

SANDS BEACH AQUARIUS

ED MATTHEWS

Also
By
ED MATTHEWS

**FRONTENAC
HARKERS
SMITHBURY SKELETON
THE BORAX BOYS**

Acknowledgements

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1

Jack O'Brennan was no less than six-three, but even as he grew older, he looked much larger than that. He was a sensible yet stubborn man who at times chose to follow the later trait. While eating breakfast on a bleak, unpleasant morning, he thought about the upcoming adventure of his life.

Although she had know him for less than three years, and been married to him for three short months, Jeanette Purchase O'Brennan read her husband like the news she found in the morning *Citizen Tribune*. Her complexion clear as quality glass, Jeanette, like O'Brennan had reached another milestone, sixty years of age.

"I have serious issues about you going out to the cottage and experiencing Hurricane Edna! O'Brennan, you've done some crazy things since I've known you, but this is the limit." As an afterthought his wife added, "Your head must be filled with madness."

Jack perceived her sense of displeasure.

"At times," he laconically replied.

"You're not thinking of doing something foolish, are you?"

"I'll give it to you straight." O'Brennan looked up from the sports section to lock stares. "I'm not looking to have a love affair with danger, far be it from me to do such a thing, but Edna just sounds right."

They glared at each other, refusing to look away.

An ominous glare glazed her eyes. "That's not so, O'Brennan. You've lived here most of your life and hurricanes are a yearly occurrence for us. You know what they're like, so why bother?" Jeanette finished her muffin and spoke through crumbs. "Some day you'll go too far."

"Be that as it may, but it just isn't the same. I want to see it, feel it, be frightened by it, and understand its fury. It's something I must do; hopefully, with your blessing."

Her husband shrugged as he poured himself more coffee.

"O'Brennan, you scare me when you talk this way. It's not like you to go off without a game plan. You're too well organized and methodical to jump into untested waters like this. Can you give me one good reason why you're going other than to experience something new? I know your mind is made up, but tell me anyway." Jeanette's eyes filled with tears as her face darkened from anger.

"Now you're offended." O'Brennan reached across the table with giant freckled hands that of late were showing the ravages of age to cover Jeanette's hands. "I've looked forward to this and feel an urgency to do it. I will not be kept from it!" His tight-lipped assurance convinced Jeanette her feeble attempt at dissuading him had failed.

She fixed her husband with a curious look. "O'Brennan, just what is it you're looking for?"

"For something different, is that all bad? Loneliness was eroding away the very substance of my being until I met you. Now, I don't have that problem, but I must explore other avenues of adventure. There is no case to investigate in the foreseeable future, so what's left? Edna." O'Brennan smiled at his sober wife.

Should I alter my plans and include Jeanette? After all my posturing, here I am with a change of heart. O'Brennan observed to himself.

"If that's what you want, then so be it." Her unsmilingly puckered face gave the appearance of eating a sour pickle. "The more I think about this hair-brained idea of yours, the more it annoys me."

"Why is that?"

"It's stupid, dumb, and you didn't ask me to go along."

"Ah, that's the real rub, isn't it? The truth finally rears its ugly head." O'Brennan looked across the table with a blank stare. A slight sound of

annoyance rose in his voice as he surveyed his gray-haired beauty. "Ok, I'll ask. Do you want to go out to our cottage and suffer through Edna?"

"Well. . .I don't know." Jeanette sighed as she looked away.

"You don't know, that's sweet! Here you are raising hell with me because I didn't ask; now I ask and you don't know," O'Brennan's voice choked up with anger.

"You don't have to yell at me," Jeanette said near tears.

"I'm not yelling at you and you know it. When and if I yell at you, you'll know it; of that you can be certain of."

She winced at his words, and then covered her hazel eyes with long slim fingers. O'Brennan could hear her low crying whimper and thought, what the hell.

"Here we go, now comes the waterfall of tears. This is the first time I've seen you cry, and I must admit you do it very well."

"You're cruel!" A blistering look crossed her unlined face.

"I'm not cruel and that is a fact. This is a ridiculous argument." O'Brennan opened his hands in frustration.

"I'm not a woman scorned, so get over that thought!"

O'Brennan dismissed her with a wave. "It's your call, but do me a favor and go up stairs and pack an overnight bag. I have to pick Cal up in half an hour."

The tears stopped as quickly as they had started. Jeanette quickly headed for the stairs, returning ten minutes later with a travel bag and a big smile.

"Come on, my honey, we have a date with Hurricane Edna." Jeanette couldn't hide the elation in her voice, nor did she try.

The spat was over as quickly as it had started.

You tried to make me into something I'm not, Jeanette thought, but maybe I haven't changed as much as you figure, Jack O'Brennan. There are two sides to every street.

O'Brennan laughed and thought, she pulls a string and I roll right over.

"Jeanette, we have to have an understanding about our time at the cottage."

"And what would that be?" She asked guardedly.

"You have to cook."

Jeanette laughed. "Count on it, you big drink of water."

O'Brennan reached over, hugged her hard and said, "Time to go, the good doctor is waiting."

A call from O'Brennan earlier in the morning alerted Cal the trip was on.

Even in casual wear for the beach, Jeanette displayed an appearance that women half her age would kill for. And as for men, she drew attention wherever she went. She had brilliantly run one of the city's posh eateries, the *Red Leather* for twenty years before it was torched several years ago. Not one to flaunt success, she nevertheless exhibited a headstrong personality that did not gladly suffer fools.

O'Brennan blew the horn while gliding to a stop in front of Dr. Cal Redout's house. His day had started with an argument and luckily the anger had passed quickly between he and Jeanette. Hopefully, the easy-going professor would bring some sunshine to the overcast day.

Cal Redout started his medical career as a general practitioner in Bridgeton with hard luck dogging him through his early professional years. His wife was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, followed by a slow and painful two-year decline to her death. Cal devoted his waking hours to comfort her as best he could, and in the interim lost his practice.

When a position opened in the Medical Examiners Office, Cal jumped at the opportunity. Without a pathological background, he embraced the unfamiliar discipline with a fervor that amazed his colleagues. He soon became an authority in the field, and ultimately rose to be Chief of Pathology for the city.

He normally appeared younger than his sixty years, but that was not the case this dark morning. His usual trim agreeable face was covered by an anguished mask as he approached Jack's Blazer.

At the very same time Cal Redout was settling into O'Brennan's Blazer, Hurricane Edna found herself lollygagging along on her way along the Georgia coastline.

Dr.Redout opened the door and recklessly tossed his carryall bag in the back seat. Much to his surprise, he realized he had almost hit Jeanette.

"Jack, how come you brought so much extra baggage with you?"

"Cal, that's not extra baggage, that's my wife."

