved.

Karen now walked up the stairs, carrying a box marked SHEET

MUSIC. "Where would you like this?"

Jack suddenly had an impulse to say "On the floor, right next to you," but for one thing, Campbell was in the room, and for another, he no desire to rush anything. His relationship was growing so beautifully on its own, that he could not bear to think of hurrying through any moment they had together. Every single second seemed to carry its own special magic. Instead, he said, "Over there by the keyboard."

Karen walked over and set the box down. She took a moment to inspect the leaves of Ted, who was sitting in the window and growing greener by the day.

Jack looked at them working: Campbell taking the mattress they had brought up earlier and arranging it on the bed frame, Karen helping with boxes. Jack thought, I have two good friends who are helping me get out of my house. Two good friends. Karen, who I am in love with, and Campbell, who I love as well. And just a month ago, I felt alone in the world. Jack had not been to church in a long time and somehow doubted he would ever go again. Nevertheless, he felt blessed. Blessed and full of thanksgiving.

Campbell finished tinkering with the bed and sat upon it.

"Well, Jack, in another couple of trips we'll have you out of your house, no problem." He glanced about the room. "We'll be sleeping on boxes for a little while, but other than that, no problem."

From what Campbell had told him about his period of druginduced hysteria in New York, Jack was quite sure Campbell had slept worse places than among boxes. "Yes," he smiled in response, "and I will be free."

"Does it feel good?" Campbell asked him suddenly.

Jack thought about it. "Yes," he decided, "it feels very good."

"It always does," Campbell replied, smiling.

Karen came over and hugged Jack. She certainly does like to do that a lot, Campbell noted, and Jack certainly doesn't seem to mind.

But who could blame him? "Well, as long as you're happy, then it's all worth it," she told Jack, and then gave him a quick kiss.

"I think I'm going to order a pizza," Jack announced. "My treat. For all my hard working movers."

"All two of us," Campbell grumbled, walking over and putting an arm around Karen. "I think we should unionize," he told her in a stage whisper.

"Should I stand up on a chair with a sign saying 'Union'?"

"Would all the workers shut down their machines?" she asked, blinking merrily. God, Campbell thought again, everytime I get this close to you I can see how Jack got so deep so quickly.

"Sounds like a plan," Campbell replied. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Pizza or we strike," she growled at Jack.

"Well," Jack replied, "the phone's not hooked up yet in here, so let me go down and take care of it." There was a brief but deep philosophical discussion concerning which toppings to order, then Jack excused himself and went downstairs. It wasn't until he reached the counter and pulled out the phone book that another thing struck him as unusual. Whenever Kim on rare occasions had flirted with someone else, Jack had been red with jealousy. Now, he felt fine. Not even a twinge of discomfort when Karen kissed Campbell on the cheek. He

trusted them, he knew. And that felt good as well.

He picked up the phone and dialed.

Campbell looked out the window. "He seems to be doing fine," he commented.

"I know." Karen had opened a box of books and was lining them up on a set of shelves. "I think all he needed was someone he felt he could talk to."

Campbell leaned on the window frame and grimaced. "I wonder why he couldn't talk to me about it, I "

"You shouldn't feel bad," she interrupted, "sometimes we can't talk to the people that are closest to us. We need a stranger."

Campbell turned and smiled at her. "You're not exactly what I would call a stranger."

"No," Karen said. "I love Jack very much. I think I have for a long time. We were just meant to be together, and I was meant to take that load from him. It's...what is that thing...where they say it's the toughest job you will ever love? The Salvation Army?"

"I think that's the Peace Corps," Campbell offered.

Karen shrugged. "Well, regardless, it fits here too."

"I'm glad you're happy."

"What about you? Jack told me about Danielle. I hope you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind at all. I don't know she's got a boyfriend, I'm going to be leaving it's all..." he put a hand to his temple, as if the very idea of it all was stifling his thoughts. Which it was. "...it's all very convoluted right now."

"Don't worry," she assured him. "If it's meant to happen, you'll be together. I can see that you care for her a great deal."

"For a long time, I have, just like you said. Even before I knew..." His voice trailed off and he laughed despite himself.

"Well, that's kind of convoluted, too."

"Say no more," she laughed as well. "So, you're going to get all this wonderful money and run on back to New York to finish school."

He thought about it. "Well, that about sums it up. My scholarship only can handle so much of the cost."

"Sums what up?" Jack asked, climbing the stairs.

"Campbell's extended plans for going back to New York. And the more I think about it, Campbell," she continued, "I was wondering if you would need any company."

Campbell had been fingering the cover of one of his myriad dog-eared paperbacks. He looked up at this. "What was that?"

"Are you dead set on going alone?" She rephrased.

"What are you saying?" Jack asked her.

Campbell had figured out Karen's suggestion already, but let her say it.

Karen addressed Jack. "Well, if you're going to be a great musician (which you are) you're going to have to be somewhere where there's a market for that kind of thing. There certainly isn't one here, though you can always send stuff off. Still, it's always nicer to be right there where the action is. Like in New York."

Jack sat for a moment and let the idea sink in. It was something he had not considered—he had just moved out of his house, which was one thing, but to another part of the country? Everything she said made sense, though it might not be as easy as she was implying.

He would like to go to a good music school, and as far as he knew, none of the prestigious ones were anywhere near here. Was there any reason to stay? He had to consider this further; it was not the kind of decision one made on the spur of the moment. "Campbell, would you mind some company? I mean, not that I'm saying I'm going right now, I really hadn't given it any thought before, but if I wanted to..."

Campbell's thoughts were drawn to another time, a time long gone, to a different Campbell Davis, young and naive and making plans to run. He remembered the childhood friends he had planned to leave with. His thoughts then grazed across everything that had happened since. Round and round we go, he thought, and always, sooner or later, the same old places just with different faces. "I don't see why not," he answered. "Some fine music schools in New York, and I'm sure you wouldn't have a problem being accepted to any of them. I'd enjoy the company, actually."

"Something to think about," Karen mused seriously, still watching Jack.

"I will," Jack promised, trying to put it out of his mind and failing miserably. After being trapped in this town for so long, the idea of getting out to a big city was both stimulating and terrifying. He tried to keep concentrating on the matter at hand: getting moved out of his present situation. One thing at a time, he reminded himself, yet those thoughts still had a spring to their step.

"Well," Campbell stood up and droned with as little excitement as he could muster, "we've probably still got some time before the pizza arrives. Let's keep moving boxes. Yay!"

There was much groaning, but the three friends kept working, chatting and laughing as they did so.

Chapter Twenty

Five minutes previous, Campbell had been getting out of Danielle's car. Danielle had explained that she was not fond of public displays of affection, so Campbell understood and complied. As a result, he did not do what he had thought about doing through the entire lunch, which was take her into his arms and kiss the hell out of her. He abstained, for he could wait until tomorrow night when they would see each other again.

Campbell was elated. No longer did he have worries about whether or not Danielle really cared or was even trying to avoid him. They had lunch Monday as planned, and as a pleasant surprise on this already pleasant Friday, she called to ask him out to lunch again. Over the lunch they made plans for the dinner and movie they previously discussed.

The lunch had gone well; they compared notes about their present occupations, and where they wanted to go from here. Danielle intimated that she wanted most of all to get into a large market paper and be one of their feature reporters. Campbell merely gave the same answer he had been giving for a couple of years now, that he wanted to do nothing more but get out of school and write his brains out.

At the end of the lunch hour, Danielle dropped him off at the campaign headquarters. He stood and watched her little import car drive away, then he went back inside.

He was at his desk for two minutes when his mother appeared seemingly from nowhere behind him. He almost jumped in surprise. "Can I see you for a moment, Campbell?"

"Sure," he replied.

She noted his lack of movement. "In the next room," she added.

"Sure," he said again, and they crossed the hallway.

She shut the door behind them. Campbell took a seat at the second hand conference table that sat in the dead middle of the room. She shut the door and then wheeled around to face him.

"I want you to tell me exactly what is going on between you and Danielle Peterson."

"Beg pardon?" Campbell asked. What the hell is she talking about? he thought absently.

"You heard me," she continued maliciously, "what is going on between the two of you?"

"I really don't see where that's any of your business," he calmly told her, "our little agreement doesn't say anything about you getting to run my life, or even be privy to what's going on in it."

"Color me curious." She leaned over the table at him. He made no sign as if to speak. "You're seeing her, aren't you?"

Only love, he thought, meet my only hate. "Well, if you must know," he sighed, "yes, we are seeing each other."

Susan Davis backed away from the table suddenly. Her eyes widened, and she took a moment to recover before beginning to speak again. It was the closest to uncertainty he had ever seen her.

"Campbell," she said flatly, "you can't do that."

Campbell had no idea what the woman was talking about. He was tempted to get up and walk out — she had no business poking around in his life. He made himself stay, however. He rubbed at one temple in a slow, exasperated way. "And why is that, mother?"

Obviously I can and I am."

Susan Davis gave him the look one would give a stupid child.

"Campbell," she explained, "she's black."

Campbell's jaw dropped open and he put his hands to his face in a comical gesture of shock. "Oh my God," he whispered, "you know, you're right!" His voice grew, shaking in mock hysteria. "I knew there was something different about her, but..." He fixed her with his gaze, "Are you sure?"

"Oh, shut up," she paced up and down the length of the small conference room, thinking. Finally, she reached her conclusion and stopped, leaning on the table again. "I'm sorry, Campbell, I can't have this going on. It has to stop right now." Her last three words were punctuated by a pounding fist on the table.

Campbell stood. "As I said before, I don't recall our agreement giving you jurisdiction over my personal life."

"You don't seem to understand," she continued slowly, patiently, holding in what appeared to be a red cloud of rage, "you forget where you are. This isn't New York. The town still considers you my son, no matter what you or I might think. And therefore, they still see me as responsible for your actions, no matter what you or I might think. The two of you being seen in public together might give people the wrong idea."

"Who cares?" Campbell laughed, "They'd probably be right."

"It could hurt this campaign," she hissed, "and I am not going to have anything in the way of my winning this campaign." She mentally deliberated for a moment; Campbell saw the gears working. "It stops...now, or you can leave this office now."

"What?" Campbell was shocked, his levity suddenly gone.

"If you refuse, then you obviously do not support this campaign. I cannot legitimately give money from the campaign to someone who does not support it. Even with the danger you are posing to the campaign's public image aside, your lack of support is a good enough reason for me." Campbell could not tell if she was suppressing a smile or not.

He shook his head. "I don't get it. Who are you going to get to run your computer, and do all the other shit that I've been doing around here? Answer me that."

"Ronald."

"Ronald?" Campbell barked high laughter. "Ronald doesn't even live inside the city; he's not eligible to vote in the election, so he could care less who won. And he supports the campaign anymore than I do?"

"That is irrelevant." She excised his logic quickly before it could spread. "Either you stop seeing her, or you leave this office."

Now."

Campbell could not believe what he was hearing, but he knew by the look on his mother's face it was all true.

He had known he wasn't going to get out of this situation without having to play a game of her choosing, and now she had thrown her cards on the table. He had to decide. So he thought, really thought about what had been placed in front of him. There was the money, which was his ticket back to school and the path toward the rest of his life. But then there was Danielle, his ticket and path to perhaps another life.

He remembered the first time they kissed, the trip he had taken to find her soul, and how it was more beautiful than anything he had ever seen or felt. He had sworn to go there again. He loved Danielle Peterson. There was no denying it, and nothing else was going to deny him it either. "All right, then," he whispered to himself, "I'll go to hell."

Susan's face contorted in confusion, "What?"

"I said go fuck yourself," he raised his voice to a normal level.

Campbell felt incredibly calm.

Susan was incredulous. "Campbell, think about what you're saying, just for a second."

"I did think about it. For more than a second," he replied, "and I said to go fuck yourself."

"But Campbell, the money "

"Unlike the people you are used to dealing with around here, my soul has no price tag."

She laughed. "Oh, baby, that's so good. You better write that one down." There was a trace of pity in her voice.

"Oh, believe me," he got up and made his way to the door, "I will. I'll be back Monday to pick up my last check."

"You're not getting another penny out of me," she told him coldly.

"Monday," he repeated and shut the door behind him.

He left the campaign office without looking at anyone, though he felt as if every pair of eyes present was staring at him.

No doubt they knew already he had been fired. The only person absent was Ronald. He probably figured out what I was going to treat myself to on my last day here, Campbell thought absently. The front door of the office swung closed behind him, and a weight fell from his shoulders.

He slid behind the wheel of Big Blue and sat for a moment, thinking. He was thinking about a void of tremendous proportions that had risen up, yet again, to yawn in front of him: the uncertainty of his future. What was he to do now?

He knew he had a future with Danielle, he felt that was certain. But to have that be the extent of his future was tempting but impractical. There was school to think of, a job, other issues that needed to be addressed. He had to make plans. There were calls to make, to ensure they would have a future together. Things he had to do. He had to lay this monster to rest again, but he would do it.

He would do it for her.

He shook his head as he started the car. Doing it for her was not enough. He would do it for himself as well.

Campbell walked into Ray's Diner. A sizable late lunch crowd sat about, some talking to their companions, others dining alone and reading. Campbell nodded to a group of men by the door, all of them sporting baseball caps with names of truck companies on them. Jack stood with his back to the room, working the grill like a master.

Campbell found an empty stool at the bar and sat down. Ray was there in a flash. "Saw the apartment up there, Campbell, it's looking good," he said. "You want me to get you something, or hell, you know where everything is, do " Ray stopped and took a good look at Campbell's face. "Is everything all right, kiddo?"

Jack turned from his work. "Campbell, what are you doing home so early?"

"That's right," Ray nodded, "you're supposed to be at work.

What happened?"

"I got fired," Campbell smiled, a very wan smile at that. My future is in jeopardy, he commented silently, and yet I feel so collected about the whole thing.

Jack heard this and abandoned his post. His face grew grave with his disbelief. He and everyone else who knew Campbell or went anywhere near Blair Headquarters knew Campbell worked for them like a dog. What the hell could have happened? "What are you talking about? Why'd she fire you?"

"Danielle," Campbell shrugged. "I guess I'm an embarrassment to the family." He laughed.

"Christ," Ray said under his breath, shaking his head, "I was afraid of something like that."

"She said get rid of her or get out," Campbell summarized.

"You needed that money to go back to school, Campbell," Ray pointed out.

"Yes, I did."

Ray sighed. "I hope Danielle knows what she means to you."

"Don't tell her what happened," Campbell said in a tone that managed to be both pleading and commanding. "You either, Jack.

If anyone should tell her, it's me. I want her to find out from me, if I tell her at all."

"What do you mean, 'if you tell her at all?'" Jack asked.

"The last thing she needs to think right now is that she got me fired from my job," Campbell explained, trying to make sense of it in his own mind. "I don't want to make her think she's hurting me at all. I " Campbell rubbed at his temple again. A headache was beginning to growl there. "I don't know," he finished weakly. "My head hurts, and I've got to go to Plan B, which involves me getting to a phone." He turned to Jack. "They hook it up today?"

"Finally, yes," Jack responded. He would help Campbell, but he had never been in this situation before and was uncertain what he could do.

"Good." Campbell rose from his seat. "I need to make some calls to some people, and try to figure out what Plan B is." He turned from them and started to make his way up the stairs to the apartment. "And then, I may even have to see my father." He was gone.

"If you need anything, just holler, okay?" Ray called up after him. He then shook his head and walked back over to Jack, who was putting his attention back to the grill. "I hope he can figure out something."

"I'm sure he will," Jack replied. "If anyone can figure out a way to survive, it's Campbell."

"This doesn't change the living arrangements, does it?" Ray asked after a moment.

Jack looked up. "Why should it?"

Ray nodded. "You're a good man, Jack Hardin. Your father would be proud of you."

Jack thought of Debra and the way they had parted, "Are you sure?"

"Even if he wouldn't be, I know I am."

"Thanks, Ray," Jack smiled. The older man clapped him on the back.

They went back to their work.

Campbell awoke from a light doze. He looked at the digital clock on the table; it was after eight o'clock. He wondered if Danielle was at the paper. He wished he could go and see her, but he knew she would be busy.

He looked down the list of people he had called. Some of these were ones he had called before, some were newly remembered. He had been through half of them. So far all had told him there were no openings to help him right now, but they'd be glad to get back with him. He gave them his number in New York and said he would appreciate anything they could do for him.

There were no jobs for him anywhere, it seemed. He felt frustrated and angry at himself.

One thing at a time, a voice in his head spoke up, one thing at a time. You're missing one that's very important. You gave up your ticket out of here for Danielle, and you're looking for another ticket already. Are you just going to up and leave her?

He stopped striking through one of the names on the list. No, he had not considered that before. He could not leave Danielle here, and yet he could not stay himself. His scholarship would die, and no school down here could give him what he needed. He had to return to New York. But what to do about Danielle? The thought of being without her seemed unbearable. So what if she wants to come, too?

Campbell decided to stop right there. No sense in worrying about something prematurely. He would have to discuss the matter with Danielle and go from there. He would tell her what happened. He had no choice.

He put all of it out of his mind, and decided to let it lie, at least for tonight.

But there was something else.

He opened the phone book and began to look down the list. There were not as many listings for Davis as one would have thought.

Chapter Twenty

-One

An hour previously Campbell left for his date with Danielle, apparently in good spirits. Jack thought Campbell was always capable of a great recovery, or at least a hell of an acting job. Campbell's entire Saturday was spent trying to figure out where to go for financial help, but to no avail. He was more discouraged than he would let on, and Jack hoped that everything went well with Danielle tonight. He also wondered if she really understood how deeply Campbell cared for her.

Over the past few days, Jack had made progress on his latest work. After wishing Campbell good luck for his evening, he played the two completed pages for Karen.

Karen was so pleased with what she heard that she immediately grabbed a pile of music, both original and not, and commanded him to play them.

He played this impromptu concert for her, interweaving various musical styles. Karen sat back, smiling all the while, and appeared to love every minute of it.

Kim never seemed to understand his music. She would simply stand there after he had finished playing, and compliment him, yes, but it always had the air of "That's all?" about it.

He finished the last piece on his play list and turned around on the bench. "Like?"

"Like," she beamed. "You really do need to think about what Campbell said, you know. You'd have a much better chance making it in New York than you would here."

"I know." Jack rested one hand on the keyboard. God, I miss my piano, he thought. I didn't feel like moving it the bed and the other furniture was fun enough...but soon. "Don't think that I haven't been thinking about it, because I have." He looked up at her and smiled.

"I just might do it, too."

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back on the bed, Karen on top of him, showering him with kisses. "That's great," she managed to say amidst her barrage.

He put a finger to her lips in an attempt to allow himself to speak. "And I just might want to take you with me," he said simply.