Cal laughed. "Hi, Jeanette, it's nice to have you along."

She gave him a pleasant laugh. "Thank you very much, my dear man, but I question how happy O'Brennan is about my going. Our day started off with our first disagreement since we've been married. Can you believe it was about experiencing Edna."

"He'll get over it before we reach the cottage. Damned," he said painfully climbing into the bucket seat next to O'Brennan, "I hate getting old."

"Why is that?" Jack asked as he pulled the Blazer into the traffic lane to head toward Sands Beach and their appointed meeting with Hurricane Edna.

"Oh, it's this arthritis weather. I swear I'll be crippled come five years and live my remaining years in a wheelchair."

"Is it getting worse?"

"Not really. Only when the barometer falls rapidly does this magnificent body feel its meaning."

"You're a little bent, but hardly broken. Cal, that's part of growing up. Do you think you're the first gray hair to have a pain when he turned sixty?"

"Indeed not," Cal said as he fired up a cigar, "but I'm not impressed by the thought of what's coming up."

O'Brennan glanced at Redout, "We're hiding in a crevice called late middle age, and we're about to hit the short side of it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Our problem is; we're over the hill, at least in body," Cal laughed as he studied the ash on his cigar.

"Since when did you start up with the smoking?" O'Brennan asked.

"Recently," Cal laconically replied.

"Why would you start smoking after all these years."

Cal smiled as he began talking about his newly acquired habit.

"Last week when I was attending the Eastern Pathologist Convention in D.C., I met an old friend from my days at Johns Hopkins. We decided to drive up to see a colleague who's on the faculty at Hopkins. Our

convention was being held at the Willard, so I told him to pick me up in front of the hotel.

"Here I am waiting for Stan when along comes this dude all slicked up and doesn't he slip a big cigar in his mouth. Did you ever notice a guy walking down the street with a cigar planted in the corner of his mouth?"

"No, I never did, but I'm certain you're not going to forget telling me. Go ahead, what am I going to see?"

"Take a look at his face and you'll get the answer. At that moment you'll see a happy man."

"If you say so," Jack said while steering the Blazer east to the bay.

"I think you look cute smoking that nasty thing," Jeanette offered.

Jack asked Cal, "What do you think of our ill-advised adventure, as Jeanette put it?"

"With all the screwy ideas you've come up with, I think maybe you hit the jackpot with this sucker. Jeanette may think we're out of our minds, but what the hell does she know?" Cal turned toward the back seat, "Right, my dear?"

The person who says hazel eyes can't look hard had never seen a Jeanette snit.

"Jack I don't think my response to Jeanette was socially correct. Let me try my backup on her. Jeanette, you look ravishing as always."

She tried not to, but had to laugh. "Dr. Redout, you are as thimble-witted as the driver. Seriously, what do you really think?"

"Well, I'm excited. I feel venturing into something new will do us a world of good. But there is something that has been bothering me and I can't shake it." Cal paused to carefully choose his words. "This

morning while packing, a thought came over me that stopped me cold. It was like the shadow of a low flying plane passing on a sunny day. Call it a premonition, call it anything you want, but I have the feeling something strange is going to happen at Sands Beach that will directly affect you, Jack."

"Cal, you sound like my personal psychic advisor, and may have just characterized a dark shadow in my future. What's your point?"

"I have no point. It was nothing more than a thought out of the blue, so let's forget it."

The cool drizzle of morning turned to a warm gentle rain in the afternoon. Following that, a hard rain invaded the beach with a vengeance in concert with a fog like nothing O'Brennan had ever witnessed at Sands Beach.

As the clock swept to midnight, the rain pelted the south side of O'Brennan's cottage. The plywood-covered windows only served to amplify the sounds of Edna and acted more as a drumhead than a protective shield.

"What do you think the chances are of Edna hitting tonight?" Cal asked Jeanette.

"The weather report predicts the major thrust of the storm will be on us by ten in the morning, so why wait up? When it gets severe enough, we'll wake up. I'm going to bed," Jeanette said.

"Good thought, Jeanette. I think waiting for an event is more tiring than the ordeal itself," Cal observed.

"O'Brennan, you always make the rules, but the weatherman says a hurricane can be dangerous. You yourself know we have no business being out here," Jeanette advised.

Cal gave O'Brennan a scholarly glance. "Jeanette's right, you know."

"Cal, don't believe everything you hear. Fear is the biggest cause of procrastination, and if we'd waited another day to come out here, then we'd never know. And further more, what else did you have on your social agenda?"

"O'Brennan, you're missing the obvious," Jeanette said.

"And that is?"

"Are we up to this?" Jeanette's fear manifested itself in her question.

"Ask my psychic," O'Brennan smiled at Cal.

"As I see it, we are an advance party for the whackos," Jeanette said.

O'Brennan looked out the picture window at the raging storm. The streetlights swayed in the stiff wind-driven downpour and loose debris sailed by the cottage.

"The show's about to begin. Edna is almost here, I can feel it."

"O'Brennan, I cannot believe you didn't have Charlie cover that front window like the others," Jeanette said.

"How are we going to see Edna if the window is boarded up? The cottage faces east, so there should be no danger of the window blowing out, or in for that matter. Just relax."

Jeanette's voice inflection turned to troubled. "I envy your confidence."

While in college, Jeanette was devastated by the news of her fiancé's death in Korea, dropping out shortly thereafter. Trying to regroup, she moved to Bridgeton to strike out on her own. Surely a city of seven hundred thousand would have numerous jobs for a beautiful young woman of her stature; she was correct.

Working as a secretary at the shipyard, Jeanette acquired a circle of co-workers who spent their evenings in the company of every available sailor of the Atlantic Destroyer Fleet. It seemed those friends were offering their favors for preposterously low amounts and she undertook to resolve their situation. Although never a part of this questionable activity, she soon realized she could make more in a week organizing their activity than working at the shipyard for a month.

Jeanette's newly formed business, *Sweet Briar Escort Service*, immediately gained success. She became a stylish madam while operating in Harkers for the better part of a decade before, as she called it, going straight. Jeanette acquired the respectability she so desperately sought in a restaurant called the *Red Leather*. After that she opened the *Red Squire*, which she still operated in Spenser, a hamlet near Chesapeake Bay.

She met and fell in love with the widowed private investigator, Jack O'Brennan, while he was investigating a case three years earlier they dated for three years and ended up marrying last June. Jeanette was used to having her own way, but O'Brennan changed all that.

2

Hurricanes start as sullen winds in the Caribbean and receive no invitation from mainline inhabitants as they wander north. They have no conscience and assert themselves as uninvited guests into any space they travel.

The last hurricane on the block took shape on a lazy Sunday afternoon in mid-September. She was different because she didn't blow and hammer in the prescribed manner that tropical storms of her dimension normally follow. Instead, brimming with a flushed glow of considerable satisfaction, she presented an elegance about her that some may have admired. Edna gracefully initiated her casual trip north in a state of euphoria, gliding along at a gait of ten miles an hour. Unaware of her potential to destroy anything that crosses her path, she conducted her journey more like a child visiting an amusement park for the first time.

All hurricanes have the common tendency to create a mosaic of destruction as they mutilate and disfigure everything in sight. However, indifference was not part of her nature and from its origin, Edna the hurricane displayed a definable tranquility along her murky journey.

The slow-moving speed with which this gracious lady chose to take on her northern trek provided ample warning to the anxiety-filled residents along her march. From long experience they anticipated that destruction was on the way. Early on, the U.S. Weather Hurricane Warning System characterized Edna as a high wind with hurricane overtones, though innocuous enough. In all cases of hurricane warnings, residents along the southeastern coast of the country prepared for an onslaught of fierce weather, regardless of what the scientists predicted. Their preparation was only a small price to pay for the many coastal pleasures pluses they enjoyed throughout the year.

The towering mass of clouds that accompanied Edna produced rain, but not in the same manner as her sister

before her had done. Observers flying over the hurricane looked down into a black boiling mass that appeared like an enormous spinning cauldron of black dye.. Her good intentions brought rain that did not consist of conventional torrents of heavy unforgiving water, but rather of a softer benevolent one. The water this hurricane carried was dropped much like a heavy spring shower.

As if by design, the rain soaked the ground as opposed to running off and eventually seeking the ocean. Edna appeared calm as she brought to distressed farmers of the southeast region a much-needed downpour that would linger and save the area from a three-year drought that nearly crippled the agriculture economy of the farm belt.

Soon weather specialists praised Edna for her docile behavior along the coast and categorized her as a faint cry of anguish from the south. She had established a style and texture of her own, much to her credit. However, when she reached the Tidewater area around Norfolk, Virginia, she unaccountably assumed a grotesque appearance and dramatically changed her personality. With this radical transformation came torrents of breathtaking rain that penetrated every crack and crevasse of the landscape with high winds approaching ninety miles an hour. Her dark mood accompanied by heavy cloudbanks grew angrier and blacker while reaching to the heavens.

Looking at a map of Virginia, the casual observer would understandably surmise the Potomac and Rappohanock Rivers appeared as fingers extending to the placid waters of Chesapeake Bay. Sands Beach was a mile-long crescent of sand located at the eastern most end of the peninsula formed by the two rivers. The residents of the beach had been spared when the dread hurricanes came their way. A quirk in Mother Nature had provided a sanctuary that hid them from the havoc others felt. This was not to be the case on this September day, a date that old-timers would talk about for years to come.

The moon slid behind the clouds as Edna crossed the mouth of the Rappohanock River. Thoughts of being a

benevolent storm along with her delusions of grandeur quickly faded, and she took on the darkest of possible appearances. The demented gene inherent in all hurricanes surfaced and she announced to the East that she had a proper pedigree, and was here to make trouble. She did not have a large audience for her newfound audacity, nor was one needed. The character flaws she so desperately tried to suppress broke loose and drove her headlong toward an unsuspecting Sands Beach, a beach considered by many to be a gift from the gods.

At this point, the gracious lady called Edna displayed an unknown schizophrenic side by changing course in the middle of her headlong dash north. An odd progression of events followed that confused all who had become admirers of hers. Her once sunny disposition had unaccountably changed to a truculent mood.

The science of weather forecasting simply stated that hurricane winds rising in the Northern Hemisphere assume a counteraction. True to form, Edna accepted this imposition from above until she reached the Rappahannock where for no explainable reason, she revealed her multiple personality by reversing her winds to a clockwise direction like her counterparts in the Southern Hemisphere.

The East coast had three large sand dunes of note: one sitting near the tip of Cape Cod adjacent to Provincetown, the Kitty Hawk dune on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and the Great Dune located at the north end of Sands Beach.

Edna passed over Sands Beach in a confused state. After her sweep of destruction, there were but two remaining sand dunes. In her frenzied state, she viciously lifted the three hundred-foot sand hill and neatly placed it in the warm waters of the Chesapeake. Geographically, the majestic dune now stood a quarter of a mile from shore looking every bit the sand island it had become.

Almost as if she were baffled by her short-lived reign of terror, Edna inexplicably turned east toward

the ocean and began to dissipate, leaving the crescent beach in absolute disarray.

Her buffeting winds sent lawn furniture, beach benches, cottage roof shingles, shutters and all insecure articles bouncing around like corks on the high sea. She had turned the bay into a foaming expanse of seawater and with it came the exceptional smell of salt.

Her fury had unearthed a skeleton with a missing arm where the proud dune once stood. The remains hidden away in its sandy grave for an unknown period was now exposed to the world in the ultimate humiliating fashion as if by design. Someone had committed her to an early sleep on the beach and forgot to wake her. The perpetrator of this assault on man probably assumed his secret would be hidden for an eternity.

After her imprudent moment at Sands Beach, Edna faded away as quietly as she had begun her trek in the Caribbean. Her waning presence left Virginia with a brilliant sun shining on a shattered beach and the remains of one lost soul.

O'Brennan awoke to the sound of thunder and for a fleeting second had no idea where he was. He could hear rain driving against the cottage before opening his eyes. The bed offered comfort and warmth from the cool damp air of the morning. He could feel Jeanette radiate warmth as he turned to face her.

Jack always slept on his right side, a throwback to his Korean War days aboard ship. Sailors berthed on naval ships tend to sleep toward the inside bulkhead so they wouldn't be kicked in the face by others climbing to upper bunks.

He turned to put his arm around Jeanette. O'Brennan found that she was awake and could feel her body tense.

"How are you making it, old girl? Did you have a good sleep?"

"O'Brennan, hold me close, I'm scared. It was the most frightening night I've been through in my life. I had a nightmare and I still can't get it out of my mind."

"What was it about?"

"The road in front of the cottage was covered with water running toward the sand dune, and it was full of snakes. On top of the dream, this thunder and lightening is scaring me to death. Between the nightmare and this weather, I wish I had never come out here."

Jack reached over and kissed her. "Jeanette, don't you worry, old Jack will take care of you."

"O'Brennan, you say the nicest things, but I'm still frightened by the storm." From their first date, Jeanette never called Jack O'Brennan by his first name. To her, it seemed appropriate to just use O'Brennan.

"By the time we get settled for the morning, this storm will have blown over and things will improve." Jack sat up and put on his slippers, "I'm going to make coffee. Did you bring along anything for breakfast?"

"There's food in the refrigerator, but I can't eat just now. Let's wait until later."