"Oh." The smile on Karen's face was replaced with surprise.

Karen sat up. "Jack, what are you asking?"

"I'm not asking for marriage or anything, not yet anyway," he replied. "I just would like you to come with me. I kind of like having you around...and I happen to be in love with you."

She seemed to have no idea what to say, which in Jack's mind was a rare occasion.

"Don't answer now. Just think about it." He took both of her wrists in his hands and pulled her forward. She was on top of him again, and their mouths did not want to speak any longer.

With minds of their own, their hands moved across each other's bodies, their eyes never opening, their lips never ceasing their work.

In another moment Karen was free from her shirt, and Jack moved his mouth away from hers to concentrate on a spot below her chin.

"What... what are we doing?" she managed to ask.

"Do you want to stop?" He paused from her neck for a moment.

She gasped her words, fighting herself over what to do. "No I just...but...please don't don't stop..."

"I have to, I " Jack stopped, closed his eyes, and let his mind focus. He gently parted the two of them. "We have to talk for a minute."

She brushed her hair out of her face and caught her breath.

"Yes, we do," she said in a relieved tone.

His hand remained on her shoulder. "Do you want to ?"

"I Yes, yes I do." Her skin was flushed.

"And you have...before ?"

"Yes. You?"

"Yes. And I hate to ask, but ?"

She put a hand over his. "Don't worry, just ask."

"You used...precautions?"

"Always. You?"

"Always. And have you, uhm, been tested?"

"Recently, yes. You?"

"Yes. Everything "

"Perfect."

"Perfect."

"I love you, Jack Hardin," she said.

"And I love you, Karen Wilson," he said.

And they pulled each other closer.

"...and then she fired you," Danielle finished.

"Yes," Campbell replied.

They were in her apartment. Campbell sat on the couch in the living room. Danielle had stood up halfway through Campbell's story and remained standing now.

"All because of "

"Yes," Campbell said quietly.

She sighed, and then shook her head forcefully. "I knew something like this was going to happen "

"Danielle..."

" I just didn't know when, I mean "

"Danielle..."

" and I am so sorry about your job, I "

He got up and gripped her by the forearms. "Danielle." He pitched his voice loud enough to get her attention. She stopped and looked at him. "It doesn't matter, because I just want to be with you." He kissed her gently on the forehead.

She did not move. "It doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't."

Her look became suspicious. "You just lost the ability to go back to school, which is why you came here in the first place...and you're telling me it doesn't matter?"

"That's right," Campbell repeated, "maybe you weren't listening, but I want to be with you."

She took a step back. "Campbell, maybe you've forgotten, but I'm in love with someone else."

"I know that."

"And yet, you " Her gaze softened. "You gave it up for me..."

I " Then her face changed and was accusing. "What good is it, anyway? What are you going to do? It really doesn't matter because you're going to find a way to get back to school, and then you're going to leave."

Campbell crossed his arms and smiled. "I've thought about that, too, and I want you to come with me."

Danielle seemed struck speechless. She sat down on the couch, her brow furrowed. "You would want me to "

"Yes, and you don't have to answer now."

She rubbed at her temples. "What would I do in New York?"

He looked at her incredulously. "What kind of a question is that? You'd do what you always wanted to do, work for a real paper in a real city."

"I don't know," she said, "I'll have to think about it." She put her head into her hands. "Why, Campbell?"

Campbell raised an eyebrow. "Why what?"

Danielle looked up. She was crying. "Why did you have to come here and complicate everything? I knew everything I wanted or needed until I met you. And now I don't know anything anymore."

He sat down next to her and took her in his arms. "I'd say I was sorry but I'd be lying."

She wiped at her eyes with the back of one hand. "And you're far too noble to lie."

They sat there for a while and said nothing, the silence only broken by Danielle's occasional snuffle.

She turned to him. "I love you," she said suddenly.

He blinked. "I love you, too."

She hesitated. "You weren't supposed to say it back."

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

She looked into his eyes, and he looked back into hers.

"That reminds me," she smiled and stood up, "I owe you something."

Before he could say or ask anything, she disappeared down the hallway. A minute later, she walked back into the room, and just stood there. "Well," she asked, "what do you think?"

It took him all of four seconds to recognize what had changed.

It was her eyes. Her real eyes. He took slow, careful steps towards her, fixated on them the entire way.

They were wholly brown, the most amazing brown he had ever seen. They were the deepest eyes he had ever gazed into, and he felt like stepping forward and drowning in those eyes.

So he did.

She flicked the light switch off, and the two became shadows in the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

-Two

Campbell looked once more from the apartment building to the address he had scribbled down, just to be sure.

For the third time, it was right. This was the place.

His heart sank.

Even after all this time, a part of him had still expected to receive some kind of respite here. Even after all this time, it hurt him to see someone who had been close to him in a place such as this.

Campbell ran a hand back through his hair and thought, One never does completely grow out of the idea that somewhere, someone can make everything all better. It's hope that does it, and sometimes I wish I could cut it right out of me. If I knew where to make the incision, I'd probably start right now.

But this was the frustration in him talking, so he bade it be quiet and let him do what he had to.

He checked to see that Big Blue was secure and then made his way into the courtyard between buildings.

Campbell saw in his mind's eye what the Park Street Apartments must have been like in their heyday – a heyday which appeared to be more than forty years in the past.

A stone fountain, dry as a bone, stood guard in the middle of the courtyard. A swimming pool, still covered here in the height of summer, sat next to it. The lounge chairs were misused and forgotten, slats missing like the grins of toothless old men. A single inner tube, deflated, rested by one of them.

The metal stairs were rusted at the edges, and closer inspection revealed that someone had recently, perhaps in the last year or so, tried to execute some preventive maintenance by simply repainting black over the rusted portions. Campbell made sure to keep one hand on the unsteady railing as he made his way up.

The apartment he sought was on the fourth floor. He finished his upward climb and checked the numbers on the doors. From what he could tell, he was supposed to turn right.

A child peeking out of a slightly cracked door watched him walk past. Inside that apartment, a football game droned on and on.

Campbell had the sudden feeling that Rod Serling was going to step out and welcome him. He wondered if everything would shift to black and white.

He passed two citizens sitting in folding chairs. They seemed to be passing the time by looking out into the courtyard. He noted the cooler between them and the cheap beer they clutched. He nodded to them and kept going without a word.

Finally, on his left, apartment four-sixteen. He knocked.

A quick glance stolen to his left showed the two men nonchalantly keeping one eye in his direction. Let me entertain you, he thought absently and knocked again.

"What the hell is it?" a voice from inside demanded. "If you've come to turn the power off again, I swear I'll kick me some ass! I paid this month, for Christ's sake!"

"Dad, it's me," Campbell leaned against the door to say.

There was a pause. When the voice came this time, it was inches from Campbell, with only the flimsy wooden door between them. "Me who?"

"Me Campbell. You Dad. Now open the door, we're giving a free show out here." With this, Campbell nodded again to the two spectators, who returned his nod and smiled.

The door opened a crack, and he saw his father's face underneath the chain. "Son of a bitch," he breathed, and the stench of alcohol blew through the space the door had left.

The door quickly shut, and Campbell heard the chain being clumsily taken off. Then the door opened again, and Campbell's heart, which had already fallen to the bottom, started digging.

Norman Davis stood in the open doorway, one hand on the door, and the other wrapped around a bottled beer with no distinguishable label. He was clad in an armless T-shirt, its whiteness a faded memory. His jeans were weary as well and hung on his skinny frame in a disgruntled fashion. "Damn," the specter said, and then repeated it as if for emphasis. "Damn. Long time, boy, and you've changed a lot, but still I know your face."

Campbell wished he could say the same. He had not seen the man in front of him for a long time. It had been at least ten years since he had seen his father in the flesh, and at least nine since he had a photograph to refer to. A vague idea came to him that some stranger had stolen his father away somewhere and taken his place.

There was no way his father could have become the creature Campbell saw before him now. But some deeper part of him assured him that yes, this was his father. This deep part also prompted him to pay attention and learn.

"Dad, can I come in?"

Norman Davis gave a quick glance back into the darkness of his apartment, and then motioned his son inside. "Sure, come on in.

It's not the Park Place, or whatever that hotel is you had up in New York, but I hope you won't think too badly of my housekeeping."

He edged a cardboard box out of the pathway into the apartment with his foot and kept speaking. "Maid would never come to work, so I had to fire her ass." He chuckled at his joke and motioned to the sofa. "Have a seat. Beer?"

"It's the Plaza, Dad, and no, I never had it that good." Campbell sat down on the couch. He shared this particular piece of furniture with a section of the Herald's want ads, a few of them circled in pen. "And no thanks, I'm not up for a beer."

Norman Davis clicked on a lamp next to his chair. "I was just taking a nap when you knocked. Worked late last night trying to catch up. Know what I'm doing these days?"

Campbell shook his head.

"Fixing electronics down at the big Circuit Central. Not bad work. Had to take the overtime when I could get

it, though.

They've cut me back a bit." He wiped at a spot on the knee of his jeans. "Well, you know, Plaza...Park Place. At least it wasn't one of those damn purple ones near the Go! space, you know?" Norman Davis laughed, quite pleased with himself. "You might not have had it that good up in New York, but I hear you're riding high down here. Living up above Raymond Wilson's place with the Hardin boy." He considered this while he rubbed at his stubble. "You're not screwing the boy, are you, Campbell? I didn't raise me no faggots." A stern look was thrown across the room.

"No, Dad, not since last time I checked."

Norman Davis grunted, seemingly in approval. "Well, that's one thing, I guess. Not that I would know if you was a faggot or not.

Been a long time, son. Been a long time since you got back in town, too. What brings you down to my castle? I figure this probably isn't a social call." While Campbell was trying to figure out what to say, Norman Davis continued. "I heard that your mother, God love her, fired your ass." He considered his beer, and then as he brought it to his lips, added, "I also heard why."

Campbell said nothing.

"Well," Norman Davis went on, as the beer bottle drifted back down to the arm of his chair, a movement Campbell was sure had been repeated more times than even the arm itself was aware of, "I guess if you were willing to lose a job about it, nothing I can say will do a bit of good to convince you some other way but where you're going. So I won't say anymore about it. No need to thank me." He managed the better part of a smile. "But I certainly hope you haven't come here looking for help." The smile, which had tried to revive itself on his haggard face, now completely expired.

He looked around his living room. "You can probably guess that I can't help myself."

Campbell felt himself following his father's gaze. There was another chair in the corner, with a stack of newspapers residing on it. On the wall behind it were a few pictures, haphazardly hung.

Some were of his father's relatives. One was of his father and a very young child who once was Campbell himself. There were none of Campbell's mother. A battered television sat precariously on a folding tray against the wall, and an even more battered picture of Christ hung slightly to the left above it. The living room was sparse indeed, and beyond it was the kitchen. Campbell dropped his gaze away, for his heart was sick of using its shovel.

"I...I really don't know why I'm here," Campbell admitted, both to his father and to himself.

Norman Davis grunted again. "Fair enough," a statement he punctuated with another long draught of his beer. "Well, I know you won't believe this, but there's not much I can do or say that will help you, Campbell." He thought on this a long moment, and then corrected himself. "No, there is one last thing." He brought the bottle back to his lips, but before the two connected, his eyes shifted to Campbell on the sofa. "Would you like to hear it?"

Campbell nodded.

Norman Davis finished the beer and set it aside. "Well, all right then. My legacy to you, Campbell. Here it is." He leaned forward in the chair and laced his fingers together in front of him.

"I never really wanted to have a kid, did you know this? You, my boy, were a mistake." He looked up at Campbell to gauge his son's reaction. Campbell's expression had not changed. "But, we didn't believe in, well, correcting mistakes like some people might have, so we had you. And for a while, things only got worse. We could not work ourselves out of our hole, if you know what I mean. We would work and work, and come home from work, and work and work at making each other just as miserable as we could.

"Mostly, we'd succeed. It wasn't like before, you understand, I never would've married the woman if I hadn't felt something for her. But it died somewhere along the way, and to this day I don't know exactly where it did. When you were born, between the strain of having a kid, and the strain of keeping the bills paid, it kept going downhill. But then, that all changed.

"I'll never forget the day the day the letter showed up in the mail. Our phone had been cut off, and we were ready to tear each other's heads off and shit down each other's throats. Then, the letter." Norman Davis reached for his beer, and when his hand clutched the bottle, he remembered it was empty. He left it where it sat, not moving to retrieve another one from the refrigerator.

"It was the estate of my grandfather, my mother's father. He had left a good amount of money to me. So, just like that, half the reason we had to be upset and pissy all the time went out the window. Suddenly, we were rich. And all those people who said that money could not buy happiness were proved wrong. Wrong." He laughed.

"So anyway, after all of those financial worries were gone, I... we...actually enjoyed being parents. I kind of got attached to you, like I couldn't be while I was working in Sanderford Hardware all day and then at the Kroger well into the next morning. I had time to be a father. So I liked it. And everything was fine. Well, almost.

"Once up in with the society people, your mother took to it like she was born for it." He smiled a thin smile. "And maybe she was. But as for me, no sir, I didn't like it much. A bunch of people standing around who have so much money that all they want to do is stand around, and have balls, and dances, and things that...just aren't necessary.

"Once your mother got a taste of what it was like up there in the clouds, she wanted to go even higher. And that meant that anything from before that was holding her down she wanted to get rid of it, she wanted to cut it loose. That meant me." Norman Davis' eyes came to rest on Campbell. "And you, too, Campbell, but not as much. I guess a son's never as heavy as a husband."

He laughed, and wiped a hand across his forehead. He shook his head, laughed again, and continued.

"Going to all of those parties, and those society dinners, made me into a social drinker. I would have one or two beers every now and then before the letter, but afterwards I could afford to drink as much as I wanted. And it kept being more all the time." He hummed a moment to himself, collecting his thoughts. "I think that's why she decided to get rid of me. It...I had become an embarrassment, and because of that, I got a lot heavier.

"So, one night while I was in our house, getting ready for one of those parties, or dinners, or whatever the hell it was we were doing that evening...I think you were at the babysitter's house. That night, I had started drinking early. Really early. I was there staring at myself in the mirror, trying to work one of those bowties, the kind that's not already made for you. My fingers wouldn't work it right, and it kept coming out all in different ways but a good honest to God bow."

He sniffed at this thought. "So, anyway, in comes your mother, and out of the blue she starts laying into me. Real quiet, though, not raising her voice. Starts talking about what a goddamn drunk I am, and how she can't imagine taking me to the party in the state I was in. Taking me!" Norman Davis snorted. "Like she was the

one with the money and not me. So I told her so, and she told me that that would all change real soon. And she knew how. I started cursing at her. Cursing that woman like I had never spoken to a woman before in my life."

Norman Davis looked down and noticed his hands were clenched into fists, his rough and tanned hands white at the knuckles. "Then she laughed at me. She told me that I was an idiot, and then she laughed in my face."

In the dim light that filtered in through the yellowed curtains, Campbell watched as the first exploratory tear ran down his father's face. Campbell also saw that no more followed suit.

"You know what came next," his father said, making no move to wipe away the trail the tear had made. "But let me tell you anyway.

"She was frightened of me at this point, for I was so angry, I felt like I could have snapped her in two. I probably would have." He paused for a moment to think on this, and gave an empty laugh despite himself. "Probably should have.

"Anyway," he waved the thought aside, "she backed out of our bedroom, as I cursed and swore even louder than before about how I would kill her for what she had done, or what she was trying to do.

"And in that last moment, right before...well, her face changed.

And she smiled at me. Not a happy, glad to see you kind of smile, but an evil smile. That I was doing what she wanted me to do. And I was. Because that smile pushed me right over the edge. I hit her.

Flat hit her right in the mouth before I realized what I was doing."

Now his father absently brushed the tear away. "Had never hit her before, would have never hit her since, would never have hit her to begin with if she had just shut up. But that didn't matter. Especially not to the six or so people at the bottom of the stairs who I had conveniently not heard come in. One of whom was the police chief's wife, another of whom was her husband."

Campbell sat dumbfounded while his father began to laugh uncontrollably. He held his stomach and rocked back and forth in his chair. "Can you imagine?" he managed to ask between gales of uncontrollable laughter, "How it felt to realize that you'd been setup? The whole time, the whole thing was nothing more than a setup?"

Campbell nodded. "I think I do," he replied simply.

His father wiped at his eyes now, which were tearing up from his grim merriment. "Yeah, I guess you do. Well, ah well." He sighed.

"Well, there wasn't much left but the shouting. The divorce, and of course, with such great friends and such great witnesses I lost everything I owned. My wife, my house, my son, my money, everything. I still pay alimony, can you believe that?

"And I'm not innocent in this, son." His eyes came to rest on Campbell again, boring the words into his son's skin. "I'm not saying none of this was my doing. No one made me drink, no one made me hit me my wife, no one made me become a fool. I'm not saying I'm a victim who probably didn't deserve a lot of this, but still "

His eyes wandered away. "But still

"Well, you're probably wondering what any of this has to do with anything, and the answer is real simple. It's an example for you not to follow. You're doing real good for yourself, but there's something you need to know, and it's about advice that you will get from just about everybody you meet. They'll look at you, and they'll say you should follow your heart."

Campbell's father shook his head. "I followed my heart when I met your mother, and married her. I followed my heart when I got the letter, and got caught up in things I couldn't understand or control. I followed my heart when she got me mad, and I hit her. I followed my heart, and I ended up here." He held out his hands to show the boundaries of his domain. He indicated the entire filthy living room.

"Your heart is a foolish thing. And it will get you into scrapes like you cannot believe. I think you may have already been in one or two already, and I think you're probably in one now. A lot of times you think you're following your heart, you're really following somebody else's. And then when you know you're following your heart, you end up trapped in a life where they still whisper in public about the wife abuser, and ain't it a shame " His voice was mocking and high, and he stopped himself.

"Now the question is obvious. At least, it should be.

"If a man can't follow his heart, or maybe, if he ain't supposed to...what the hell is a man supposed to follow?"

Campbell made no response. His father did not expect one.

"And I don't know the answer. I don't know the answer at all."

He gestured at Campbell. "Maybe that's what you're supposed to figure out. Maybe that's what you have to learn." He dropped his head a little. "Maybe that's what we all have to learn."

He raised his head again, and the musing philosophic look was gone from his eyes.

"Sure you wouldn't like a beer?" He asked.

Campbell wished he could decide what the hardest part of his visit to his father had been. He thought on it as he passed the deserted folding chairs and made his way down the rickety metal steps.

Had it been the knowledge that his father had wanted to pass along?

Had it been seeing his father reduced to such an existence?

Had it been hugging his father goodbye, an action which he was not sure either of them had expected to happen, and knowing he would more than likely never see his father alive again? Knowing that his father would sit in his helplessness and drink himself into a shallow early grave?