"Fine with me, I'll just make coffee." Jack turned the kitchen light on with no results.

"The power is off, so we'll have to have juice."

He walked to the front room and looked through the picture window, his attention focused on the water. "Jeanette, come out and take a look. It's almost like trying to look through a bottle of ink."

Jeanette pushed up next to him to squint through the window. "It looks like the sky is touching the ground," she said as she ran fingers through her graying hair.

The gigantic rush of wind along with torrents of rain that accompanied the storm suddenly stopped and turned to a steady drizzle. Suddenly, a crack of sunlight punched through the gray overhead. Odd, Jack thought, the first light of day with no dawn, just sun beginning to break through the cloud cover. The sun appeared to change its course and withdrew leaving the morning steeped in fog accompanied by a heavy mist.

There was no wind, thunder, or lightning; only a heavy gray fog so thick it was difficult to see the road in front of the cottage. At high noon, the oppressive fog evaporated in a matter of minutes, leaving a lovely late summer afternoon.

"I can hardly believe Edna blew herself out so quickly. It certainly is a mess out here," Cal said as he walked through the front door into the sun-drenched hotness of the fall season.

"We live in a fragile environment," Cal observed.

Jack O'Brennan and Dr. Cal Redout knew Sands Beach would never be the same. Edna had turned the bay into a bubbling pot of seawater while releasing an exceptionally strong smell of salt. The Great Dune that stood as a sentinel was no longer visible.

Charlie the beachcomber, the O'Brennans, and Cal Redout were rewarded with a shocking sight when they converged on the street. They collectively surveyed the scene in amazement. In the meantime, the beach road came alive with captivated residents gawking in wonder at the strange phenomenon that had occurred. They had been witnesses to an incident that would receive world news coverage.

Charlie, a retired teacher from Roanoke, was considered the character every neighborhood should have but doesn't. After retiring, he picked up and moved bag and baggage to his summer home. He daily systematically searched the sand with a metal detector with one hand and a long handled basket in the other, finding a variety of lost items ranging from watches to wedding rings.

His cottage was four places up the road from O'Brennan's, and on his front porch he placed a large plywood board adorned with hooks holding lost items. Over the years, this kindly gesture helped many visitors claim their lost treasures.

"It was a hell of a blow, wasn't it boys?" Charlie observed. "I can't imagine what I'll find when I sweep the beach."

"Who'd'a believed it. In my fondest dreams I thought the Great Dune would stand the test of time," O'Brennan said in wonder.

Redout looked in wonder at the empty space the former Great Dune occupied. "Believe it or not, it happened, go figure. My life experience never prepared me for something like this. That's what you call a textbook disappearing act."

"We were smack dab in front of the action with a matchless view of the beach and missed a grand

opportunity at a no uncommon experience," said a disappointed O'Brennan.

Charlie listened as O'Brennan carried on, and then nodded. "What the hell, with the storm flying around the way it was, nobody saw it. Nevertheless, it's difficult to believe," he said weakly.

"Well, I believe it," O'Brennan said, as he pointed at the new island in their midst. "I know Edna wasn't much of a hurricane, but we'll remember her for a long time."

Jeanette heard a conversation resonating from a group standing around down the beach.

"What's the major attraction over there?" Jeanette pointed her thumb toward the area that formerly claimed the famous sand dune.

Despite the damage to the area, the beauty of the day swirled around them as Cal suggested, "Let's walk over and find out. There's two things I'm certain of and that is: one, your beach is going to be very busy with curious tourists for many months to come, and two, National Geographic is going to have a field day with this. Jeanette, when they come down to take pictures, maybe you can go topless and act like a native."

"Cal, that isn't funny," but she laughed with the others while pointing at Cal. "That is perverted and you know it."

Jeanette, her girlish looks never more in evidence led the way in her casual beach attire. Her cut-off jeans, faded sweatshirt and worn white sneakers with holes her toes peaked through fit the image of a cast member on the set of *Gilligan's Island*. She led them to the cluster of people formed in a circle. Jeanette turned and laughed, "O'Brennan, did you see that seagull wink at me like he thought I was cute."

Jack looked at Jeanette with a blank look causing Cal to laugh. "How do you know?"

"I just know," Jeanette replied.

"Jack, don't listen to her, she'll drive you crazy," Cal happily said.

As Jeanette neared the circle of curious residents, even with her nearly six-foot height she couldn't see what they were looking at. She excitedly burrowed through the crowd to view the object of their attention. The excitement of the moment quickly dissipated as she continued to eye the skeleton.

The man who owned the cottage opposite the crater addressed O'Brennan. "Jack, you're the resident detective of the beach, what do you make of this?"

The circle of observers parted like Moses had just arrived, allowing O'Brennan and Cal to walk into the their midst. On the sand lay the bones of a skeleton minus an arm stretched out as if waiting for museum attendants to come and cart it away.

Look what we have here, O'Brennan thought.

A neighbor called from in back, "Tell us Jack, what do you think?"

O'Brennan heard another say, "The forces of darkness must have been at work. I'll remember it forever."

I wonder what he'll remember, Jack thought. Will it be the relocated dune, the skeleton on the beach, or, more likely, both?

"I have absolutely no idea other than it was a human body. Let's talk to an expert. What do you think?" Jack looked at his pathologist friend with a questioning glance.

O'Brennan's answer was an oblique compliment, but nevertheless well received.

"These are a woman's bones," Cal said.

"How do you know? It would seem all skeletons look the same other than size," Jeanette said.

Cal started his scholarly discourse calmly. "Not so. This is definitely a woman. If you look at her pelvic area, the bone is roomier, wider and less funnel-shaped than a man. Look at the skull and you'll see the back plate appears to be lighter and smaller." Cal pointed to the back part of the skull. "This bone, the occipital is smooth and that's a telltale sign the body was a female."

"I wonder what caused her death?" O'Brennan asked.

"How did it happen, you ask. This is just a guess, but I believe it happened this way. If you look here," Cal pointed with authority to the bone above the opening of the left ear, "note the crack in the plate. This is a fracture or break of the temporal bone and it appeared severe enough to have immediately rendered the victim unconscious."

"What you're saying is this poor soul was hit on the head causing the fracture," O'Brennan said.

"Exactly. I would suggest the victim suffered a blow to the temple and was knocked out from the thrust. This appears to have been a simple fracture, so if a doctor had been called, he would have prescribed bed rest and that would be it," Cal patiently explained.

A persistent Jeanette frowned and asked, "I may sound untelligent, but if this was a simple fracture, what would have been a compound fracture?"

When Cal Redout talked business, he used a no-nonsense approach.

"My, you're full of questions this afternoon, aren't you? To answer your question, a compound or depression fracture would entail a blow that shattered the temporal bone to the point where the brain was exposed. In that case, they'd attach a plate to the skull to compensate for the loss of the bone structure."

A scrambled look of confusion graced Jack's face as he looked toward the sparkling water of the bay.

"Stop me if I'm going too fast for you," Cal said with a smile.

"Out of deference to your professional training, Cal, when you were in medical school, did they offer a course in buzzwords?" O'Brennan asked, a smile beginning to show on his tanned face.

"No, but you asked me that before. What's your concern?" Cal hunched his shoulders as if he really didn't care.

"Because every doctor I've ever heard uses the word 'exactly' and I just wanted to know why, that's all."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "Jack, spare me."

The crowd of cottage residents turned to watch a sheriff's patrol car come to a halt on the grass next to the beach. Jimmy Childs, the officer who had worked with O'Brennan on the Smithbury Skeleton case walked up to the group of spectators.

"Hello, my friends. What little surprise do you have for me today?"

O'Brennan returned his greeting with a smile. "You'll find out more in the tarot cards than we can offer, and it's a mystery to all of us. This skeleton was unearthed during the hurricane. Getting away from this for a moment," Jack waved at the bones peacefully stretched out in the sand, "it's great you were named Sheriff."

"Thanks, Jack. It's one of the nice things that sometimes happens to people."

"Well, if you ask me, it was long overdue," Cal said as he smiled at his friend. Since his early days in the Medical Examiner's Office, he and Sheriff Childs had crossed paths over the years and Cal had acquired an enduring respect for the lawman.

"It won't last long, Cal. I'm retiring next spring after I have six months on the job. When Sheriff

Wilham suddenly died, the county legislators thought it would be a nice gesture to reward me for my long service working for the county."

Two deputies busied themselves placing yellow plastic stripes around the skeleton with POLICE SCENE, DO NOT ENTER printed in black.

"I'm going on forty years with the department, so this is a temporary appointment. The job is a political one, but I never chose to go that route, couldn't be bothered. Seems the state retirement is set up so retirement is based on your highest paying salary, provided that you spend at least six months in grade."

"That was nice of them, but the bottom line is, will it help you in the money department?" Jack asked.

"To the tune of three hundred more a month. How's that? Let's take a gander at the skeleton."

After looking closely, the sheriff turned to Cal and asked, "What's your take? I have my own thought of what happened, but you're the professional."

The pathology professor from Bridgeton Medical School reviewed the business of the fracture to the head reviewing much the same story he told earlier. "I just finished wrapping up my observations when you came along so why don't I finish up. With such a fracture, the victim would have blacked out immediately and a large hematoma would immediately have developed."

Someone from the crowd asked, "What's a hematoma?"

Cal was quick to answer and eager to dispense his own words. "It's a clinical term that means a large swelling containing blood. In this case, the swelling was in the brain, and that's a problem area. Normally, if medical attention is readily available, a CAT scan will be given to determine the cranial damage. If the blow has been sufficiently severe to create such damage, immediate action must be taken."

"Meaning?"

"Jeanette, the blood that has gathered in the head will have to be drained. If this is not done quickly, signs of atrophy will immediately begin to show."

"Cal, you always did talk over my head, what is atrophy?"

"It's the degeneration or wasting away of body tissue. In the case of a cranial hematoma, the brain cells bathed in blood rapidly deteriorate and brain damage is certain to follow."

"Then you think she died from brain damage?" O'Brennan asked as he eyed the crowd around them.

"No, I didn't say that. This may sound silly, but I don't think she died from brain damage at all."

Becoming more annoyed with the former medical examiner, O'Brennan asked, "Then what caused her death?"

"This is only a guess, having spent very little time examining the evidence, but I think she was suffocated. She was rendered unconscious and pushed under the sand to die in an shallow grave."

"Is there more to tell me? Seems as if there should be." O'Brennan's question hung there without the resemblance of charm.

"Are you questioning my veracity? You know better than to ask such an insulting question," Cal curtly replied. "Let me put it another way, can you prove it didn't happen as I suggested? No, you can't." Cal answered his own question. "Remember, I said it was only a guess. Here comes the ambulance crew now, so we can talk about this later."

Sheriff Childs motioned a deputy over. "Sam, I want you to disburse those rubbernecks." He nodded at the onlookers. "Put a couple of men around the area until the remains is picked up. And make sure those people are run off the beach, at least this immediate area."

The deputy looked strangely at Sheriff Childs.

"Don't look at me that way." Childs made a 'go-ahead' gesture. "Just move them!"

The officer shrugged and said he would.

A ton of questions flashed through O'Brennan's mind as a red and white ambulance pulled up next to the remains and attendants started loading them onto a gurney.

Jeanette placed her hand on O'Brennan's arm. "I'm going back to make lunch; it's afternoon but I have the fixings for breakfast, so that's what it will be. Plan on eating in half an hour." She turned around and headed for the cottage. From across the road, Jeanette called over her shoulder, "Don't forget to bring your buddies."

"From what I can see, there isn't much that can be done. We'll be over after a fashion," O'Brennan said with a smile.

Sheriff Jimmy Childs nodded his chin at the transplanted dune in awe. "So Edna moved the big Kahuna."

"Jimmy, have you had breakfast?"

Childs gave O'Brennan a wink. "If Jeanette is cookin', I'm eatin'."

"You always have a way with words when food is mentioned."

"How about me? The medical examiner asked.

"That's a given. After all, you did bring the Virginia ham."

Sheriff Childs turned to his assistant and motioned toward the cottage. "I'll be at the cottage that lady just went in if you need me. I called our ME and the lab, so they'll be right along. After you wrap

things up here, head back to the office and we'll figure out something later."

O'Brennan looked like the Pied Piper of Sands Beach as he started across the road with Sheriff Jimmy Childs, Charlie the beachcomber and Cal the doctor following in a row.

Childs turned on his heel to face the site where the dune formerly rested. "It was almost as if Edna was trying to tell us something, and I'll say this, the beach was a perfect venue for such an exercise."

Unlike the rest of the crowd, O'Brennan sensed he would become more than a passive observer.

"I'll tell you one thing about that body. I'll be surprised if you ever identify it," O'Brennan said to Sheriff Childs as he started for the cottage. "Come on, food awaits."

Investigating senseless deaths like this is begging to take its toll, on me and I can't wait for my career to end, Childs reminded himself.

It was impossible to guess his feelings because of his expressionless face, but as Sheriff Jimmy Childs looked at the remains of what was a human being, he could feel his heart pull, trying to jump out of his chest.

His forty years of police work in the county pretty much paralleled O'Brennan's career. The only difference was, Childs went straight to the Sheriff's department after serving in the Korean War, while O'Brennan attended college before entering law enforcement with the Bridgeton police.