He made his way across the cracked and worn parking lot to his car. He unlocked the heavy door, opened it, and got in quickly, wanting to flee from this place as fast as he could.

"You take care of yourself, Campbell," his father had told him, the alcohol on his breath punctuating the words and giving them meaning he could not quite fathom. "In the end, you're all you have."

He felt like crying there in the parking lot of the Park Street Apartments. But he did not cry.

He did not cry.

Instead, he took note of his father's advice, and backed out of the parking space.

Campbell was correct about one thing, at the very least.

He never saw his father alive again.

Chapter Twenty

-Three

Campbell walked down into the diner.

Ray and Karen were working the counter while Jack was busy at the grill. Considering the way he was handling several different orders at once, Campbell had a sudden insane idea to set up a row of sticks, and see how many plates Jack could keep spinning.

Campbell had a feeling he would do pretty well indeed.

He sat down at the counter. Within moments, Karen made a cup of coffee appear in front of him.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked weakly, looking at her from beneath heavy eyelids.

"Psychic," she tapped her forehead, smiled, and kept moving.

Campbell upturned the sugar dispenser and watched the contents pour into his cup. "You're an angel," he told her.

"Good morning," Jack called over his shoulder.

Campbell took a sip of his coffee. "Mornin', neighbor."

"Weren't you supposed to be going to get your last check today?" Jack asked.

"Supposed to be," Campbell remarked, keeping both hands on the coffee cup. The warmth was rather pleasant; he felt it spreading up through his arms. Yesterday, after returning from the visit with his father, he had felt cold for the remainder of the day. Campbell knew there was nothing in the world he could do to help his father;

his father was the only one who could help his father. This was not what had disturbed him so. It was the simple detachment he had felt, sitting at home and reading through the night. All of the feelings he had experienced for his father during his relatively short life—love, respect, resentment, and perhaps, yes, even hatred here and there—all of them were gone now. He was left with only a vague sense of loss and nothing more.

"Well, I called down there to see when I could come get it, and they gave me the runaround." Campbell was tempted to pitch his voice high so that everyone in the diner could hear his dissatisfaction. He did not. He added without a dramatically ominous twinge to his voice, "They obviously haven't powered on the computer yet."

"What do you m—" Jack began, but was interrupted by the front door of the diner being thrown open.

"Good morning, Ronald," Campbell called out without turning around.

Ronald's face was flushed and his tie hung askew, as if he had been quite upset, running, or both. "Don't you 'Good morning, Ronald' me," he panted.

"I thought that's what you say to people in the mornings,"

Campbell swiveled around on his stool to face him. "I thought the South was a neighborly place."

"You infected the office computer with the Low Key Virus!"

Ronald accused, ignoring Campbell's banter. "I don't believe even you could do a thing like that!"

Campbell set his coffee cup down and began to speak very calmly and very slowly. All eyes in the diner had turned to him.

"You know, Ronald, because you're upset, and because since you obviously are badly out of shape, seeing as how you only ran two blocks to get over here and you look like you're about to fall over dead, I'm not going to smack you around for saying that I've done something I haven't. Even though I am for the most part a practicing pacifist, I would not mind doing said smacking, because lying is something that makes me want to break things, or people, as the case may be." Campbell held up a finger. "What I will do, however, is I will give you a chance to take me to the computer in question and let me show you how wrong you really are."

He stood up, and Ronald jerked a step backwards. Either he was not sure what a "practicing pacifist" was, or he did not buy Campbell's claim that he was one.

"I will say," Campbell continued, "that if your employer had simply paid me the money that I was due without a lot of hullabaloo, then all of this could have been avoided. Shall we go?" Campbell gestured to the door.

Ronald went out, still trying to keep one eye on Campbell; as if Ronald thought he would make a break for the state line at any given moment. Campbell followed him.

Before he closed the door, Campbell called back. "Back in five."

The door closed.

No one spoke for several seconds, and then finally it fell to Ray to break the silence. "What the hell has he done now?" he asked, trying not to smile and failing. He turned to Jack. "I'll take the grill; you make sure that he doesn't do anything he might regret."

"That doesn't cover much," Jack remarked, stripping off his apron.

"Well, then you better hurry," Ray countered, picking up a spatula.

Jack caught the door to the campaign office just as it was swinging shut. He opened it in time to see both Campbell and Ronald disappearing down the hall and into a side office. He followed them.

He heard Susan Davis' voice all the way from the front door.

"I want it fixed now," she was saying. "This is serious business, Campbell. Sabotage—it's so unlike you."

Campbell sat down in front of the computer.

The screen said:

Good morning, Campbell.

Please enter your password correctly the first time or the system will be infected with the Low Key Virus and all data will be lost!

Have a nice day!

PASSWORD: _

The cursor was blinking and waiting for input after the word PASSWORD.

"It is very like me, however," Campbell said, "to want my check.

I called here earlier and they told me it might be a week or more before I got it. I told you I wanted it today. Give me the money you owe me, and I promise you your computer will be fine."

Ronald opened his mouth again. "This is illegal, Campbell!"

He turned to Susan. "I believe I remember reading about Low Key.

It wipes your hard drive, makes your modem dial 911, and causes physical damage to the system board."

"Does it, now?" Campbell asked him in mock seriousness.

"We should call the police!" Ronald demanded of her.

Campbell shrugged. "Only if you want to make yourselves look even more ridiculous." He thought for a moment before adding, "If such a thing is humanly possible. My check, mother?" He held out his hand.

Susan Davis stood there for a moment, her lips shut tight. Jack could tell she was not used to being backed into a corner. The fact it was Campbell doing the backing did not seem to help the situation. After a moment of intense internal deliberation, she turned away from her son. "Ronald, bring me the checkbook. In my office, the top righthand drawer."

"But " Ronald began.

"Ronald," she commanded firmly, "do it. Now." She looked as if she wanted to tear someone's head off and any someone would do.

Ronald exited the room very quickly.

No one spoke for several seconds.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, mother," Campbell began amicably.

"Oh, shut up you," Susan cut him off.

Ronald reentered the room, checkbook in hand. He handed it to Susan. She stood there.

"Start writing," Campbell prompted. "It's two L's, if you've forgotten."

Susan Davis put the checkbook down on the desk and threw the cover open. She flipped until she found a blank check and began writing. She signed her name in a furious scribble, tore the check out, and thrust it into Campbell's waiting hand.

"A pleasure doing business with you," Campbell told her, and then turned to the computer. "Now for my part of the deal."

He tapped the space bar.

"NO!" Ronald exclaimed, and tried to tear Campbell's hands away from the keyboard.

But it was too late.

The computer continued to boot normally.

Recognition dawned in Susan Davis' face.

Campbell turned to look at Ronald. "There was no password lock on the system at all. That was a text file I set to display on the screen everytime the system booted up. Instead of the 'Press any key to continue...' message, I changed it to say 'PASSWORD.'

There is no virus on this system at all. There is no such virus, to my knowledge, as Low Key. Loki was the Norse god of deception,"

Campbell smiled at his mother, "and lies."

He folded the check and placed it in his pocket. "Now that you know, Ronald, you can, I'm sure, easily edit out the text file from the startup sequence." He stood up and went to the door of the office.

Campbell ushered Jack out before him, and then poked his head back in. "Oh, and by the way, mother. I won't say that's the last surprise I left on the computer. It could be. But just in case the thought crosses your mind of stopping payment on this check before I get to the bank," he tapped his pocket. "I thought I might leave you with that enigma. Like the computer said, 'Have a nice day.'"

Campbell made a pistol with his hand, and aimed it at Ronald.

"Bang," he mouthed, and was gone.

Outside again, Jack and Campbell walked through the sunlit streets back to the diner. "Well?" Campbell asked his friend.

"You are a god among men," Jack said, smiling.

"That's what I was hoping you would say," Campbell sighed and examined the check. "Buy you breakfast?"

Chapter Twenty

-Four

Jack swam out of sleep to find someone kissing very slowly up his neck. When he managed to work his eyes open, he found the someone on top of him, and she had reached his chin.

"Can I wake up like this every morning?" He heard himself asking. "Or is this a special occasion?"

Karen rose up on her elbows. "Yes, this is a special occasion," she kissed him now on the lips, "and you should be very careful with the first question you asked, because I just might answer it.

Happy birthday, by the way."

Jack rolled this thought around his addled brain. "Oh, yes. I guess I am older now."

"Though not necessarily wiser." She ruffled his hair and removed herself from the bed.

Jack sat up and tried ineffectually to smooth his hair down.

"Thank you. It's good to be loved."

"Now, get out of bed, get dressed, and get downstairs," she instructed, then walked out of the room.

Jack saluted. "Yes, sir."

He was answered with a smile thrown over her shoulder, and the sound of her descending the steps.

Jack took a moment to assure himself that he did have legs, and they were functioning properly. Despite his body's protestations, he got out of bed and stretched. He scratched the base of his skull. Twenty-one, he thought. Twenty-one, independent, and in love.

He shook his head. Life is so very strange. Jack made his way into the bathroom.

Five minutes later, he heard Karen at the top of the stairs.

"Hon?"

Jack turned off the faucet so he could hear her better.

"Hmm?"

"Bring some aspirin when you come."

"Headache?" He called, "It's my understanding that you're not supposed to have those until after we're married."

Laughter. "You're really pushing it, Mr. Hardin. Just bring the aspirin, or I'll see to it you need some, too."

Jack grunted assent and splashed cold water on his face. This seemed to jar some other thought in his mind, for his voice stopped her before she could go back down the stairs. "Karen?"

"Yes, dear?" she responded, with only the slightest tinge of sarcasm.

"I was having a really strange dream when you woke me."

He heard her take two steps back up the stairs. "Hope I wasn't interrupting anything. Is this a dream you can tell me about?"

"Oh, please." He dried his face, and went back into the bedroom. He opened his closet and stopped, frowning. "Actually, I was waiting for you. I was in New York, and Campbell was there, too, but I couldn't see him. I just knew he was...around. And I was just...I don't know...waiting for you."

"Where was I?"

"I'm...not sure. That's what was strange."

"That's all?"

"Yes." Jack laughed. "For all I know, you were at the store."

"Oh, so you assume that I would do all the shopping?"

Jack took out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. "Okay, you were at the gym. Fill in the blank. Sheesh. Last time I tell you my dreams."

"Somehow I doubt that," she remarked, and he could hear a grin on her lips.

Jack smiled and got dressed.

"Well, it's about damn time," Campbell said as Jack descended into the diner.

Campbell was sitting on the counter next to a rather formidable picnic basket. Karen stood in front of it, looking through its contents, checking inventory. Ashley was at the booth across from them, sipping ice water.

"Well, well, the gang's all here," Jack observed. "I'm almost afraid to ask what happens now."

"Ask away, but we won't tell you." Karen hefted the basket from the counter and dropped it onto Ashley's table. "Are we ready?"

"We were born ready." Campbell slid to his feet. "We still need to make one stop."

Karen nodded.

Jack shrugged. "You're in on this, too, Ashley?"

"I've been sworn to secrecy." Ashley held up her hand in a botched version of "Scout's Honor".

Campbell laughed, and Ashley frowned at him. "One less finger," he pointed out and she giggled.

Karen went to Jack and took his hand. She held the basket in the other. "Are you ready?"

"Lead and I shall follow." He kissed her on the forehead.

"Good answer," she responded, and squeezed his hand.

The door to the office of the Macomber County Herald was answered by a man Campbell had never seen before. "Yes?"

Campbell was suddenly uncertain what he should say. I know you, Campbell thought at this stranger, and he felt a throbbing form somewhere behind his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I was expecting the intercom and not a live person.

No offense," Campbell added for a touch of humor.

The man either did not catch it or ignored it. "Intercom's busted and no one can get out to fix it until tomorrow. It was my turn to get up and answer the door. Are you here to see someone?"

"Ah, yes." Campbell was relieved to be back to the matter at hand. "Danielle Peterson."

The man blinked at him. "Danielle's not in today. In fact, she's out of town. She's gone to Houston for a conference. Can I tell her you stopped by?"

Campbell again was stopped dead in his tracks. The only thing that seemed to be marching on was his headache, and he began absently rubbing at his right temple. "Out of town," he repeated aloud. He had told her about today, told her they were taking Jack to the state park for his birthday. She had agreed to go along, never mentioning Houston at all. He knew something was wrong, but could not decide exactly what it was.

He looked up at the man. "All right then. Could you please tell her Campbell Davis stopped by."

"I'll do it." He gave Campbell a look before he shut the door.

Campbell, in turn, watched the man through the glass as he disappeared down the hallway. Campbell ran a hand back through his hair. Damn, he thought. This is an unexpected damper on my day.

He stood there a moment longer before going back to Big Blue, getting in, and starting up the car.

Ashley, who was riding shotgun, spoke up first. "Danielle's not coming?"

"No, Danielle's...not going to be able to make it." Campbell stared straight out through the windshield, at the place he had been standing not one minute before. "She had to go out of town."

"Oh," Ashley said. "Who was that at the door?"

"I'm fairly certain that was her boyfriend," Campbell returned, and the moment the words left his lips, he knew them to be true.

He turned to look over his right shoulder and back out of the parking space. His eyes met Jack's, and the situation communicated itself in its entirety. He felt Ashley shut up next to him and knew she was sure she had asked too much. Karen wore a face of unspoken apology.

Campbell could not deny the gnawing apprehension he felt, but knew that if he was not careful, it could, in this moment, infect the entire day. This was Jack's day, and he had no right to color it with his own problems. Very quickly, he said, "But hey, I've been wrong before." He smiled to show them that he was fine. The rest of the group half-believed him, and there followed a moment of awkward silence.

"Put in some Fishbone, Campbell," Jack offered to bridge the gulf.

"Fishbone?" Ashley looked at Jack and then to Campbell, her confusion obvious. "Who is Fishbone?"

A light came up in Campbell's eyes.

Jack gave an inner sigh of relief. He knew that all was okay. Not perfect, perhaps, but at least okay.

Chapter Twenty

-Five

"I really appreciate this, Campbell."

Jack and Campbell were sitting side by side on a stone wall, overlooking a wide expanse of forest. It stretched before them up and over the side of the mountain, its path broken only by the occasional hiking and biking trail.

After their crew had consumed the picnic lunch, they basically wandered amok through the state park. They had hiked enough to remind Jack how out of shape he really was, and Karen had gone to great pains to point this out to him with every huff and puff he let out. Finally, Karen told Ashley it would be a good idea to roam about on their own and let the "old man" rest. The two women left the two men sitting on the wall with instructions to guard the picnic basket.

Jack picked up the glance back and the smile that Karen had given him as she and Ashley walked off. She knew that he and Campbell had had little time of late to speak. She also knew it was important, especially given events outside the Herald office, that they do so. The glance, the smile, her understanding of his needs...all of these things made Jack's love for her work itself in even deeper. He seemed to be the fabled coin thrown into a well, never to hit bottom.

As for Campbell, he had been nursing a deep apprehension all day. He had kept it buried though, for the sake of their outdoors party. The relationship that Campbell had built with Danielle was precarious for many reasons, and the reasons seemed to keep multiplying. At random points during the day, Jack would look at Campbell and know his thoughts were on Texan soil, searching for Danielle.

Campbell had been there at this very moment, it seemed. He looked up at the sound of Jack thanking him. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Wake up," Jack waved a hand in front of Campbell's face and snapped his fingers. "I was trying to thank you for the lovely day that I am having."

Campbell returned to his body very quickly. "Oh, that. Well, since it seems to be going so well, I wish I could take the credit for it, but it was mostly your girlfriend's idea." Campbell shrugged, "I, of course, added additional editing and commentary wherever I thought it fit."

"Of course," Jack agreed.

"Oh, by the way," Campbell turned and began ruffling through the picnic basket, which Jack had assumed to be empty, except for the containers which had carried their lunch. He produced from it a brown grocery bag, which he handed to Jack. "Happy birthday.

Like the wrapping paper?"

"It's first class with you all the way, isn't it?" Jack smiled, and then opened the bag. Inside he found three books, two hardback editions and a paperback. The hardbounds were *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand and *Another Country* by James Baldwin. The paperback book was *Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury.

"The Baldwin I gave you just because it's a great book." Campbell tapped its cover. "If I could write half as good as this book is, then I would be set for life. The Bradbury is in paperback because you'll probably read it a lot, and it's a book that needs to be dog-eared. It's specifically about writing, but it can apply to all the arts,

in my opinion. And the Rand. Hmmm." Campbell touched a finger to his lips and smiled. "It took me about a year to read that book, because I was in college at the time, and as you see it's fairly sizable. Finally, one day I skipped class, went to the beach, and read the last three hundred pages. I did so because I had to finish it. It was time to finish it. So, I had a great experience and also received a pretty good sunburn."

Jack was not sure what to say. But he tried. "Campbell, if these are your only copies of these..."

Campbell laughed. "I give away my books all the time, but not this time. Generally everything I buy for consumption is paperback.

It's cheaper, and you don't feel so bad about taking notes in them.

I've written some of my best poems on the inside covers of books."

"So you bought these for me," Jack stated, a touch of wonder in his voice. "Campbell, this must have been expensive. Your whole purpose for coming down here was to make money to get back on your feet. You only got a month and a half of work in. You can't be "

Campbell cut him off. "Things have changed."

"Do you mean Danielle?"

"Danielle..." Campbell wanted to drift westward at the mention of her name, but forced himself to remain rooted firmly where he was. "No, it's not just that. I didn't come here simply for monetary reasons. I don't think so, anyway. I think that was just the excuse I gave myself and anyone else who would listen." He ran a hand back through his hair, and Jack wondered distantly if Campbell believed this stimulated brain activity. "I came back here for money, yes. But that's not all. I wanted money from my mother, but I also needed to know that I wasn't afraid of her anymore. I needed to know that I could leave again when I wanted to, and this time the police wouldn't be after me. I needed to see my father again, and though I went there with some thought in my head that maybe he could help me out financially, another part of me knew that wouldn't work. I needed to see him. I also needed to see Carol, and the others. I needed closure. I needed to come back here to get this part of my life behind me. I needed to come here and bury my childhood where it fell." Campbell went silent for a moment. He wanted to make sure he had said everything he meant to say. He thought he had, so he looked up at his friend. "Does that make any sense?"

Jack nodded. "I think so. But since you've had this revelation, what are you going to do now? You're not going to stay "

"No, I can't stay." Campbell sighed. "I don't belong here. Not anymore. I was meant to do other things. The time that I spent here before was important; it helped make me what I am now. So is this time that I've had with you. But now I've got to go back. Specifically, I need to be back in New York in a couple of weeks."

"Back in New York?" Jack's heart froze. There it was: Campbell was leaving. It was something Campbell had said was in his plan since the beginning, two months ago. A summer of work to supplement his scholarship, and that was it. Then he would leave. But still, Jack had not believed it. Somewhere in him was the thought, the hope, that Campbell would stay. When Danielle had entered the picture, it had become even more of a possibility. But now...

Campbell leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

"A few years ago, I did a favor for someone. He owns a communications company in Manhattan. He asked me what I wanted in return, and I asked for an 800 number. I have a message mailbox in New York for free."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "What kind of favor buys you something like that?"

"The kind that's better off unexplained," Campbell said simply.

"Anyway, that's where I've been asking people to call if they found me anything. And this guy I know did. A starting position at a magazine. I'll be doing what I like doing, writing, and doing it in the city I like to be in, and getting enough money to live on."

"To live on..." Jack repeated. "But what about school? You've got one year left, and your scholarship..."

"I know...I know." Campbell seemed to be reassuring both Jack and himself. "I can't do anything about it. This is a job that will at least get me back on my feet. I can finish school later." He almost winced when those words passed his lips. So many people Campbell had known over the course of his life had spoken those words, and nine times out of ten they were a dream. Those nine people would never see the inside of a classroom again. At least, not until they became a member of the PTA. Still, he knew the reason why.

"I really don't have much of a choice right now." He looked up at Jack. Campbell's eyes felt very tired.

Jack nodded. "Well, if that's what you think you have to do."

"It is," Campbell added, resigned.

"And Danielle?"

"Danielle..." Campbell echoed, but this time, his thoughts did not stray. He laced his fingers and closed his eyes. "It will work out."

It has to. She can come with me, if she wants to. She's talked about it before; she wants to work in a large market. New York's about as large as they come." Campbell stopped, and looked up again. "You could come, too, you know."

Jack was not quite sure what to say. "I have thought about leaving here, but..."

"It's familiar, isn't it?" Campbell asked.

"Familiar?"

"You're used to everything here. You know where the corner market is, you know where your favorite restaurants are. You know where everything is. Change is not an easy thing. It's not for everybody."

"Kids, don't try this at home," Jack observed.

Campbell smiled. "That's right, we're trained professionals."

They sat in silence for the better part of a minute.

"Campbell, can I ask you a question?"

"You just did."

Jack scowled. "Another question, smartass."

"Shoot."

"How is that you seem so serene with all of this? Danielle, your parents, your job, your money...does anything make you upset?"

"Upset?" Campbell was incredulous. He pointed to his temple, laughing. "Jack, I'm losing my damn mind in here! I have no idea what's going on. I'm blundering about in the dark. What gave you the idea that I was serene?"

"Okay, okay," Jack acknowledged, "perhaps serene was the wrong word. But if I had to deal with all of this, I'd be wadded up in a ball in a corner, paralyzed."

"Oh, that. Well, hmmm." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "Okay, it's like this: Stand up."

"Stand up?" Jack smirked. "You mean it's that simple?"

"You're close, but shut the hell up and let me finish."

They stood up.

"Now, do you see that over there?" Campbell pointed straight ahead.

Jack squinted. "More trees?"

"No. In perspective drawing, there is a place that everything comes from. It's where all lines converge. They call it the vanishing point. See it? There at the horizon."

"I see it."

"Now, here's the deal: When you get there, when you arrive at that point, everything is going to be fine. I mean everything. No worries, no doubts, no debts, no hatred. Everything will be perfect.

Got it?"

"Campbell, yes, but "

"No buts. You asked, just listen. Take three steps forward with me."

Jack did as he was told. They walked three steps forward, almost in unison.

"Right," Campbell said. "Now guess what that point just did."

Jack made no reply.

"It took three steps, too. Away from you."

"So how the hell are you supposed to get there?"

"You'll never find out standing in one place, now will you?"

Campbell asked. "The trip there is everything."

Jack nodded. "I think I understand."

They went and resumed their places on the wall. "Thanks for the books, Campbell." Jack looked over his gifts.

"Books, music, and truth are the only three things worth giving anyone anymore," Campbell replied, counting them off on his fingers.

"That's a bit redundant, isn't it?" Jack asked him. "The third kind of covers the first two, doesn't it?"

Campbell nodded. "Excellent point."

Chapter Twenty

-Six

Years later, when Jack would look back on the strange and wonderful summer of 1993, there were many details and many events which had become omitted or changed over the course of time. This was to be expected, for memory is a malleable thing.

However, one recollection Jack knew to be still in its original, unedited form, was the exact moment the summer ended. Not in the seasonal sense, for it was only mid-July, and the weather was still hot and humid. No, what heralded the end of that particular summer was a very simple action, and Jack would never forget it and what it meant.

Ashley fell.

She fell in the literal sense, though she never hit the ground.

Still, it did not matter that Campbell caught her before she finished what she started by tripping over the exposed tree root. She completed the fall nonetheless.

Jack and Campbell had been sitting in relative silence for fifteen minutes or so, each turning over the thoughts they had about their conversation. Jack had idly thumbed through the Bradbury paperback, but was still thinking about Campbell leaving. This led him to another interesting point, What am I going to do?

Campbell was thinking about many things. Among them were Danielle, his new job, and his return to New York. The only ties he really had to this place now were Danielle and Jack, and he hoped one or both would accompany him. He knew they would be better off in a place where they could use their talents to their utmost potential. In his opinion, they were doing nothing but wasting time down here.

Ashley and Karen walked out of one of the trails and toward the two men. They were smiling, and Jack wished he could be privy to their thoughts. He was discovering just how much the female mind was closed to him. He could only ask. "Having fun?"

"The best," Karen said.

They were a couple of yards away.

Ashley was about to say something when the toe of her right lowtop shoe struck the root, which was just barely sticking out of the ground. It was no more than three-quarters of an inch around.

Her arms came up instinctively to catch her fall, as she tipped completely forward. She might have done no more damage than skinning the palms of her hands, but there were a lot of rocks on the trail, so no one would ever know.

In a blur of motion, Campbell jerked forward and caught the girl by both of her upper arms. Then, something happened that no one expected.

What everyone expected to happen was that Ashley would be a little startled, thank Campbell, and the day would continue unabated.

That did not happen. Instead, the young girl cried out in pain.

Campbell was the one to be startled. He quickly steadied the girl on her feet and let go as if he had grabbed something hot and burned himself.

Karen put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Ashley, are you all right?"

Campbell collected himself quickly. He was good at that. "I didn't think I grabbed you that hard, Ash, I'm sorry."

"No, you didn't, I " The girl began, absently rubbing her arm.

"Are you hurt?" Campbell reached out to her, meaning to move her sleeve up. "Let me see "

Ashley slapped his hand away. "NO!"

Campbell's eyes were wide and horrified. He thought he had been doing a good thing, he thought he had saved her from hurting herself. Now he had no idea what was happening.

Karen drew Ashley to her. "Ashley, what are you doing? Campbell's trying to help you."

"I know..." The girl replied, looking smaller than she actually was and also very confused. "I just...please, I'll be fine. You just... you scared me, that's all..." Ashley added a smile, as if to convince everyone, including herself, that what she was saying was true.

"Why can't I look at your arms, Ash?" Campbell asked, still keeping a small bit of distance, in case he frightened the girl.

"Please...I don't..."

"Ash..." Campbell began again, inching closer. There was a voice inside his head, telling him he had definitely been here before, and everything was happening all over again. But there's no way! his mind protested. She couldn't possibly be shooting up at her age!

But it all began to make sense. Whenever Campbell saw Ashley, he always had the suspicion she was hiding something, though what he had never been sure of. But the long sleeves even on a day like today, in the middle of summer...

Oh no, he thought, not Ash. Please, not Ash.

"Please stay away from me." Ashley crossed her arms in front of her, her eyes pleading.

"What is wrong with you?" Karen asked the girl. "Campbell just wants to make sure you're not hurt. What's wrong with your arms?"

"No," was all the girl could say. "No."

"I want to help you," Campbell tried to comfort her. "Ashley, I've been where you are. It's a nasty, horrible thing, but you need friends to help you through it. But we can't help you, unless you trust us to."

A single tear wound its way down Ashley's right cheek. Perhaps she thought Campbell understood, perhaps not. But a line had been crossed, something had been said, and now Ashley seemed less reluctant. "You won't tell my dad, will you? He'd...he'd be very angry."

Karen tensed up, as if some premonition crawled up her spine.

Campbell barely noticed. "I won't tell him if I don't have to. Show me, Ashley."

Jack would reflect, in those later days when he looked back at that particular moment, how swift and complete the ending was.

One moment he was in one part of his life, and in the next moment, he had stepped into a different part altogether. He had not seen the doorway at the time, or even acknowledged the fact he was in a different room. But hindsight made the line of demarcation evident for any who looked back to see. This future Jack would also wonder at how such a simple action, a fourteen-year-old girl showing them her arms, could have so many different repercussions.

Ashley rolled up her sleeve, and the summer officially ended.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty

-Seven

Jack was pacing back and forth in front of the stone wall and wringing his hands. "Campbell, what are we going to do? I mean "

He stopped, unsure exactly what he did mean and sat down again next to his friend. "Campbell, I've never been here before. I don't know what to do." Jack felt deflated. Whatever energy he had possessed coming into this day now was completely spent.

Campbell had been silent for several minutes now. Even if he knew what he should say, he felt as if he could not find the voice to say it with. His mind was preoccupied with an image of Ashley's tear-stained face looking up at him and asking, "You don't hate me, do you Campbell?"

Campbell clenched and unclenched his fists, digging lines into his palms with his fingernails. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Dammit, Jack, it's happening again," he finally said aloud. He shook his head. "It's happening all over again. I'm going to kill him."

"Maybe we should call the police," Jack reasoned.

"What good would that do?" Campbell asked. His face was scarlet with rage. Jack had never seen Campbell like this, and he felt a twinge of fear.

"Campbell, we have to, we can't just "

Campbell stood up quickly. "And then what ? Then what, Jack? I've been here before, I know what will happen. They'll come and talk to her father, not her, but her father, and when the cops have decided it's nothing but a false alarm, he'll...he'll..." Campbell sat and winced at the thoughts which followed. "Oh, that cocksucker has been hitting her. Beating her all this time, and I didn't know. I didn't know!" Campbell slammed a fist into the palm of his other hand. "I should have known!"

"Campbell, how were you supposed to know? She never "

"Jack," Campbell interrupted, trying to calm himself, "I thought she had been shooting up. She had tracks in her arms, that's why I thought she didn't want to show me. I thought she was a drug addict." He ran both hands through his hair this time, and left them at the back of his neck, gripping tightly. "I am so stupid."

Ashley had rolled up the sleeves of her shirt and shown her three companions a series of bruises on both of her upper arms. It did not take long to discern what had caused them. Someone had grabbed her by both arms very hard, as if they were trying to hold her in place.

Those particular bruises were from an occasion a few days previous, when she had tried to run from her father. She explained to them that by now she should have known better, and trying to run only made matters worse. That was how things had been explained to her, at least. He grabbed her by her upper arms and pinned her against a wall rather forcibly. She had, she explained, suffered a large bump on the back of her head for the two days immediately after this incident.

Campbell by this time knew what the rest of the story was; he had heard it or a similar version far too many times than he cared to think about. Nevertheless, he forced himself to listen as Ashley explained.

For a long time while she was growing up, her father had been content to hit her mother in private. Ashley would sometimes hear something going on in the privacy of their bedroom, but she was never sure what it was. Normally it was her father slapping her mother around.

The first time her father ever touched her was when she was eight. Her mother was in bed with a cold, and her father needed someone to take her mother's place. She went to the refrigerator to get him a beer, as he had asked, and when she returned, he slapped her hard across the face without warning. This was because she had forgotten to bring the beer nuts to go along with the beer. From her place on the floor where she fell, she tried to snuffle out that she had not been told to bring anything else to him. He called her incredibly stupid and asked her why the hell she thought they called them "beer nuts" if they weren't supposed to be brought out with a beer.

He told her to go back to the refrigerator and try it again, seeing as how the can of beer she had brought him was now quite shaken up.

Once the line had been crossed, David Blair would hit either of the women he loved, although he still reserved the majority of his affections for his wife. He would be affectionate with them for no particular reason, but especially if he had a rough day at work, or had been drinking. If both occurred, Ashley stated, you wished you could leave the house, but this only upset him further. Ashley told them she had liked it when her father was forced to take an evening job for about six months, because she rarely, if ever, saw him.

When she was twelve, she was sure she had taken all that she could take, so she went to a guidance counselor at her middle school. She had told the counselor, Mr. Harmon, the entire story, sparing no details. Campbell knew Mr. Harmon, or at least his type.

Mr. Harmon apparently was still of the mind that anything a man did in the privacy of his own castle was his own business.

Ashley's father was waiting for her when she arrived home from school. He had locked her mother in their bedroom so she could not interfere, although Ashley heard her crying out from behind the locked door for her husband not to hurt the girl.

In the end, he had hurt her. Quite badly. But the only saving grace, if such an event could be seen to have one, was that if she had not been hurt right out of the starting gate, her father might have had the idea to work on her for a while. Instead, when he ushered her inside, he had grabbed her wrist and shoved her through the door before him, giving her a nice brisk push. When he pushed her from behind, she felt something in her left shoulder give, and she began screaming.

When David Blair could not convince his daughter that she was all right, and the threats to give her something to cry about did not cease her wailing, he did what any red-blooded American father would do: he told her she fell down the stairs, and then drove her to a friend of his brother's who was a doctor.

Ashley had suffered a dislocated shoulder and was kept out of school for a week so she could recover. That particular pain would probably have been enough to keep her from ever telling anyone about her problem again, but just to make sure, her father informed her that next time she opened her mouth, he would inflict the same pain on her mother.

At this point in Ashley's narrative, the young girl was so upset she could not continue. Karen had kindly ushered her in the direction of the restrooms.

Jack was going to ask again what they should do. The sensible part of him was saying their course should be fairly clear: they should immediately go to the authorities and turn the matter over. But another part of him

remembered Campbell's story about Carol, about how the police had handled everything. He thought of Ashley with her arm in a sling because her father had pushed just a little too hard.

He had met Sheriff White on a couple of occasions, for he and Jack's father had been good friends. He could not imagine Sheriff White turning a scared and battered fourteen-year-old girl over to her abusive father. Hearing Campbell speak of it, it was as if no one was to be trusted. He was not sure he agreed with Campbell on this, but understood why his friend would think that way.

Jack was going to ask his question again when he spotted Karen heading in their direction. As she came closer, Jack realized how tired she looked. He could relate, for he felt as if the past fifteen minutes had completely exhausted him. He knew Campbell was not faring much better. When she had come within a few paces of the wall, he asked, "Is Ashley okay?"

"I think she's okay." Karen sat down on the wall next to Jack, and he put an arm around her. She appeared grateful, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "All things considered," she added.

"Are you okay?" Jack squeezed her shoulder.

"I think I'm okay," Karen smiled up at him. "All things considered."

Jack kissed her forehead.

"Ashley will be along in a minute," Karen continued, "she wanted a moment by herself, and I wanted a moment with the two of you. What are we going to do about this?"

"Campbell and I were discussing taking it to the police." Jack directed this toward Campbell. Perhaps with Karen here, they could come to some kind of agreement.

Campbell had been sitting with his head between his knees, rubbing at his temples. Lost in thought, he had been trying to find a solution but nothing was coming. He had no idea why he was so mentally stunned by the idea that something such as this had happened. Ever since he had read the translated *Carmina Burana*, he had liked the idea of the wheel of fortune as more than a place where you bought a vowel. "What goes around, comes around," was the modern bastardized translation, and it was true. It was so true.

"We were discussing that." Campbell lifted his head. "Myself, I am not so sure that it is a good idea."

"Why is that?" Karen asked. There was no accusation in her voice, just genuine concern and curiosity.

"I look at it this way," Campbell cleared his throat. "Jayson Blair is the president of a rather large bank in this community. Blair's brother beating his niece is not conducive to getting elected mayor, which is what Blair wants." Campbell thought on this for a moment and then corrected himself. "Or what my mother has convinced him he wants, anyway. So, I don't think that the Old Boy Network is going to let her get help. Not that way."

"Well, we can't take her back to her house, and give him a chance to do it again." Karen crossed her arms in front of her.

"No, she can't go back to her house, on that we are in violent agreement." Jack looked up at her. "The question is, where can she go? What did you have in mind, Karen?"

Karen waited a moment before answering. "We are in over our heads," she said simply. "We can't do this, just the three of us. We can't. We need help."

"Who is going to help us?" Campbell asked. First Carol, now Ashley... he kept thinking over and over again, like an album skipping on a turntable in his mind.

Karen walked briskly over to him. "Campbell, I love you to death, but if you don't stop acting all depressed and helpless over this, I'm going to slap the living shit out of you."

Campbell looked up sharply.

"I know you care for Ashley, and I know you're concerned for her," Karen continued, "but spending your energy worrying and being depressed and thinking negative thoughts is not doing us any good. So snap out of it."

Campbell felt an immediate surge of anger toward her, but the understanding of why the emotion was there came just as quickly.

He was upset with Karen because she was right.

"Karen," Campbell put a hand on Jack's shoulder to include him as well, "Jack, I'm sorry. You're right. I should know better."

Karen took Campbell's other hand and squeezed it. "Apology accepted. Now, like I said, there's no way we can handle this, just the three of us. We'll need help. And I know where to start looking."

Raymond Wilson was in his favorite chair. He had his head bowed and his chin resting on his hands, which were laced together in front of him. Were his eyes not open, you would think he was a man deep in prayer. A much heavier subject was on his mind at this moment. Those aforementioned eyes looked up at Ashley, sitting on the couch with Karen where Jack had been some time before. Karen held one of Ashley's hands in both of hers. A box of tissue was on the other side of Ashley, and it had seen a great deal of use in the last thirty minutes.

Jack and Campbell stood by the doorway. Neither of them had spoken during the time it took for Ashley to relate her story to Karen's father. It was no easier to hear the second time around, Jack noticed.

Ray completed his reverie and signaled its end by sitting up.

His hands were still clasped together, and his thumbs rubbed each other as he spoke. "Ashley, it was a very brave thing you did, coming here and telling me this. I want to tell you one thing upfront: I believe you. I believe you, and I want to do anything I can to help you. And right now, the best way to help you is to keep you away from your father. In the meantime, I need to get in touch with some people who can help you, too. While this is all being worked out, you can stay here with me and Karen. Scott's bedroom will do just fine."

"But " Ashley protested. "But, my mother! He said if I told he would hurt her. What about my mother?"