O'Brennan felt strangely at ease while studying the morbid scene in front of him. His attire had proven to be a bone of contention between he and Jeanette. Gray shorts and what he called his "beach shirt", a gray and white striped cotton sweatshirt with the arms cut off, about half way down his biceps.

He looked at the sparkling waters and thought, how could a beach such as this be so calm after the night of violence it suffered?

Always an early riser at the beach, he'd drink his first coffee of the day while rocking on his front porch. He loved the quiet of the early hours and enjoyed watching the sky put itself together for another day. After finishing his coffee, he'd leave the relative comfort of his porch to sit on a bench overlooking majestic Sands Beach Bay. More times than not, he'd bring a book and read under a streetlight until the dawn was ready to break.

He continually marveled how, at four in the morning, the gentle breeze that traveled from bay to beach felt like it had escaped from an oven. He believed the beach was at its best the week of a full moon. From his catbird seat, he had an unobstructed view of the sky turning from pitch black to gray streaked with red followed by the yellowish-orange sunrise.

This is where I do my best thinking, and watch the sun rise over the dune, O'Brennan reminded himself. Now that the dune was relocated, he wondered how much earlier he'd view the sun.

What he liked best were the sights and sounds of a deserted Sands Beach. The lights of a distant ship making its way north or south across the bay, the soft lapping of water against the sand, an occasional car making its way along the road, driving slowly as if not to wake the beach residents.

Cal's call interrupted his reverie. "Jack, are you coming?"

The deputy had followed Childs' orders and moved the spectators away from the crime scene. A blue blanket covered the skeleton. The spectacle as O'Brennan saw it was a monument to something vile and ghastly from the past. O'Brennan took one last look at the former site of the dune and walked across the beach to Cal and Sheriff Childs standing by the road.

The white sand appeared covered with hundreds of crater-like holes as if a barrage of mortar shells had hit the beach. It was obvious to the casual observer that Sands Beach had lost a war. Not to armed invading soldiers, but to Hurricane Edna.

"You know, Jack, I wear too many hats in this job."

"What do you mean, Jimmy?"

"I'm in charge of enforcing speed limits on county roads, taking care of reports of all accidents that happen out there, investigating all robberies and break-ins, controlling crowds at the county fair, and now this." The sheriff turned to point at the blanketed skeleton, and then removed his Stetson straw hat to wipe his sweat-covered brow with his forearm. "Damned, I'm a simple man with more patience than brains."

"Loosen up, Jimmy, this will all go away before you know it," Cal advised.

"I have a couple of months before I retire. I don't like this happening on my watch, and out there I'm involved in something considerably beyond my expertise."

"Obviously you're not culpable. What is there to be concerned about? You'll have the remains taken to

the county morgue and that will be it; that's an old body."

"No matter how tall a building is you have to start on the first floor."

Cal looked sideways at O'Brennan with a shake of his head. Jimmy's last words didn't register.

"What do you have up your sleeve?" Cal asked evenly.

"You're a doctor and don't understand. I'm sworn to do a job and feel obligated to do it." Childs again motioned his head toward the blue-covered lump on the sand. "That sand dune was here forever. People have walked around it, climbed it, and taken pictures of it. It stood as a lasting reminder of days gone by. Now look at it. It's still the monument it was before, but a different kind. Its present location has changed our lives forever. Things will never be the same."

"How so?" Cal asked.

"Did you see those helicopters flying around? What do you think they were doing?"

"Well. . .they were probably taking pictures for TV coverage."

"You've got it. Once people see what happened here, they'll come down and look, no question about it. All of a sudden, this quiet beach is not going to be quiet anymore. There'll be people milling around, gawking, rubbernecking, and causing all kinds of problems for my department. It will touch the people who live out here. This guy has been here forever," Childs motioned at O'Brennan, "How will it affect him? You see what I mean?"

Cal made an indifferent shrug as Childs looked to him for support.

"I know I can't solve this. I'm just a policeman, nothing more, nothing less. I direct traffic and roust

bad guys, but I'm not an investigator." Childs sighed, "At least I know my limitations."

O'Brennan looked at the ground in front of him. "If it's any solace to you, Jimmy, we've all been there. There are certain things in life that we should take care of, but find they're beyond our reach."

Childs looked up him and laughed. "You know, Jack, you're amazing. You have a great ability to make people feel better about themselves even when they know full-well what you're saying isn't true."

O'Brennan waved him away. "Go on with you. I've been there myself and you know it."

The beachcomber rejoined the gathering. "Charlie, have you eaten breakfast?" O'Brennan asked.

"No, not yet. The power just came on a few minutes ago, and I've been too busy checking the beach to think much about it."

"Come over with us to the house. Jeanette's cooking breakfast, and you know her, there'll be plenty to go around. Does that make any sense to you?"

"It certainly does. You know me, Jack, I'm always in the market for a free hand-out."

Everyone laughed as O'Brennan led his hungry followers toward his cottage.

Childs stopped in the middle of the blacktop road. "Charlie, when you mentioned sweeping the beach, I just had a thought. Could you sweep the area where the skeleton was exposed?"

"Be glad to. I'll go over and get my gear. It shouldn't take but a minute. Don't want to miss breakfast, do I?"

With everyone seated, Jeanette set a table of fried Virginia ham, home fries, scrambled eggs, blueberry muffins and enough coffee to sink a battleship.

Charlie swooped in and loaded his plate.

"What did you find, Charlie?" Childs asked.

"No big deal, believe me. Your deputy is coming over shortly and he'll show you."

What Charlie thought of as no big deal could mean something, maybe not to him, but occasionally insignificantly articles sometimes lead you by the nose to what may prove to be an important clue, O'Brennan thought.

"Damned, Jeanette, besides being good-looking, you're a quality cook," Jimmy Childs said as he pushed his plate away.

Jeanette offered a giggle. "I like the good-looking part, but I don't know about the other."

Childs turned serious. He looked at O'Brennan without ceremony and said, "I hoped maybe you could find it in your heart to take a look at what we found out there." He motioned his head toward the beach as he raised the coffee cup to his lips.

O'Brennan slowly shook his head no. "That's all I need. I have serious misgivings about your request," O'Brennan nervously laughed, "but I'm flattered you asked."

A curious look crossed Childs' weathered face as he pointed at O'Brennan. "You have an aptitude for these things."

"Thank you for that, but hold on. I'm surprised you can think that."

"Artfully put, Jack, artfully put. But everyone at this table knows different, including yourself."

O'Brennan thought for a moment and sighed. "Oh, all right, you talked me into it."

Sam the deputy entered the cottage after knocking. "Sheriff, this is what Charlie unearthed out on the

beach." He handed Childs a clear evidence bag. "There's a class ring with the name, Canton-McKinley on the crest and the initials AMW on the inside."