"We're going to help your mother, too," Ray told her. He stood up and walked over to the couch. "I promise you I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that you both are safe." He held out a hand to her. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes, sir," Ashley said in a small voice. She took Ray's hand.

"Good. Very good," Ray said. "Now, if you will wait here for a moment, I need to speak with Jack and Campbell." He nodded to Karen, and the three men went into the foyer.

"Now what?" Jack asked, once the door had been shut.

"Jack," Ray cleared his throat, "that is a very good question.

Now I am going to call Tommy White, the sheriff. Ashley's safe here for now, so at this point Judy is my primary concern. If everything Ashley is saying is true and I have no reason to believe that any of it is not then Judy is in real danger. When it comes to that, Tommy will have to take over. I'll see if there's any way we can get her out of the house and away from him." One of Ray's hands went up to his forehead and he shut his eyes. "David Blair, for the love of God." His eyes opened again, and he fixed their gaze on Campbell and Jack. "What makes a man want to do that to his child? to his wife? I " Ray stopped and sighed.

Neither Jack nor Campbell made any move to answer.

"I don't think there is an answer to that one, gentlemen," Ray decided. "At least not that we can provide."

"Ashley's father better have a good answer," Campbell remarked. "At least, if he gets anywhere near me."

"Stay away from him," Ray quickly reprimanded, pointing a warning finger. "Campbell, I know you have a really good reason to want to put some serious hurting on him, but stay away from David Blair. We are going to give the system a crack at taking care of this.

Okay?"

"As long as you say that Ashley is safe," Campbell stated.

"She is," Ray assured him. "In a larger city, there might be some charity in place, somewhere else she and her mom could go to get help. But we're not in a larger city, and they'll just have to rely on the kindness of some neighbors." Ray looked at Campbell and put a hand on his shoulder. "For right now, she's safe. So let me make a few phone calls and make sure she stays that way. You two get on home, get some rest. You look exhausted. I'm tired already, and I haven't had to deal with this until just now, so I can only imagine how you two are doing." He turned to Jack. "Hell of a way to spend a birthday, son. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Jack smiled. "As long as Ashley's on the right track to getting some help, then it certainly wasn't a wasted day."

"This is a good kid," Ray shot to Campbell as he gave Jack a playful jab on the shoulder. "You two get home safe." Again, to Jack: "I'll send Karen right out to say good night."

Ray went back into his study and closed the door. Through the glass, they could see him talking to Karen and Ashley.

Jack turned to look at his friend. The verbal wakeup call that

Karen had given Campbell back in the park had done him some good. His brow was still deeply furrowed, and his lips were drawn tightly together, but he no longer had a series of stormclouds hanging about his head. "How are you holding up?"

Campbell's eyebrows relaxed at Jack's words. Jack imagined he could hear them sighing their relief. "I I'm okay." He laughed then, and Jack could almost take this as a good sign. "I can't help feeling that I've been here before, and that it's happening all over again, and I still can't do a damn thing about it."

"It will be different this time," Jack told him. "It has to be."

Campbell nodded after a moment. I hope you're right, Jack, he thought. I really hope you are.

Karen came out of the study, ushered Ashley out and then shut the door behind her.

"Hey, kiddo," Campbell greeted the young girl.

"Hey," Ashley sniffed in return.

"You're going to be okay," Campbell told her.

Ashley smiled. "I hope so."

"She is," Karen cut in, "but she'll be even more okay if she gets some rest." She showed Ashley to the stairs. "Go on up, the bathroom's down the hall, and the bedroom's on the left. I'll be up in two seconds."

"Okay," Ashley said, "good night."

Jack and Campbell said good night, and watched the young girl make her way up the stairs.

"It only gets better from here, right?" Campbell remarked after they heard the bathroom door shut. "I'll be outside." He turned to Karen. "Thanks for setting me straight."

"Hey, anytime." She hugged Campbell. "What's a friend for, if she can't hit you over the head when you need it?"

Campbell hugged her back, smiling. "I've never heard it put quite that way, but I agree whole-heartedly." He went out through the front door. Another moment and they heard his footfalls descending the steps from the front porch.

Jack and Karen stood there, facing each other. "This really is not what I had in mind for today," Karen offered suddenly, smilingly nervous.

"It's not your fault, and like I told your father, as long as Ashley's okay, I'll be okay, too." He ran a hand through her hair.

"How's your headache?"

"Better, surprisingly." She smiled and took his hand. "You know, I love you."

"You know, I had my suspicions," Jack whispered, and kissed her.

"Happy birthday, Jack."

They held each other for several moments, and Karen was the first to let go. "You hurry home, you you need to get some sleep."

"You, too," Jack countered.

"I will. And " she seemed unable to think of anything to say, " I'll be talking to you soon."

Jack frowned. "Is everything all right?" He took a step toward her.

Karen backed up a step, and then thinking better of it, leaned forward and kissed him. "Everything is just getting better." She poked a finger into his chest. "And you better believe that."

Another minute and he was seated in Big Blue next to Campbell. They did not speak on the way to the apartment.

"I'm going to bed," Campbell called down from halfway up the stairs.

Jack was locking the door of the diner behind them. "All right, then. See you in the morning."

Campbell reached the top of the stairs and was momentarily startled when he turned on the lights. He regained his composure and smiled. Well, what do you know, he thought. I had almost forgotten about that. The day worked out after all. "Good night, Jack."

Jack began his ascent. "Yes, Campbell, good night."

When Campbell saw the top of Jack's head coming up the stairs, he called out, "Happy birthday, Jack," and shut the door to his bedroom.

Jack was about to say something. He could not be sure what, it may have been a simple "Thank you," but the moment after he entered the apartment and looked up, all traces of what he could have been about to say left him.

Jack's piano stood against the far wall, in full view of the stairs.

Jack was unable to move or speak for several seconds. "Oh, my God," he gasped out. He took a few tentative steps towards it, as if it were a mirage that would disappear the moment it felt itself being advanced upon. He opened the cover and played a C minor chord.

Perfectly in tune. "Holy shit," he breathed. His heart was doing a doubletime march in his chest.

"Campbell," he called out. "Campbell, get your ass out here!"

Campbell opened the door to his room and wore a very poorly rendered sleepy expression. "What is it, Jack? Can't you keep it down? I'm trying to sleep in here." He manufactured a yawn.

Jack paid him no heed. "What the hell is this?" He asked, exasperated.

Campbell studied it for a moment. "Offhand, I would say a piano. But that's just a wild guess."

"No," Jack groaned, "I mean, what is it doing here?"

"You know," Campbell took a step back into the room and made a routine of examining closer the object Jack was indicating. "I thought something was different in here. It was so dark, I must've missed it when I walked in. Tired as I am, you know."

"I'm serious, Campbell, what is it doing here?" Jack was trying hard not to laugh at his friend's feigned ignorance.

"I guess somebody moved it while we were out." He tapped a finger on his chin and made a contemplative face. "I wonder who that could have been."

The telephone rang.

"Allow me." Campbell walked to the cordless phone and picked it up. "Joe's Pool Hall...Yeah, I thought that might be you...No, you're just in time. I was beginning to run out of clever banter...Well, thank you...Good night." He handed the phone to Jack. "I believe it's for you."

Jack took the phone from a mischievous Campbell, who retreated to the relative safety of his bedroom door. "Hello?"

"Well, hello there. Why aren't you in bed?" It was Karen.

"I should have known," Jack groaned, placing a hand over his face.

"Good night," Campbell mouthed and then shut his door. I had almost forgotten in all of the melee at the park, he thought. Jack, you are one lucky individual. Campbell began undressing for bed.

"What have you done?" Jack sat down on the piano bench.

"You seem to have lost your capacity for grasping the obvious,"

Karen laughed.

"You had this done while we were gone? Who?"

"You can thank Daddy next time you see him. He had a couple of friends help him, too."

"My God, Karen." Jack shook his head. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, I know what to say. I say I love you, and happy twenty-first birthday."

"Thank you, sweetheart." Jack leaned over and placed his forehead on the cool wood surface. "I've missed my piano."

"I know. That keyboard you have is all right, but it's not the same." She paused. "So play me something."

"Like what?"

"Well," she spoke in a low voice, "I am in bed, and about to go to sleep, so you know, a lullaby or something. Something...soothing."

"Soothing, huh?" Jack smiled. He got off the piano bench and opened it. All of his sheet music was there.

"Uh-hmm," she said softly.

Jack wanted so much to be there, but he knew what the next best thing was. He picked a piece out of the bench, closed the lid, and sat upon it again. He spread the pages out. "I have just the thing. I'm going to put the phone down on the bench so you can hear it, okay?"

"Okay."

Jack placed the phone down gently. He flexed his hands. This was going to feel so good. It had been so long. Did you miss me? he asked in his mind.

He played. He closed his eyes and played. When at certain points he forgot what notes came next, he improvised a bridge or a vamp to allow him time to open his eyes and find his place. Jack wished that Karen was here, but he knew that in a sense she was.

She was not sitting behind him on the floor, or next to him on the piano bench, watching his hands do their dance, but she was here with him nonetheless. And he was there with her. His music was there with her.

He let the last notes of the piece ring out and then stepped off the soft and sustain pedals. He picked up the phone. "Karen?"

There was no response but slow, steady breathing.

"Karen?"

More of the same. She slept.

Jack smiled. "I love you. Good night," he said into the phone, and then turned it off.

"It only gets better from here, right?" Campbell had asked.

Jack certainly hoped that was the case.

He sat at the piano and played until long past midnight.

Chapter Twenty

-Eight

Jack and Karen were on the staircase leading into the apartment.

Karen sat two steps above Jack, who was sitting between her legs with his head down. Karen kneaded at his shoulders with what Jack could have sworn were the hands of an experienced masseuse.

"Mmmm," Jack remarked, trying to put this idea into English.

"Good?" She asked him.

"If you have to ask, you obviously are not paying attention."

"Well," she worked her hands up to his neck, "just remember, I'm next."

Jack rested his head back against her chest. "Not if you put me to sleep."

"I'm sure I can keep you awake and aware," she smiled, and then dragged a fingernail down the back of his neck.

Jack yelped in surprise. He turned to find Karen, looking startled, wide-eyed and innocent. "Why, I oughta " he began.

"Whatever you're about to do, let it wait till I get past you."

Campbell was making his descent. "On account of my virgin eyes, you know."

"I'm sure you're as pure as the driven snow," Karen confided.

"On the streets of New York City," Jack added as they scooted themselves to one side to allow him passage.

"Ten thousand comedians out of work, and you two are trying to be funny." Campbell pointed an accusing finger from the bottom of the stairs, "Emphasis on the trying."

"Where you off to?" Jack asked. He reached behind him and grasped one of the hands Karen had left on his shoulder. It was almost an involuntary action. He wanted to be in contact with her at all times.

"Over to the Wilson residence, to check on Ash and her mom."

"Any word from the estranged husband and father?" Karen asked him.

Campbell leaned on the railing. David Blair was a subject that made him want to start snapping things in two at random. The man himself would make a perfect start, he thought. "No, still no sign of him since that night. I don't like it, but my guess is that the Blair for Mayor camp has him under wraps for damage control."

"No comment from the mayor to be?" Jack pondered aloud.

"The official comment in the Herald from the Blair for Susan Davis' Footstool campaign is that they had no idea there was even the chance of this going on, and they're sure it's some misunderstanding." Campbell grinned, and then continued, "Nevertheless, they will withhold final judgment until he is proven guilty."

"Any chance this will help our present mayor?" Jack asked.

Campbell shook his head. "He's all but given up. Not even this appears to affect the predicted outcome. People either think it's a mix-up, or they've forgotten the idea of guilt by association."

"Oh well," Jack sighed.

"Oh well is right." Campbell paused, and could not think of anything else to say. He looked to his two friends, and decided not to pester them any longer. "Off to see the wizard," he commented.

"Watch out for flying monkeys," Jack called after him, and moments later they heard the diner door shut.

Jack and Karen sat for a few moments in silence. Karen returned her hands to Jack's neck, caressing it tenderly. "No word from Danielle, I take it," she said.

"No," Jack sighed. "I don't know what happened. It looked like something great was going to come of it, and now...I don't know."

Jack shifted around to look at her. "He hasn't talked about her much recently."

"Hmmm." Karen moved one hand to her side, and the other went up to Jack's hair. "And he's leaving soon."

"Yes."

She studied his face. "You'll miss him."

"Yes, I will."

"I'll miss him, too." Karen played with his hair for another moment before taking her hand away. "And what about you?"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "What about me?"

"Well, think about it," she urged, "you're young, you've moved out of your house, you just got the first part of your trust..." She trailed off.

Jack waited for her to continue. She did not. "And your point would be?" he prompted.

"My point would be: you've got this lovely talent, and you need to go somewhere where you can perfect it, utilize it." She looked at him and smiled. "No one's going to commission you to write a symphony in Macomber County."

"Symphony?" Jack began his protest, "Dear, I only play piano, I..."

"It was an exaggeration. Work with me here." She looked as if she wanted to be flustered with him but kept failing at it.

"So," he tried to approach it from a different angle, "you're trying to get rid of me?"

Karen reached around and grabbed the back of his head suddenly, drawing him to her. She kissed him slowly but effectively.

Her lips left his. "Ask me that again," she commanded.

Jack licked his lips. "If I do, will you do that again?"

"No. You know what I mean."

"Okay," Jack said. "You are a very convincing person, by the way."

Karen smiled in response.

"I know that I have many options available to me," he began.

"I know there are schools, I know there are real cities out there, I know there are many ways to further myself. I know this. I do." He punctuated the last two words by tapping his index finger lightly on her nose.

"However, since so much has happened in the past two months, I would like nothing else than to catch my breath here for a bit. And, of course, I have to convince someone to leave with me."

Karen looked startled.

"Don't look like that," he admonished gently. "And don't look so surprised. I've said this before."

Karen blinked at him and did not respond.

"What?" Jack asked incredulously. "Did you really think that I would leave without you? That I would go, and not take you with me?"

Karen did not speak.

"I mean, let's face it, we're twenty-one years old here. We have a ways to go before the end of the line, right?" That was the wrong approach. He tried again. "We've only really known each other two months, but it feels like a lot longer..." No. No good. He tried yet again. "I I "

Say it. Just say it. Just...say it.

"I meant it when I told you earlier. I want to take you with me," he blurted out quickly, and once that was out, the rest began to flow behind it. "I want you...to come with me. When I leave, if I leave, it has to be with you. I want to be with you, no matter where I am, because I love you." He shook his head. "There, I've said it."

Karen still was not speaking.

"Karen, please tell me I haven't made a fool out of myself."

Jack looked closer. A tear was almost invisible against her fair skin, making its way down her face. She made no move to wipe it away.

Jack did it for her. "Karen? Karen, what did ?"

"Do you mean that?" She asked. Her voice was hoarse, and she cleared her throat. "I mean, do you really mean that?"

"I asked you, didn't I?"

"No I mean yes." She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts and start over. "I mean, yes, you asked me, but that doesn't mean anything. Words are easy."

"Are they?" Jack asked, amazed at his inability to say anything exactly how he wanted to. He pointed to himself quizzically to illustrate this.

Karen laughed. "No, I mean Dammit," she exclaimed, "don't get me started again! I'm trying to say something very valid and meaningful!"

Jack smiled and said nothing more.

"I mean, that's very easy to say and not mean. Do you really want me to come with you?" She stabbed a finger at his chest as he was about to open his mouth. "Think, Jack Hardin. Think hard. You might not ever be able to get rid of me."

He took her advice. He thought for a moment about what he was asking. He could not compose the words necessary to make it plain enough, but he hoped their mutual adoration would make up for what he lacked in eloquence. He wanted the game they had played in this apartment to be his reality. He wanted to hold their child in his arms.

He wanted to wake up with her in the morning and go to bed with her in the evening. Many would have called this foolish because of his age, this Jack knew. Others would have said such a thing could never come to pass, for in time they were almost certain to change away from each other. Jack knew this as well. But whatever the outcome might turn out to be, he had to know. He had to make that step; he had to try.

Whatever he could do to make this dream come to pass, he would do.

So he went through this in his mind and then answered.

"I guess that's a risk I'll have to take."

He put a hand under her chin, and they moved together. Jack put a hand on her cheek, and felt the dampness of her tears there.

He kissed her and kept on doing so. There were no more words left to speak, so he did not try to conjure anymore.

They stayed there on the steps, laughing and talking and kissing, for some time.

Upstairs, they heard the phone ringing. Neither made a move to break their moment.

The fourth ring was interrupted by the answering machine picking up.

Neither thought anything of it.

Jack awoke from a light doze. He looked over at the clock on the bedside table. He had only been asleep for fifteen minutes.

Karen lay with her head on his bare chest, her breathing slow and even.

He let one hand stroke her hair, loving the way it felt between his fingers.

This, he thought. This is where I am supposed to be.

He remained as he was for another five minutes or so, before very carefully moving out from beneath Karen and making a visit to the bathroom. He then put on a pair of shorts and ventured into the living room area. Campbell's bedroom door was open, and no one was inside.

The red light on the answering machine was blinking.

It took a moment before Jack remembered the call from an hour or two previous.

Curious, he reached over and hit the Play button.

The machine whirled the tape backwards for a couple of seconds, and then there was a click.

A moment of silence.

"Jack," the machine said, "this is Kim. I I wanted to call and let you know that I found a graduate school, and that I'm leaving tomorrow." Pause. The voice came faster. "I would like to see you for a moment, just to say goodbye...if that's all right. I'll understand if you're busy." Another pause. "I'm at my parents' house, loading up some old things, and I thought I would call." There was an intake of breath. "Well, that's all. If I don't get a chance to talk to you, take care of yourself." Click.

The machine was silent.

Jack looked at it, confused. Kim, he thought. Kim. Kim is calling me. Kim is leaving. He frowned. Kim wants to say goodbye.

"Is something wrong?" Karen asked, walking into the room.

She had donned one of Jack's T-shirts.

"No." Jack was nervous in spite of himself. "I just got the strangest call."

"I heard something from the other room," she replied. "Who was it?"

"It was Kim."

Karen's eyebrows went up.

"Well, she's leaving town and she wanted me to come by so she could say goodbye." It spilled out of Jack's mouth very quickly, and he had almost no time to wonder if he should have said it at all.

"Well, are you going to?" Karen asked plainly.

"No. Why would I?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"I "

Karen gestured for him to come back in the bedroom. She sat down on the bed and patted the space next to her. "Sit," she commanded.

He did so.

"All right, look," she told him kindly. "I know you've said that Kim would get jealous a lot, right?"

Jack nodded.

"To me, when you're perfectly honest with someone, completely and totally honest with someone, you have no reason to be jealous." She stopped and looked at Jack. "You loved Kim very much, correct?"

"I Yes, I did."

"And do you still love her?" Karen asked. She then added, smiling, "The only wrong answers are the dishonest ones."

Jack thought for a moment, and then took her comment to heart. "Yes, part of me still loves her. I think that if you truly love someone, it never completely goes away. However, I don't feel the same way about her that I did then. It's changed. I've changed."

Karen seemed to understand. "Right, so you're not going to decide to run off with her anywhere?"

"Of course not," Jack protested.

"Well then, I have nothing to be concerned about." She stood up and held out her hands to him. She helped him up. "And neither do you. If you want to go tell her goodbye, or if you don't, it makes no difference to me. I love you, Jack, and I won't imprison you in that love. The door is always open, so that way you'll never want to leave."

"I don't want to leave," he told her, and put his arms around her.

"So don't," she replied, and they spent a good deal of time enjoying the silence while they held each other.

The back of the Jeep sported a bumper sticker, which urged him to: "Think globally, act locally."

That's new, Jack thought absently, as he made his way down the sidewalk to the Meyers' house.

As Jack passed the Jeep, he stole a glance inside. The bumper sticker, as far as he could tell, was the only addition.

He approached the front door and became suddenly uncertain of himself. What would they have to speak of, after so long? What could he possibly say to her, after catching her with someone else?

He was about to turn and go when he stabbed his hand forward and pressed the doorbell. Well, I'm committed now, he thought, resigned. Unless I feel like running really fast. He did not.

The door swung open and for a moment, he had a flashback to the first time he had stood in this exact spot. It had been what felt like centuries ago. He had stood there, waiting for the door to open, wondering if he looked all right, afraid that his hair was askew, not caring if it was, worried that he should be caring if it was.

So many things to be worried about, Jack thought, and so many of them turned out to mean nothing at all.

The door here in the present opened before him.

He corrected himself, No. They didn't necessarily turn out to mean nothing; they just didn't mean what I thought they did. Or what I wanted them to mean.

Kim was standing there. "Jack," she said, surprise in her voice.

"Hello, Kim."

He took a seat on the couch in her parents' den, and she sat opposite him in one of the chairs. She had offered him a Coke, he had politely declined. He had asked about her family, she had responded they were all doing perfectly well, thank you. It was all of the polite niceties one would expect, seeing someone after a long absence.

After all these had been thumbed through, they seemed to be at a loss for a direction to take the conversation in. When they finally decided to attempt speech again, they did it simultaneously.

"You got "

"I really "

They both stopped. "After you," Jack invited. How can I be so calm? He inquired of himself.

"I was going to say I was really glad that you came by. I " She hesitated. "I wasn't sure if you would."

"Of course I would. Why wouldn't I?" Jack was surprised to hear himself say that. Had he not, just an hour or two before, stated he could find no reason to come here? Perhaps he had a reason but could not find it at the moment he made that statement. He thought Karen had known this and helped him along. Now, if I could only figure out the reason for myself, he thought.

At his words, Kim looked extremely dismayed. She sat there, waiting for Jack to continue.

Jack did. "I mean, you're in graduate school. That's great.

Where?"

Relief seemed to flood Kim's face. "Vanderbilt," she replied.

"And I'm pretty sure you got a good scholarship for it, too,"

Jack said confidently.

Kim blushed a little. She had always been incredibly smart, but did not like to talk about it much. "Yes," she replied. "I'm...well, pretty much taken care of."

"Good," he nodded. "Good deal."

Silence.

Jack had the idea that when you spent a great deal of time with a person, you became very sensitive, very "tuned in" to what they might be thinking or feeling at any particular moment. Jack had spent two years with Kim, and he could swear she was waiting for something. He did not know what, so he could not offer it to her.

In studying her face, however, something else very obvious became clear.

"Where are your glasses?" he asked.

"Gone," she smiled, apparently pleased. "Totally gone. Contacts instead." She added, almost as an afterthought, "Took you long enough."

"Sorry," Jack laughed, "but I haven't been around much, you know?"

Kim again stiffened, as if she were bracing herself.

What is she ? But then it became as obvious as her lack of glasses. She was waiting to be accused.

Think of it, Jack told himself. Now's your chance, to drag it all out here in the open. The guy, the ten hours in the dorm, that look that look on her face, when she knew that you knew everything. Now's your chance, Jack.

If you want to take it.

The last thought sounded like Campbell had spoken it over his left shoulder. He almost looked to see if he was actually standing there. That voice was right. It would serve no point. What was done was done, now and here they were just two people getting on with their lives.

Closure, Jack thought. That's my reason for being here.

"I'm really happy for you," Jack said, coming out of his thoughts. He saw her looking at him with suspicion in her eyes.

"I mean that. You had...always talked about Vandy as a possibility for grad school, and I'm glad you're getting the chance. I mean, it looks like things are going to work out for you. So, I'm I'm just really happy for you."

Whatever in Kim that had been waiting for an attack from the past seemed to soften at this. She took a moment before she replied.

"Thank you, Jack. I'm I'm happy for you, too. You seem to be doing well, I I heard you have a job now, you know, got moved out of the house..." She trailed off, as if she were considering whether or not to say anything more. She apparently decided to go ahead and take it to the next step. "And Karen. I hear that is going well also."

"Yes. Yes it is."

He was sure the smile on his face was very clear. "That's good."

She repeated it, nodding her head, "That's good. You you need to be happy, Jack. You deserve to be happy."

"We both deserve to be happy," he corrected.

They talked for another half-hour, much freer than before. No more mention was made of the past, or any errors they both had made. They had come to an unspoken agreement that they were too involved in their present and future to deal with things already long gone.

They talked for this half-hour, and then Kim walked him to the door.

They were not certain what to do at first, and then Kim hugged him.

Jack hugged her back, and they held each other for the better part of a minute.

They smiled and said their goodbyes.

Jack went back the way he had come, and Kim stood on her front steps and watched him leave.

Just before he left her vision, he looked back and waved. She returned his wave and then went back into the house.

Jack would not see her again for five years.

Chapter Twenty

-Nine

Danielle lay next to him, propped up on one elbow. The bedclothes did a marvelous job of hiding her body while still letting the contours show. Her eyes settled on his. "You're still planning on leaving." It was not a question.

"Yes, in less than a week." Campbell smiled as his eyes did an involuntary shift from her face to the covers. "I don't have much lined up, but it's a job."

There was silence. Somewhere in Danielle's apartment a clock was ticking. The silence had too much potential, it desired to be filled.

"I'm glad I caught you in," Campbell said finally, and despite the fact she made no move to ask the question, he answered it.

"And not just because of...this," he gestured to indicate the bed they shared. "I've been needing to talk to you. I've missed you." He touched her face gently.

She dropped her eyes away for a moment. "I've needed some time to think."

"Well, so have I."

Her eyes fell back upon him, and their weight was wonderful.

It gave him the strength to say what he felt needed to be said.

She asked the question he had been waiting for. "So what were you thinking about?"

Campbell took one of her hands in both of his and kissed it.

"Something I've mentioned before. That I want you to come with me." He saw something in her eyes that might have been doubt.

He tried to intercept it. "I do. I want you...to come with me to New York."

Danielle said nothing.

Campbell wasn't sure how to interpret her silence, so he made an educated guess. "And you wouldn't have any trouble getting a job. You've talked before about how you wanted a larger market, and how the Herald is such a dead end. I couldn't agree with you more. You're an incredible journalist, and you need wider horizons. My friend helped me; I know he could give us the names of some people to send a resume to. And some sample writings, too."

Danielle said nothing. She looked at Campbell with eyes that were too green.

Campbell tried a different tactic. "Or maybe you can't leave right away," he continued, "I'll go ahead and find us a good place to live, and you can take care of your business down here and fly up or drive up, or whatever..."

"Campbell."

"...and it'll be great. You always said you wanted to see New York, and I know all the great places, and I know all the really shitty places, too, so we'll know to avoid them. Like I said, it'll be great as long as you're there, so..."

"Campbell." She spoke more forcefully this time.

Campbell came out of his train of thought, albeit reluctantly.

She pulled her eyes away from him, and the rest of her followed suit. She sat up in bed, drawing her knees up to her chin.

"I've been doing some thinking, too, Campbell. I I've been thinking about what I want to do with the rest of my life. You've got to understand, at my age, you start to wonder about certain things.

Children, marriage, security...it may seem like a small list, but it's a big one nonetheless." She looked at him, as if to make sure he was listening. He was. "The world begins to be less of an adventure."

She sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "And you go looking for those adventures less and less..." Her voice trailed off.

Campbell waited a moment to take this in. "Danielle, I'm not quite sure I follow you. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying..." she began, and could not seem to meet his eyes. She finally focused them on the end of the bed. "I'm saying that the Herald made me an offer. A five-year contract to stay. An increase in salary."

She paused.

"So they offered you a contract," Campbell repeated. "So what?"

You've always said that you hated that job. You practically live there, for Christ's sake. I "

"Campbell," she interrupted, almost laughing, but there was no mirth in that sound. "You're not listening to me." Her smile drifted off.

"I had to get some time away so I could think about what to do with their offer." She looked as if she were going to take his hand and then seemed to decide against it. She shook her head, and then looked at him for a moment before continuing. "Campbell, I signed the contract."

He went cold. "You signed the contract." Knowledge and certainty began to creep into him, but a defiant part of Campbell would not stop. Could not stop. "Well, that's fine. But you have to have an 'out' in it, right? Something that says if you get an offer from a big market, you can bow out, right? New York's got to be one of the biggest markets, if not the biggest. So, no problem. I can find you a job up there, and "

"Campbell," she said kindly, "stop."

Campbell was up now and pacing. Back and forth, he marched the room, unmindful of his naked body. On some distant level he thought he must look the true madman, but he was beyond caring.

"But why did you why ? You hate that place, Danielle, they work you like a dog, and you have the potential to be so much more! You know that, so "

"It's not just that, Campbell."

She slowly turned away. It must have been something she could not bear to see in his eyes, for he could hardly bear to be looking through them.

It was all the answer he needed.

"For him," he croaked. His throat seemed to be suddenly quite dry. "You signed it for him. You didn't want to decide between us, so you decided not to decide. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

She flinched from his voice, but said nothing.

He was moving faster and raving as he did so, helpless to stop.

"I don't believe this! Where has he been, Danielle? Where has he been? Has he been here for you? No! I was here for you. When you needed someone, I was here. Every single time. You're leaving me for someone that I haven't even really seen, and we've been together for two months. Two months, Danielle." He stopped. His body felt incredibly tired. Spent, he stopped pacing and looked at her with pleading eyes. "Why? Just please tell me why."

"Because I love him," she replied simply.

Campbell shook his head in desperation. He held out his arms, indicating his nakedness. "Then what the hell am I doing here?"

Why the hell did we just just " Campbell looked at the rumpled sheets and then sat down at the foot of the bed, defeated. "Jesus," he breathed.

She advanced towards him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"But Campbell, I love you, too."

Campbell turned to face her. "And I love you. But he doesn't love you, Danielle, not like I do. Not like I do. I love you. For God's sake, please don't do this to me."

She said nothing.

"I'll stay," he decided quickly, his mind racing. "I'll stay, you can always change your mind, we can think of something, I "

Danielle took her finger and placed it against his lips. "No, Campbell. Please. Just stop."

And it finally clicked home. There it was. He was beaten. Beaten by a ghost. He had lost. A thought came to his mind that was so tragic it was almost amusing, so he had to share. "I don't even know the man's name," he laughed. He ran a hand back through his hair.

"I see," he announced, to clarify things for himself. "Well, I guess that's it. Guess there's...nothing else to say."

Danielle remained sitting, saying nothing. Please, he thought at her. Please, just speak to me. Tell me what I can do to

And then his own voice in his head, repeated her words at him.

Please stop. There was his answer.

Campbell stood up on legs that were not as steady as they looked and got dressed. He felt her eyes on him throughout the process, but managed to keep himself from returning her gaze.

She was still on the bed, the cover draped across her, and that vision would haunt him for long enough already, he knew.

He took a pen from his jeans pocket and fished a scratch sheet of paper out of the wastebasket. He scribbled on it and handed the page to her. "This is the number of my message service in New York. When...if...you ever change your mind, or just want to call, or anything...call it and leave me a number where I can reach you.

And I will call you."

He turned to leave. He was planning on letting himself out and was about to shut the door when she called after him.

"Campbell."

He opened the door again, and she was there. Before he could stop it a twinge of damnable hope raced across his heart. He quickly grabbed that emotion and put it away. "No one will ever love you as much as I do," he told her. "No one."

She ran a hand through his hair, looking at him. Studying him.

He grasped her wrist gently and pushed it away. It was not a gesture of anger, nor had he done so as an insult. Her very touch seemed to cause him pain on levels he had not known existed previously. He had to escape from it.

He had to run from this pain, even though it meant running yet again, flying north, and later perhaps even farther, all to get away from her hurting, loving touch.

"You don't understand," she said, as he released her.

He stood there a moment longer. "No," he agreed, "I don't."

He walked out into the rain.

Jack had broken open a new pack of blank sheet music paper and was scribbling on a page. He pushed back the curtain of the window to his left and peered out into the dark. The rain was falling very steadily, and he found its rhythm soothing. He went back to the matter at hand and pondered over a measure in his head, wondering if it would work.

He had played it through the second time when he heard the door downstairs open.

"Welcome home," he called over his shoulder.

Campbell tromped up behind Jack and stood there at the top of the stairs.

Jack turned around. He dropped his pencil. "Campbell? Jesus!"

Campbell's clothing was draping off of his body, and weighted down as it was, it must have been taking in water for some time. His hair was plastered to his forehead. The water from his clothing and skin was running off; a puddle was forming on the floor where he stood. Campbell seemed to pay it no heed.

"Hang on, don't move, I'll get you a towel." Jack found one in the closet and ran the several paces back to his friend.

"Here," he held it out to Campbell. For a moment, he was sure that Campbell would simply stand there, oblivious, and not take it.

Finally, after an eternity of moments, Campbell looked down at the towel. He recognized it. "Thanks," he muttered, and began slowly drying his face.

Jack sat down on the piano bench. "Campbell? What happened?" He raised an eyebrow; he had never seen Campbell like this. "Is everything all right?" It was a weak question, but he was uncertain what he should do or say.

"Everything's..." Campbell began, and then started over with more enthusiasm. "Everything's fine." He broke his paralysis and walked over to the couch. He sat down on it and Jack soon followed him. "She's...not going to be able to come along just yet...but...you know she's got a lot of stuff to work out on her own...needs some space to do it in." His eyes found every single spot in the room except Jack. "I'm sure that sooner or later...she'll...call...and..." he trailed off. His eyes had found Jack. He had run out of other places. "Dammit, Jack," he told his friend softly. "She said no, Jack.

She said no."

Campbell Alan Davis had been denied his parents and the upbringing that most children take for granted. He had cried the night his father fled from his life, the night he learned the true nature of his mother. He had vowed never to cry again.

Campbell Alan Davis had lost his childhood on the streets of New York City, trying to stay alive. He had not cried then.

Campbell Alan Davis had fought to come off of his drug addiction, where his detoxification program had consisted of being locked in a basement while drying himself out. He had not cried then either.

And now, from this selfsame Campbell Alan Davis, a single tear rolled down his cheek. It made him think of the tear that had fallen after his first kiss with Danielle, who he had felt was to be his soulmate. This tear was but a prelude, for with the memory of that kiss, the grief in Campbell broke free. Everything that had been holding him back let go, and he wept. He fell forward, and Jack caught him in his arms. Jack began rocking his crying friend, and Campbell Alan Davis allowed himself to be held, and he wept.

He wept for Carol, for Jack, for his childhood which had bled to death on the city streets, for Danielle, and most of all, for himself, who could see nothing but a life bereft of Danielle, who he had wanted so badly to be his mate for life.

Jack held his friend close and rocked him, being his anchor to reality and to the present.

Campbell fell asleep as he was, cradled in his best friend's arms.

Chapter Thirty

He grabbed the clock and meant to throw it across his room before he realized both that he only needed to move the lever over to where it would silence the hammer, and also that he had no room.

The alarm had been deafening in the relatively tiny space of his car. Thanks to this he was not only stiff in the joints because of his sleeping arrangements, but his head ached dully and his ears rang.

He yawned then checked his watch and the clock both, as if one of them had to be lying. Six-thirty, he thought first, and then, I did sleep fifteen hours. Jesus. He tried to remember waking up at three to reset the alarm and could not. I slept like a rock.

Despite his long rest, he was not filled with energy. He was filled only with suspicion and dread for whatever Susan Davis might have in store for him.

Campbell unlocked the driver's side door and got out. He walked around to the back of the car, feeling the gravel surface of the huge fairground's lot on his bare feet. He dug into his front pocket, found his keys and opened the trunk. He looked through the clothes there for a clean T-shirt and exchanged it for the one he was wearing. He wadded up the used shirt and tossed it into a plastic bag that also made the trunk its home. The new morning sun on his bare back felt good for a reason that he could not, nor wished to, name.

Once dressed, he closed the trunk, and got back in the car.

He suddenly had something not unlike a premonition, something that told him he should get out of Dodge as fast as he possibly could. Leave the fairgrounds, head straight back to Highway 15, and just

He stopped. What was that sound?

He opened the door and got out of the car. He strained to listen.

And then, it came again. Laughter.

Someone was inside the building.

This is wrong, he thought. This is all completely wrong.

He made his way to the other side of the concessions building, his direction chosen from some distant memory. Just as he remembered, the window they used for entry was there. A stack of boxes sat beneath it, serving as a makeshift staircase. God, will they still support my weight?

He paused to ponder this momentarily, then began climbing.

The boxes groaned under him, but held. He pulled on the bottom of the window, and just as he remembered, it slid open easily.

The lock had been broken; he thought he recalled Jonathan finding it that way one afternoon long ago.

He swung his legs inside and dropped to the floor. He turned around.

A dilapidated crate sat in the middle of the floor.

Carol sat on the far end of it, shuffling a deck of cards.

"Hello, Campbell," she said in that sweet voice of hers. "Took you long enough."

She was still the Carol of his youth, vibrant and smiling, the secret of her father still hidden somewhere in her mind.

"Of course it's not hidden, Campbell," she scolded lightly. "You know it, I know it. But it doesn't matter now, does it?"

I don't suppose so, Campbell told her.

Campbell thought on this turn of events for a moment. Carol, I can't be dead. Can I?

"Oh, for crying out loud, Campbell," the girl replied, trying to hide her smile. "You've gotten older, yeah, but did you have to get denser? Of course you're not dead, you're dreaming."

Oh, Campbell decided, resigned, that explains everything.

"If only," she remarked off-handedly, shuffling the cards.

"Have a seat."

Campbell did as he was told, sitting Indian-style on the other end of the crate.