Turning his attention to the deputy, Childs spoke in an easy manner. "Thanks, Sam, you can take these back to the evidence room. O'Brennan here has said he'd kinda' step in and help us with this, so whatever you come up with, he's going to be your man. Unofficially that is, you got that?"

"Yes, sir," the deputy said."

"Sheriff, do you think there's a connection?" Charlie the Beachcomber asked.

"Charlie, I simply don't know."

"Jeanette, I hate to eat and run, but I have to get goin'. This has been a long day, and your husband here has lightened it up a bit by saying he's going to take a look at this mess."

Sheriff Childs waved as he left the cottage.

Jeanette rose from the table and busied herself picking up the dirty dishes. Charlie stood up.

"Stay put, Charlie. You men have a lot to talk about, and I'll do this very quietly, but I'll listen closely." She smiled at Charlie who sat down as if he had received an order.

"Jack, what do you think about that ring?" Cal asked.

"I'm baffled by the Canton-McKinley name."

"Ah. . .if it were from one of our local schools, I wouldn't think much of it. But. . .maybe there's something there. How would you find out anything about Canton-McKinley?" Charlie asked.

"Maybe it was someone from the university. You know there are kids from all over the country attending

here...from all over the world as a matter of fact," O'Brennan offered.

"How do we find out such a thing?" Charlie absently asked.

"I think I can take care of that," Cal said. "I have a close friend who's a professor over at the university. He's been there a long time. Tommy should be able to pinpoint what you need to know about that ring Charlie found. What was the year on the class ring?" Cal appeared to mentally search out the year.

"The ring was from the Class of sixty-one," Charlie interjected.

"Yeah, the class of sixty-one. Now knowing the class year and initials of its owner, we should be able to narrow this down in short order. We're talking about a period thirty years back or so. I'm sure he'll dig around and give us an answer."

"That is if she attended Bridgeton," O'Brennan said. "I know there's always a mixed metaphor but don't mention it."

"Jack, I'll check with Tommy Emery over at the university."

"Cal, where would they take the skeleton? Over to the county morgue in Scots Harbor?" O'Brennan answered his question with another question.

Cal calmly nodded yes.

"Do you think you could take a look at it?" O'Brennan asked.

"I was going to suggest that. Look, let's go over there and get at it. I'm rather curious myself."

Jack O'Brennan looked over at Jeanette with a gesture that told her that he was going as opposed to could he go.

Jeanette walked over to O'Brennan and gave him a playful tug around his waist. "Be my guest, big man. Will you be back for supper?"

"Indeed, my dear. Plan on eating at Sean Donegan's, Kinsale."

Sean Donegan was a solidly built man living his life in a restless way who looked smaller than the five-six height stated on his driver's license. Born in Ireland, he learned the cabinetmaking business from the ground up. At the age of twenty-five he left the Emerald Isle and landed in Boston, married a local girl, Mary Doreen Ryan, raised a large family, and along the way made a comfortable living as a finish carpenter.

Donegan liked everything about his life except the harsh weather he occasionally encountered. The cold winter, spring dampness, and summer humidity caused him to feel trapped in his environment. That changed however when the numbers of his lottery ticket matched those drawn at lottery headquarters. He had won seven million dollars, and as quick as a cat became wealthy and immediately lost his restlessness. With one quick strike, he quit his job, sold his house, and he and his wife and six kids headed for Virginia, the land of Jefferson.

The residents along the mile-long Sands Beach continually suffered the rundown Pirate's Cove Bar, an eyesore that sat atop a knoll at the immaculately maintained beach's southern end. When the owner died of acute alcohol poisoning, hopes ran high that the bar would be ripped down and fade away, but that was not to be.

Donegan bought the rickety building and immediately set upon it with a vengeance. It took a year of his woodworking magic to change the old relic into the majestic refurbished building it had come to be. Donegan's creation immediately became as much an attraction on the beach as the Great Dune located at the other end.

His efforts, accompanied by an amiable manner, won quick approval from the nearby residents as well as those from Bridgeton and other peninsula spots. The interior of his restaurant appeared to have been copied

from a Hollywood movie, which in fact was the case. Donegan had styled the interior of the bar after the one in which Paul Newman played pinball in the 1982 movie, *The Verdict*. Its darkly stained wood appeared more an upscale Virginia tavern than the Irish pub it was purported to be.

Through Mary Doreen's efforts, the *KINSALE* became more a tearoom than a simple neighborhood beach bar. She made scones and deeply browned doughnuts for the men on a daily basis. As a nod to the ladies, such delicacies as cucumber and tomato sandwiches along with chicken salad were regularly served at noon. Donegan did his part and imported an Irish chef whose specialty was the pub food and rustic charm of Kinsale, County Cork.

"We know the victim's initials to be AMW. From Cal's analysis, there's every reason to believe she was murdered, and. . ." O'Brennan paused to survey a grading crew busily smoothing out Edna's crater hole.

Although it was only two in the afternoon, the condensation on the beer taps looked too inviting to pass up. O'Brennan motioned to Sean Donegan contently sitting at the end of the bar watching ESPN.

"Coming right away, gents." Donegan's voice carried with it the soft tones of his native land.

"I'll have a pint of Harp."

He gave O'Brennan a look that said, "and why would you be drinking so early in the afternoon?"

"Oh, what the hell," Charlie said as he motioned for the same.

"Don't forget me, Sean," Cal added.

It appeared that Donegan needed to ask a question but backed off.

O'Brennan obliged him by pointing to his empty coffee cup in an effort to explain. "We have some

questions that need answering and that Brazilian brew isn't getting it done."

"Well, lad," Donegan said in his heavy Irish brogue as he headed back to the TV, "this elixir is from the 'old sod' will give you some answers. It worked for me on many occasions."

"Back to where we were before we interrupted ourselves." Charlie said as he took a sip of the golden brew. "A strange thought entered my mind. Isn't it logical to assume the Sands Beach skeleton was part of the student enclave at Fostertown?"

Cal Redout picked up on his meaning. "That's a possibility, Charlie. Jack, what's your take on this?"

"There has to be an explanation, but at the moment I'm stumped. Cal, is your friend at the university the type who might help us?"

"No doubt. Tommy Emory authored a book on the sixties student culture that is recognized throughout academia as a masterpiece. Oh, he'll take us by the hand and lead us through those rocky times, but after a fashion he'll send us a clear message to what we need to know. You'll find yourself in a one-way learning experience and quickly discover he's an interesting guy whom you'll like."

"Your Tommy Emory sounds impressive. Would it be possible to meet with him?"

A pause followed and Cal said, "I'll call him now and tell him what we're after. He'll come up with an answer if anyone can." Cal motioned to Donegan. "Sean, can I use the phone?" Five minutes later Cal hung up.