"Touch them," she commanded, holding the cards out to him.

Campbell laid one hand on the deck, feeling his fingers brush against her skin.

"Thank you." She took the deck back, shooting him a quick smile at having his hand touch hers. She just as swiftly returned to business. "Now," she began.

She took the first card off the top of the deck. She threw it down on the crate and studied it.

"The Lovers," she confirmed aloud.

When she said this, Campbell noticed another sound, this one coming from somewhere outside the building. It seemed to be growing louder.

Carol drew the second card and looked at it. "Hmmm," she mused. She looked around her, acknowledging the alien sound, as its growth continued unabated. She seemed frustrated. "See," she accused, "you shouldn't have taken so long." She turned the card to face him. "Now, you'd better go see about that." Carol nodded toward the window and the sound which felt as if it were forcing its way into the building through every available opening.

She tossed the card down. It was the last thing Campbell remembered seeing as the room spun away from him.

It was the Five of Pentacles.

Campbell's body was halfway down the stairs just as his dazed mind was coming to realize he had sat bolt upright and leapt over the back of the couch.

He recognized the sound.

It sounded like screaming.

It sounded like Jack.

Chapter Thirty

-One

Jack sat in the large, stiff-backed hospital chair. Raymond Wilson was pacing around behind him. Campbell leaned up against the window, looking out onto the semblance of a city. He wanted a cigarette and was fighting his own private war to make that feeling go away. It would be so simple to surrender, though. There was more than likely a cigarette machine down in the hospital cafeteria, which seemed a rather ludicrous place for such a device. Still, he could find some change...he stopped.

He looked at Jack, who had his hands folded in front of him, leaning over as if he were trying to read the covers of the outdated magazines strewn about the table in front of him. He remembered walking down the stairs and seeing Jack and Karen there together, Jack out of his head with happiness. His next thought was of the last time he had come down the stairs, this morning when he had awoken from his strange dream of Carol.

He rushed downstairs into the diner to find Jack, kneeling on the floor, cradling Karen in his lap and screaming for help.

Karen was not moving.

Campbell dialed 911 and then began checking Karen over to see if she was even still alive. Her breathing was very shallow; her eyelids were half-open.

Jack had stopped screaming upon Campbell's arrival but was still sobbing helplessly over Karen's body. Campbell placed a firm hand on his friend's shoulder. "Jack," he said, making pains to speak slowly, "get a hold of yourself. You're no good to her if you're hysterical. You have to help me here, all right?"

"Y-Yes," Jack stammered, his face distorted with shock. "A-A-All right, I..."

Campbell gripped his shoulder harder. "Jack, come on. Take a breath. Make it a good one."

Jack closed his eyes and tried to regain control. He breathed in as instructed and appeared to calm somewhat.

"Okay, Jack, tell me what happened." Campbell said, emphasizing the last two words.

"I I heard her come in, and then nothing, so I came down to see what was going on, and she was just...just lying in the floor, not moving. So I I..."

Campbell had no idea what could have happened. He checked her pulse, which was very weak. He concentrated on keeping Jack calm, and waited for the ambulance.

Campbell brought himself back to the present. He might try that machine downstairs after all. "Jack," he asked, "you want anything?"

Jack hesitated, then shook his head.

He walked over to Ray, and was about to ask him the same question.

Ray looked up at Campbell, smiled grimly, and patted him on the shoulder.

Campbell made his way down the hall.

"Dammit," Campbell said.

It taken him only five minutes to find the machine he was looking for. The price, much higher than he remembered it, was not what had given him pause.

He looked at the cartons of cigarettes on display. So easy, he thought. It would be so easy.

"If only," he remarked aloud, and shivered with the memory of his dream. He then shoved his dollar into the other vending machine and hit two buttons. The package of gum dropped into the bottom with a thud, and he fished it out.

On his way back to the waiting area, Campbell ripped open the pack and was chewing contentedly three sticks of gum. His brief moment of weakness for nicotine had subsided. He was passing the nurses' station when he slowed and then stopped completely.

He was not sure why he did so, but he could not seem to go further. He felt as if he were waiting for something.

The nurse looked up. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Actually, yes, I think you can," Campbell responded without thinking. "May I use your phone?"

Campbell ran back into the waiting area.

Ray heard him come in and turned around to see what the matter was.

Campbell quickly motioned for Ray to join him, and they took a couple of paces back down the hallway.

"Ray," Campbell pitched his voice low, "where are Ashley and her mother? Did Sheriff White move them some place?"

"No, he never did. He thought they were fine at..." Ray hesitated for a moment, the pain of the words showing on his face, "...at our house."

"That's what I thought. You have an answering machine, right?" Campbell asked.

"Right," Ray responded immediately. "Campbell, what "

"That's what I thought. I need your house keys."

Ray fished them out of his pocket, and tossed them to Campbell. Campbell caught them one-handed and bounded down the hallway. "What's happening, Campbell?"

"Something bad," Campbell called over one shoulder. "Don't ask me how I know but I think our friend David has resurfaced. I think he's got them."

Campbell turned down the corridor and was gone, being chased by the echoes of his footfalls.

"Jesus," Ray breathed. He went back to the nurses' station and called the police.

After that, he went back to the waiting area.

Jack turned his head slowly to face him. "Is Campbell all right?"

Ray seemed to debate what to say, but then settled on the truth.

"Campbell thinks David may have showed up."

Jack shut his eyes and slowly shook his head. "Have you called the police?" he asked finally. His speech was slow, as if he were living in a dream. Most of him wished it was a dream.

"Yes."

"And I take it Campbell has gone after him."

"Yes."

Jack almost managed a smile. His face felt like it belonged to someone else. "Well, he'll need some help." Jack struggled to his feet and walked towards the nurses' station.

"Jack, I don't think you're in any "

"No, Ray, not directly from me," Jack responded, and turned to continue walking. "Indirectly. Sometimes that's best."

Jack borrowed the yellow pages and made a phone call.

Then he borrowed the white pages, waited five minutes, and made another call.

Chapter Thirty

-Two

Big Blue screeched to a halt in front of the Wilsons' house.

Campbell was out of the car seconds later, running up the front walk.

Guess I didn't need the keys after all, he thought. The front door stood ajar, the glass on the front of it broken, obviously to give someone access to the deadbolt from the outside.

Although there was no doubt in his mind who had done this, Campbell understood he needed to be careful not to disturb anything and make the job of the police any harder. Mindful of fingerprints, he grabbed the tail of his shirt and used it to push aside the door and step in, carefully avoiding the shards of glass which littered the foyer. He moved into the den and quickly found the answering machine.

It and the telephone had been pulled from their sockets in the wall and flung across the room. The answering machine itself was shattered, plastic fragments laying all over the rug. You had to stomp on it, too?

He quickly made a survey of the rest of the house and found nothing else amiss. More importantly, he did not find Ashley or her mother. Campbell was not surprised; he was certain David had taken them somewhere. But where?

He made up his mind where to start looking first as he was sprinting back to Big Blue.

Before he started the car, he turned to look in the backseat.

"Hello, old friend," he said, and his smile was grim.

Campbell cut the lights and turned the car off, letting Big Blue coast to a stop in front of the Blair residence. He remembered how forlorn the whole setting had been the day he dropped Ashley off here, and nightfall certainly did not improve it.

A light was on inside the house. A battered Nissan Sentra sat in the driveway.

Okay, the rational part of his mind spoke up. I hope we're right, or we're about to do something somewhat more than wrong.

He paid it no heed.

He got out of the car and crouched as he ran through the front yard, not seeing any faces looking out the front windows at him, but still not wanting to take any chances.

Campbell went up the front porch and studied the door. A small window sat in the top center part, in lieu of a fisheye lens.

He peered at the curtain-covered windows, and saw no movement inside. He rang the doorbell and then knelt down out of sight. A square of light was pouring out of the small window set into the door, and he kept one eye on it.

Campbell waited. Moments later, a form appeared at the front windows of the house. It pulled back a curtain and peered out. The shadow it cast on the curtains was wide.

Good, he thought.

A second later, he saw that shadow block the square of light he was watching, so he stood up quickly.

Before David Blair could move his eye away, Campbell pushed his baseball bat straight through the small window, shattering the glass and hopefully, Campbell thought, the man behind it. He felt the fat end of the bat collide with something solid, and he pulled it back out through the hole. He caught a glimpse of David falling out of view, and he dimly heard something heavy and metallic hit the floor. A woman inside screamed.

Move quickly, part of his mind reminded him. Move quickly, or we're all so unbelievably dead.

He reached his arm all the way through the window, ignoring the pieces stuck in the frame which tore at his shirt and skin. He was able to reach both the chain and the deadbolt, and undid them in one quick movement.

Campbell threw open the door and immediately assessed the situation.

David Blair was just beginning to pick himself off the floor, his left eye already swelling. Blood was streaming from one nostril.

Judy Blair stood in the doorway to the next room. She had been the one who screamed. He could tell from his brief glance that she had been beaten. One of her eyes was several steps ahead of her husband's.

He did not see Ashley anywhere.

The metallic sound Campbell had heard was a Colt .45 automatic pistol striking the ground. David apparently had been holding it, ready to use it on whoever was at the front door.

Between the gun and the stink of alcohol that seemed to come off of David in waves, Campbell was beginning to wonder if his rescue attempt was a grievous error.

"Stay down," Campbell was about to say, "stay down until the cops get here."

He never got a chance.

David was a very large man, but quick for all his bulk. He had already been finding his feet when Campbell had gotten the door open, and now he was working toward his weapon on all fours.

No, Campbell tried to cry out. He took dangerous steps forward to intercept him.

David was fast. He swept one of his legs around and brought Campbell's out from under him.

Stupid, Campbell cried out in his mind as he fell. Now we're dead.

Campbell screamed something, he was not sure what. He recovered before hitting the floor and launched himself at David, tackling the man's legs. Through his adrenaline haze, he knew he had to keep David away from the gun or the situation would go from worse to deadly.

The two of them went rolling across the den area, doing two complete revolutions before David was able to right them. He managed to put a heavy booted foot against Campbell's sternum and kicked.

Campbell felt his back connect with the wooden frame of the couch. The bat slipped from his hands. He cried out, and before he could do more, David was on him.

David clutched the pistol in his right hand.

"Little bastard," David spat at him, and brought his left fist into Campbell's stomach.

Campbell felt the air leave his body in one large whoosh.

"Take my family from me, will you, you shit?" He cocked his fist back and then forced it into Campbell's stomach a second time.

Campbell felt himself getting farther and farther away. He had to strain to hear David and his ramblings.

"They're mine," David hissed, and smashed the butt of the .45 across Campbell's head.

Campbell twisted in time to feel fire trace lines just above his eyes. His head rocketed backwards and seemed to roll, being barely attached to his neck.

He heard an animal screaming from far away. He opened his eyes again to see what it was.

He did so just in time to see Judy Blair bring the baseball bat down on her husband's back. The bat snapped in two on impact, and David fell to his knees.

"Thank you," Campbell tried to say, and could not quite form the words with his tired lips. He caught sight of one of the halves of the bat, and mused dimly, Homer, you fought the good fight. Farewell, old soldier.

I feel like shit, Campbell thought distractedly, and then brought a knee up into David's chin. That's better. If he was going to be the one to finish it, Campbell knew he would have to do it fast. His vision was becoming extremely blurry, and the blood from whatever wound David had managed to open on his brow was quickly blinding him the rest of the way.

He brought a fist down into David's face and felt the man's nose splinter.

Again, with incredible speed, David shoved Campbell backwards with one arm and then turned to use the other on his wife.

He grabbed Judy and pinned her against the wall by her throat.

She was choking and gasping. "Turning on me?" He was asking, although he did not expect an answer. "Turning on ME?!"

Campbell saw all of this in slow motion as he fell backwards over the couch. The back of his head crashed down on the rim of the coffee table, and he collapsed in a heap. Can I please pass out?

For God's sake, I'll die, fine, just let me go ahead and pass out first.

From somewhere far away, he heard a click and then a small voice. "Put her down."

Campbell raised his head, and with a hand that felt like it was coming loose from the rest of his body, tried to wipe some of the blood from his eyes.

David's voice came from his left. "Put that down before you hurt yourself."

"Put her down or I'll hurt you," the small voice said again. "I'm not kidding, Daddy, I'll kill you if you do not

put my mother down right...now."

"Don't make me " David began to say, but the gun went off.

"That was the wall," Campbell heard Ashley say, her voice even and too calm. "The next one is for you, Daddy. I won't ask you again."

"Ashley?" Campbell tried to ask, but his voice came out in a gasp. He was beginning to slide into unconsciousness, and he fought for a handhold in this reality. He began to hear what should have been sirens, but he could not be sure.

From the direction of the front door came sounds of commotion. "Police, Blair. Don't move."

Another voice, now inside the door. It might have been Sheriff White. "Ashley?"

"No!" Campbell cried out, forcing his lungs to work. "Stay back!" He scooped blood out of his eyes and tossed it away. He glimpsed a spray of red out of the corner of his eye, peppering the carpet. Later, he thought. Deal with that later.

He could see Ashley's form, a blurry visage that was failing fast. He reached out to her. "Ashley? It's all right now, put down the gun."

Ashley did not stir. She held the gun in a stance she must have gleaned from television, or perhaps from her father. Sheer adrenaline and anger must have enabled her to withstand the pistol's recoil. Campbell thought dimly how her arms would ache the next day. "He was going to kill us. Kill you, too. Told us so."

"He can't do that now, Ashley. The police are here. They've got him now."

Ashley cut her eyes to him. He did not need his full vision to know she was crying. "He'll find a way. He'll hurt us. He swore he would."

"He won't." Campbell felt himself slipping further, and the world swayed around him. LATER, he screamed in his head, and wrapped one hand tightly around the arm he had lacerated sticking it through the door. This brought back a semblance of clarity, but he knew it would not last. "Ashley, please. Please don't do this. Please."

Ashley's eyes were darting back and forth. "I'm so afraid," she whispered.

"I know," Campbell told her, "but you don't have to be anymore."

Ashley let the gun drop for a moment, and then raised it again.

"Ashley " Campbell began, fearing it was too late.

"If you ever, ever come near me or my mother again," she hissed at her father, "I will kill you. I...will...kill...you."

She let the gun drop and then fell into Campbell's arms.

"Campbell," she cried, "Campbell, you came to find me. You really came to find me. I was so afraid..."

Campbell was drifting off. He felt like he was finally going to go to sleep and that this was a good thing. His

arms fell away from Ashley of their own accord. Carol, we won.

Carol

Jack walked in the front door of what had been the Blair household. His eyes found his friend immediately. "Oh, Christ. Oh, Campbell."

Campbell was strapped in a gurney being wheeled through the foyer.

Jack took Campbell's hand. Campbell had a bandage that started just above his eyes, and covered most of his head. Dried blood was all over his face. There was another bandage around his left upper arm. "Campbell," Jack said again, walking alongside the gurney as the medical technicians took him to the ambulance.

Campbell's eyes fluttered open. "Jack," he managed to say, and then coughed. "Jack, I feel like shit." His voice was little more than a whisper.

Realization came into those eyes and they opened wide. Campbell gripped the wrist of the EMT on his left. "The ladies, Ashley and her mother?"

"They're fine," the man replied, "they're roughed up pretty bad, but they're all right. It's all right. Settle down."

Campbell released his grip. His eyes went back to Jack.

"Find out," he commanded. "He may be humoring me."

"I will," Jack responded.

"Jack, there's one last thing." The doors of the ambulance were being closed.

Jack leaned forward. "What?"

"I feel like shit," Campbell stated plainly. The doors of the ambulance shut.

The man whose arm Campbell had gripped walked around to the front of the ambulance. Jack followed. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Bad concussion for the most part," the man answered, as he climbed into the cab. "He got the shit kicked out of him. He'll be okay."

With that, Jack had to be content, for they drove away.

Jack quickly ascertained that the other ambulance, which contained Ashley and her mother, had already left for the hospital.

Hospital, Jack thought, and winced.

Later, he commanded, and those thoughts shrank back. For the moment.

Sheriff White was standing by his patrol car, the only occupant of which was David Blair himself. Jack could tell the man was handcuffed from his uncomfortable sitting position. Jack noted the man's bloodied face: the eye which had all but disappeared beneath a mass of swollen flesh, the twisted nose.

Christ, Campbell, what did you do? he thought, with more than a touch of admiration.

"Excuse me, Sheriff?" Jack asked as he approached.

"Yes, son? You're Jack Hardin, Ray told me you would probably be here."

"How are Ashley and Mrs. Blair?"

The sheriff removed his hat and set it on the top of his car.

"Well, I'm no doctor, but they're pretty roughed up. Judy has a black eye, but other than that, he wasn't able to do too much damage before your friend showed up." Sheriff White shook his head, and tried to stifle a smile.

"Your friend's a crazy son of a bitch."

From inside the police cruiser, David's eyes darted to the left and he began to call out. "Brother! Jay, buddy..."

From behind the sheriff a voice responded, "Shut up."

Jack and the sheriff turned to see Jayson Blair standing there, forcing a smile upon them. "Sheriff White, Jack," he nodded to them both.

"Jay, buddy, get me out of this damn car..." David was whining.

Jayson made no other response to his brother. "Someone called my house and told me this was going on, I came as soon as I could. Sheriff White, I see you've found my brother."

Sheriff White looked from him to his captive. "You might say that," he said calmly.

"Jay..." David droned on, "you said you would help me!"

Jayson Blair looked very nervous. "Sheriff," he began, "might I have a word with my brother alone?"

"May I ask for what purpose?" Sheriff White countered.

Jayson Blair cleared his throat. "Certainly. As you know, I was a lawyer in my time, and being his brother, I feel it would be best if I gave him some reminding of his rights before you take him down to the station."

"We've read your brother his rights, Mr. Blair."

Jayson stole a glance into the cruiser. "Well...sheriff, my brother is obviously intoxicated, and may not have any understanding of what is occurring. I think it would be best if I were to see if I could help him, both as a brother and as possible legal counsel."

"I see," Sheriff White replied, stealing a glance over Jayson Blair's shoulder. "All right, but you make it quick. The door will open from the outside." He took a step away and then turned. "You might also, Mr. Blair, remind the captive, your brother, that if he tries to run I will not hesitate to shoot him." The sheriff leveled his gaze at Jayson. "Make sure he understands that, too."

"Yes, sir," Jayson Blair agreed, "thank you, sir."

Sheriff White led Jack several paces from the two brothers.

"Sniveling little bastard," the sheriff breathed. He shot a glance at Jack as he pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket. "You never heard me say that, by the way."

Jack looked back in the direction of the cruiser. "Say what?"

"I like you, son," Sheriff White remarked with a trace of a smile.

He flicked his match alight with his thumbnail and lit the cigarette.

He shook the match out, and dropped it, stomping it into the ground to make certain it was extinguished.

A minute later they heard the car door shut.

Jayson Blair approached Jack and the sheriff. "Well, sir, I think that takes care of that. Thank you for "

" told you to stay away from them, you ignorant bastard!"

Jayson's voice spat from behind him.

"But Jay, you know...I know I was supposed to, but they's my family, right?" David's voice came now, clear as a bell.

The three of them turned.

Danielle Peterson stood by the police cruiser. In her hand, she held up a small cassette recorder. Out of the speaker came Jayson Blair's voice again: "If you had kept this quiet, like I asked you to, everything would have been fine. But we'll work this out, and we'll get this all cleared up. I'll see to that. I promise."

Jayson took a step towards Danielle, but the sheriff stopped him cold with his voice.

"No, Mr. Blair," Sheriff White warned. "Don't even dream about it."

Jayson looked from the sheriff, to Jack, and then to Danielle.

He seemed to be lost and looking for guidance. Finally his eyes came to rest on Jack.

"Go home," Jack told the little man. He felt incredibly old and tired. "It's over. All of it. Go."

Jayson Blair turned and went for his car. If Campbell's mother had been there, perhaps, she might have had some threat, some comeback that he could have used to make his exit more graceful.

She was not there, however, so he simply limped away. The three of them watched him drive off.

"Thanks for the ride," Jack told Danielle.

"Thanks for the tip," she replied.

"Anonymous tip," he corrected.

She smiled. "My mistake."

Sheriff White put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "Come on, son, I'll drop him off, and we'll get you back to the

hospital. I know you have some people to check up on."

"I have to get back to the Herald. Big story to write," Danielle commented as she went to leave. She hesitated, and then faced them again. "Jack, tell Campbell..." she trailed off.

Jack waited for her to finish. She did not. "Tell him what?"

"Tell Campbell I hope he feels better," she completed her thought. She seemed to know it was a weak sentiment at best.

"If you have anything to say to Campbell," Jack replied, running a hand back through his hair, "I suggest you tell him yourself."

Danielle thought about this and then nodded. She walked away.

Jack looked up at Sheriff White. "You never heard Danielle say anything about a tip, by the way."

"She said something?" Sheriff White asked.

Jack nodded his appreciation.

"All right, I'm ready," Jack told the sheriff. "Take me back."

Chapter Thirty

-Three

Jack preferred not to attend the actual funeral. Instead, he stood and watched the ceremony from a small rise among the headstones about fifty yards away. Half the town had turned out to comfort Ray, who had not long ago been through this same ordeal. A spouse was a terrible loss, but one was never supposed to go through something like this for one's own children. Jack could not understand how Ray could bear such a thing. From among the many mourners, Jack watched as Campbell would, from time to time, glance up at him. It was as if Campbell wanted to make sure Jack was still there.

Jack could have been nowhere else.

He watched as someone came up to Campbell and the two spoke; he assumed it was Karen's brother. They shook hands and spoke for about five minutes, and then the brother went back to Ray's side.

Since Karen's death, Jack had spent a good deal of time looking for someone to blame. He had spent hours walking aimlessly through town pondering this question. But who was there to accuse? Big stupid God for placing the time bomb that erupted in her head? Her mother for passing down the genes that created the tumor in the first place? They had told him there was nothing anyone could do. He kept trying to refute this idea, but could not.

It was hard to think clearly, not like when Karen was around and laughing, talking. Karen had spoken so much, and what she said had meant so much, that the world now seemed too quiet.

There was nothing left for it to say, Jack thought. Or at least, he did not want to listen. Not anymore.

There didn't seem to be much point in it anymore. Listening, that is. Or anything, come to think of it. He felt a numbness creeping over his heart, a familiar feeling, and he welcomed it.

The double doors swinging open, and the doctor's face telling him volumes of information he did not want to hear...

Anything but this, he thought distantly. Please, I can take anything but this.

But he knew he could and was doing quite well, all things considered. He had not cried, not even when they had come and told him she was gone. Not even when he realized that yet again someone had left him and he had not been able to say goodbye. He had not cried. He had the idea that his father would have been proud.

When he lost his mother at birth and then his father years later, he was an orphan, and knew he was an orphan, but the word never occurred to him as a way of describing himself. But now, with Karen gone, the word kept surfacing and resurfacing on the dark lake of his mind. I am truly an orphan now, he thought.

He watched the people going to and fro in the distance, around Karen's new home. I wonder if I can go lay down in the hole, just on top of the coffin, and I wonder if they would just shovel the dirt on top of the both of us, he thought absently.

I've got to stop, he told himself, but there could be no stopping it now.

He turned and began to walk out of the cemetery, with the heavy thought on him that he would be back. Many times. Perhaps every Sunday.

Chapter Thirty

-Four

C A M P B E L L

"Did I ever tell you the story about how I met Mary, Karen's mother?"

Campbell looked up from his cup of coffee. Ray was standing over him at the counter, looking down at him. Campbell could feel nothing but amazement at Ray. The man had just recently lost his only daughter, and he had mourned, but now he was back on his feet—saddened, yes, helpless, no.

"No," Campbell replied, swiveling on the stool to face him.

There was a constant spark in Ray's eyes it seemed, but now, with the thoughts of his Mary on his mind, it illuminated the room.

"We met in high school, like I may have said before. But we didn't get along right off. In fact, we couldn't stand each other. It was six months before we actually began speaking like civilized people do towards each other. And eventually, we realized that we were feeling things towards each other that we probably wished we weren't.

And, so we went our separate ways for the rest of high school, rarely saw each other, spoke, anything.

"And then one day, six months into college, we saw each other on opposite ends of the quad, and that was it."

"That was what?" Campbell asked, although he was pretty sure he already knew.

"We were stuck together like glue," he slapped his palm on the counter for emphasis.

"So what are you trying to say?" Campbell asked, although he was pretty sure he knew this as well.

Ray smiled. "I think you know. But I'll tell you. This isn't the end. No matter how bad it is, there's always hope. You never know, Campbell." He placed a hand on Campbell's shoulder. "I know you loved her, because I could see it when the two of you walked in that first time. But the thing is: I saw it in her, too."

Campbell looked at him, uncertain of how to react.

"Don't think that she didn't," Ray told him, kind yet firm. "Because I know she did. And you know it, too. It's just hard to accept what's happened."

"I can't stay," Campbell's voice was weak and felt far too dry. He sipped from his coffee.

"Then don't," Ray replied, "but also don't give up on yourself, or anything else for that matter. Especially not love, because nothing ever ends. Nothing ever ends. Do you understand?"

Campbell thought for a moment. "I think so," Campbell said finally.

"Good." He turned to go into the diner's back room.

"Ray?"

Ray turned around, smiling. "Yes?"

Campbell felt an aching thought pass through him, something he almost said, which was: Why couldn't you have been my father? Instead, Campbell merely smiled. "You really are an amazing person, you know that?"

Ray almost laughed. "No, not me, son. I'm just a normal human being like everybody else," he explained. "People think that others are amazing, but there's nothing keeping them from being amazing themselves. That potential it's part of being a human being. You know?"

Then he was gone, for the bell on the door had rung, and someone needed to be fed.

Campbell leaned on the open door of Big Blue, watching Jack walk over to him.

"Your head good enough to drive?" Jack called out.

Campbell knew Jack was referring to the large Band-Aid on his forehead. A nifty little souvenir, he thought darkly. "Is it ever?"

The two laughed for a moment, and then silence descended again.

"I can stay if you need me to," Campbell told him.

Jack shook his head. "I'll be fine; I just have to deal with this myself. You go do what you have to do."

They looked at each other for a moment, and an involuntary laugh escaped Campbell.

"What?" Jack asked, half-smiling.

"I just can't believe I'm leaving alone again," Campbell blurted out.

They had said good-bye several times over the past few days.

Jack would help Campbell bring some of his boxes down to the car, and they would talk about the departure. Campbell would be sitting around, listening to Jack play the piano, and they would discuss the departure. They had been rehearsing for this very moment and now that it had arrived neither had any idea what to say or do.

They embraced each other.

Jack asked, "You got plenty of money? Gas and all that?"

Campbell nodded. "Yeah, plenty. You still have that number I gave you? For my answering service?"

Jack nodded.

"Remember to call it if you ever decide to get out of here, or if you need anything, or if...if you just want to talk about...anything,"

Campbell told him.

"I will."

They stood there a moment. Campbell looked over at Jack and shrugged, trying to smile. "I don't know what else to say."

"This is truly a historic moment," Jack offered. "You better take care of yourself, you raving lunatic," he instructed, grinning.

"You, too." Campbell hugged him again.

They paused, both of them waiting for something else to come up, something that would stall this moment. Nothing did.

"Well, I need to get going." Campbell broke the silence and with a small wave, headed toward his car.

"Be careful," Jack followed close behind him.

"Yes, mother."

They shook hands and then Campbell slammed the door shut.

He paused a moment, waiting for some true epiphany to come to him. It would be some idea perhaps, some profound thought about all he had done and seen during this summer. But nothing came.

He supposed he would have to mull it over and perhaps write something about it later. It all eventually came out in the writing.

He started up Big Blue and pulled away from the curb. In his rearview mirror he saw Jack waving and stuck a hand out the open window back at him. He turned the corner, and Jack disappeared.

He drove out of town.

Campbell headed north on Highway 15 and suddenly felt the car was too quiet. He picked a tape at random and stuck it in the cassette player. It was mix of his favorite artists, so he was too busy singing along to notice the city limits sign when it passed him, making its way south.

Chapter Thirty

-Four

J A C K

Jack watched as Campbell rounded the corner and disappeared.

He stood there for several minutes, not moving, watching the parking space in front of the diner that Campbell's car used to take up. No matter how long he stared, there was still nothing there.

Jack finally accepted this and walked back into the diner.

He was flipping through a photo scrapbook he and Karen had been working on together. The pictures were for the most part from his surprise birthday party at the state park.

Here was himself and Karen, doing a very dramatic waltz on top of a large rock. They both had severe looks on their faces, although you could plainly see laughter about to spill out of their eyes.

Here was Campbell, appearing to dangle Ashley over a precipice. The two were hamming it up for the camera, Campbell looking very dastardly and Ashley playing the cowering heroine.

Here was Karen. Just Karen, looking at both the camera and the young man behind the lens taking the picture.

Jack traced the outline of her cheek. The other hand went to his forehead and rubbed at one temple.

Jack was not sure how long he remained looking at that picture.

When he came back to reality, he heard movement on the stairs.

"Jack." It was Ray. "Can I come up?"

"Sure, Ray, come on."

Ray peered up over the floor and then walked around into Jack's bedroom. "Campbell got off all right, I take it."

Jack nodded. "Saw him off this morning."

Ray looked him over. "How are you feeling?"

He thought over the question before answering. "All right, I guess."

Ray sat down on the bed next to him. Without waiting for a preamble, he began. "You know, if there's something that you seem to be able to do when you get as old as I am, it's notice things you never seemed to notice before. What I mean to say is that I know how you felt about Karen, and I can tell you that she loved you very much." Ray swallowed hard, and took a moment before continuing.

"I hope you realize that you're not to blame for what happened. I don't hold you responsible, I know Karen wouldn't." He paused. "I just hope that you don't hold yourself responsible."

Jack shook his head.

"That's good," Ray nodded. "I know you're in a lot of pain right now, and so am I, but " He gave Jack a look that Campbell would have recognized, "...did I ever tell about what happened when Mary died?"

"No, you didn't." Jack turned and faced him.

"She died the same way, you know. An undetectable tumor, sudden like that. No warning. And for a while there, I kept thinking about how bad off I was, you know, and that the rest of my life was already over." He stopped for a moment, thinking. "But then, I thought that Mary would never have wanted me to spend my whole life mourning. Mary taught me how to love life, and how to live it to the fullest. The worst way I could remember her was to think of her death. The best way to honor her was to keep on living and not die in my tracks."

He fixed Jack with a look.

"Do you know what I mean?"

Jack started as if he had been pinched. Ray seemed not to notice. "I think so."

"Good," Ray stood up. "I'll let you get back to your business; I just wanted to see how you were doing. Can I get you something?"

Jack shook his head. "Can I get you something?"

"I'll be just fine, Jack." Ray made his way toward the stairs.

"Ray," Jack called after him.

Ray stopped and turned around.

"Thank you," Jack told him. "Thank you for everything. I see why Karen and Scott turned out so well, because they had a wonderful father to help them along the way."

"Thank you, son," Ray said, smiled, and walked down the steps.

Jack awoke in the quiet that is only known in the minutes before dawn becomes a reality. His first thought was confusion, for he could not remember falling asleep. He was fully clothed and scattered around him were the photos he had been studying earlier.

He must have slipped into a doze while looking at them.

His eye happened upon the picture Campbell took immediately after the one of him and Karen waltzing. It was the two of them, still in each other's arms, but letting the laughter break through their facade of seriousness. It was the stillness of that moment. It was preserved forever. Something that could be preserved forever.

Yes, Jack thought suddenly, yes.

He began to empty his closets. He would have to make arrangements about his furniture, but that could all be taken care of.

He set about composing a note to Ray in his head.

The sun was merely peeking over the covers of the hills and mountains to the east when Jack arrived at his parents' house. He unlocked the garage in back with his key and lifted the door. The fluorescent lighting outside shone on the hood of his father's car, his car now. He got the keys from the lockbox on the wall and did a quick checklist in his head.

Registration in the glove compartment.

License tag, of course, up to date.

Full tank of gas.

"Good morning," a voice said from behind him.

Jack turned, startled. Debra was standing at the back door in her robe. "Long time no see."

"Good morning, Debra," Jack responded instinctively. He was not certain what to say. "Sorry I woke you."

"Light sleeper," she answered, and almost smiled.

They stood there, looking at each other.

"You came for the car." Debra was not asking a question. She sighed. "I knew you would sooner or later, after all, it's yours." She shrugged. "I've been meaning to go down to the dealership and find me something I'd like to drive anyway."

Jack smiled. This was probably as close to her blessing as he would ever receive. "Thanks."

"I know you're probably needing to go ahead and hit the road," she continued, "but...would...would you care for a cup of coffee?"

Jack did not have to think about this answer. "Yes, thank you. I can certainly spare some time to have a cup of coffee. Thank you."

She held the door open for him, and he went up the steps.

Just before he stepped inside, he turned back to look at his father's car.

His car now.

Yes, I agree, Jack thought to himself, Sheila is a wonderful name.

Ashley opened the front door of her house, and her face immediately lit up.

Jack was pleased beyond words to see that the bruises and scrapes she sustained during the incident with her father had faded and would soon be gone completely. He thought again what a beautiful woman Ashley would grow up to be.

"Hi, Jack!" she exclaimed, and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Jack caught the girl and staggered backwards. "Whoa," he gasped, and almost fell over. "You shouldn't be doing stuff like that, to an old man like me."

Ashley let go and stepped back. "Oh, shut up," she complained, "you're a long way from old yet."

"I stand corrected," Jack bowed.

Ashley looked to his right and raised an eyebrow. "Jack, what is this?"

"This," Jack explained, indicating the plant, "is Theodore. But you can call him Ted."

Ted sat in his pot, bearing his tremendous yellow bow. Most of the brown of his leaves had gone, and he had even grown about an inch since Jack had changed the plant food he used.

"What kind of plant is he?" Ashley bent down and studied Ted, taking one of his leaves in her hand.

Jack tried to remember if he ever knew what Ted was. There might have been one of those plastic spears in the soil of the pot at some point, identifying his make and model, but it was long gone. "I don't remember," he admitted finally, "I suppose he's just a mutt."

"Is he for me?" Ashley asked anxiously.

"If you'd like him," Jack looked down at his vegetable friend.

"I'm going to be traveling around for a while, so I don't have any permanent place for him. He's moody sometimes. He hates to be moved around a lot."

Ashley nodded, seriously taking all of this in.

"So, I decided he needed a new home, where someone would take care of him." Jack looked at the young girl. "Would you like to do that?"

Ashley hugged Jack again, and he felt as if he were being strangled. He did not mind at all. "Jack," she told him, "I'd love to."

Bathed in the light of a fully developed morning, Jack Hardin stood with a light wind blowing his dark brown hair, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jeans. He raised his head to meet the breeze and felt it caressing his face. He looked down at the headstone at his feet, rising in three dimensions toward the sky, above the simple plaques around it. He studied it, for he had never seen it before, and he wanted to know it well, for he was quite certain he might not ever see it again.

KAREN WILSON, it said, 1972-1993, BELOVED DAUGHTER AND FRIEND.

He stood there and tried to make sense of it all, and say goodbye to the woman that he had decided in such a short time to share his life with. And he was sure, absolutely sure, that this was the hardest thing he would ever have to do.

"Karen," he finally spoke aloud, "I love you. I think I always will.

Wherever you are, I hope you're happy."

He knelt down and picked up the one thing he had brought with him: a single red rose. He placed it on top of the stone, and something caught his eye.

There were some young blades of grass making their way up around the headstone.

He reached for them, but stopped. No, he thought. It's all too important. He withdrew his hand.

"Don't forget me," he told her, "because someday I'm going to be there, too." He looked around him, and stood up. "But not today."

He took one last look, turned, and left the cemetery.

The keyboard was secure in the back seat, and he had the radio going. He was driving north on Highway 15, the sun in full glory on his right and the world ahead of him. Secure in the knowledge that no one could hear him, he began to sing along with the radio. He could remember one word in five of the song in question.

Just before the city limits, a station wagon passed him on the left.

He turned to look, and in the back window he spotted a pretty little girl who must have been six or seven years old. She had wonderfully curly blond hair, and she was waving at him. Jack could not be certain, but he was sure her eyes were blue. A gorgeous blue, almost the color of the sky.

He shivered, and pulled the car over to the side, right next to the sign pronouncing the end of his hometown. He sat there for a moment, frozen, eyes staring straight ahead, watching the station wagon race out of sight.

Without warning, he burst into tears, bitter, bitter tears of loss.

It was an incredible release, one that he had been building up towards since he had changed. He sat there, letting his grief drain from him, waiting for it to subside.

It would subside, and that was the important thing. He was not dead, he had simply changed. He was alive.

Once it had subsided, at least temporarily, he could move on.

But for now, he was content to sit by the side of Highway 15 and weep.

Later, he would return to the two tasks before him.

One was to find a phone.

The other was to keep going.

May 1990

June 1996

GRATITUDE:

To my wife Maegan, to whom this book is dedicated. And as well to Jenna Leith, who is a fine writer in her own right. Without their support and assistance, this book as you hold it in your hands would not exist. My profound thanks and love to them both.

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John Robinson

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