"He'll meet with us tomorrow morning at eleven in his office."

Kanacadea Hall, an ivy-covered relic on the old campus of Bridgeton University, served as home base for the Sociology Department. Bridgeton, like many other large universities, had two campuses. Cal and O'Brennan passed through the new campus, an ostentatious sprawl of aluminum and glass of modern architecture. The glitzy look on the new campus was outdated, causing Bridgetonians to suffer from past indiscretions of the sixties.

Entering Dr. Tommy Emory's book-strewn Kanacadea office, O'Brennan wondered if any college professor maintained a clean and uncluttered office. Cal's friend waved them to a seat and after the obligatory niceties began to talk.

"Cal, you'll have to bear with me but I ran into a road block that has me baffled; let me tell you about it. Dated student lists have been computerized back to 1940, that's the good news. Here's the clinker. The listings of the student body are obviously arranged alphabetically. Following each name is the student identification number from 1 to 14,872, with Alfred Zauus the last. Their home addresses, majors, and their graduating dates follow. Much the same as any other college directory, I might add." Cal nodded in understanding.

"Now the odd part. Fred, that's my friend at the Registrar's office, scrolled down the W's and immediately found a discrepancy. Number 13,975 was a Jonas Waltherdorf and next came number 13,977, Silvia Walthour. What happened to 13,976? He then went back to the old student directory file and came up with a blank. It's a mystery."

Cal glanced at O'Brennan with a lopsided grin. "I guess I'm better at autopsies than sleuthing."

"Now you know what we detectives are continually faced with, brick walls." O'Brennan looked at Professor Emory with a frown. "There's no way this quest for AMW

is finished. It's not in my nature to throw in the towel so quickly."

Emory made a cheery laugh. "I like your tenacity, Mr. O'Brennan. I'm as much a hardhead as you, and don't accept failure readily. Your quest ends right here." Pointed to his chest, he said, "I'll come up with an explanation. Don't know how, but bank on hearing from me with the answer in a couple of days. It may take as Cal called it, some sleuthing, but I've been around this place a long time and can call in some favors. Let's talk about why you're here. "

"So, Mr. O'Brennan, Cal tells me you're interested in the decade of the sixties. I may be able to help fill in some of the missing holes Cal told me you had. That period from so long ago was an age of pure and simple excess. It was a time where all factions of personal, moral and political enlightenment were in overdrive with no time for rest. Let me turn back the pages of your mind to that era."

There's no nonsense about this guy, O'Brennan thought.

"What made the sixties so unusual was they followed the neatly orchestrated docile fifties. That decade stood for a button-down look of Middle America having a romantic fling with prosperity. Discounting the rich who will always be around us and the poor with their striving mentality, the middle class enjoyed a loving courtship with money and what it could do for them."

A sudden breeze swirled through the open window sending papers flying off Emory's desk. Not bothering to retrieve them, Emory continued.

"The wild period that succeeded the fifties was a spin-off of the Baby Boomers phenomenon that followed WWII. For beginners, you must remember fifty million babies were born between 1946 and 1955. Television, the new media darling of information exchange geared up by concentrating on this young generation.

"American youth rode a delicate line between accepting the affluence offered and resenting the demands it made. Along came John F Kennedy in 1960. Kennedy appealed to young America because of his youth, good looks, wit, war record, obvious intelligence, an attractive wife, and his role as the father of two young children." Emory laughed and shook his head. "He had it all, an absolute ace. If you recall, he ambitiously outlined his vision for the New Frontier in his inaugural address. 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country'. He was oriented toward helping others and the kids sensed it."

O'Brennan looked out the window as students passed between classes. It seemed like only yesterday that he was doing the same thing except in a different era. I'm experiencing a time warp about how time has flown, he thought.

"Looking back, I would suggest the social revolution of the sixties had a subtle start; art, music, literature, and science to name a few, dramatically acquired a face-lift overnight." Emory appeared to relish talking about earlier days that he himself experienced and it manifested itself in the smile he displayed.

"Let me recite an example of how accessible this new change was. You gentlemen are of my generation, so you'll appreciate these thoughts. When we were old enough to first be attracted to girls, we all faced the common barrier of how to get on with these lovely creatures. By that I mean how we were to engage them in conversation beyond the normal high school chatter. What was the solution to this frightening problem?" Emory's hardy laugh caused his visitors to join in.

"Why dancing of course. The problem of dancing was the next hurdle we faced, and a harrowing and traumatic experience it was." Emory appeared to drift off to days of his youth before he continued. "At least they were for me. If we wanted to get next to the ladies, it was dance or parish." He again laughed as he placed his feet on his well-worn desk.

"As self-effacing young people, most of us suffered through this learning process in much the same manner; we had our sister, neighbor, or some sympathetic classmates teach us how to navigate the dance floor.

"At this stage we reached the plateau where we could amble around and call it dancing, marginally, that is. Our next obstacle was asking a girl to dance and, gentlemen that may well have been the most humiliating experience of my life. If you remember, after getting someone to dance, one had to worry if they were holding her correctly. And the most mortifying thought of all; please God, don't let me step on her toes. If you recall, all the guys learning to dance were wearing a somber face with their eyes glued to the dance floor."

Emory's look into the past rang a bell for O'Brennan, causing him to laugh. "Professor, in one fell swoop you just snatched a page from my earlier teens." This guy isn't coming off as the dry old fart Cal portrayed him as being, O'Brennan thought as he crossed his legs.

"Ah, but we forget, don't we? Those weren't the only trepidations that we felt. The curse of all young suitors was upon us; the concern about bad breath confronted our very being. Coupled with that, body odor was a persistent nemesis to our continued existence in the worldly game of womanizing. So we washed our beautiful young bodies with Lifebuoy and swished Listerine around in our mouths."

"Boy, isn't that the truth." Cal said, laughing as he turned his glance to O'Brennan. "His last sentence was most assuredly a truism from my past."

"Cal, my friend, you're too impetuous because the end has not yet arrived. The crowning blow came when we applied Old Spice after-shave if we could afford it, a lesser application if not. Then the topper came when we put Rose Oil or similar tonic on our hair to produce a patent leather effect.

"Did you ever notice a light globe and see flies trapped in it trying to get out? Think about it. Like those flies, we were flying around not knowing what to do. And what did this aggravation we suffered gain us? If we were lucky, we managed to sneak an amateurish kiss in a corner of the gym."

"That's the greatest valedictory I've ever heard." O'Brennan realized the professor's nostalgic discussion of young men growing up in the fifties came right out of *Life* magazine. He also believed this happy man's discourse to be gospel because he had muddled through the same experience.

At that point, Professor Emory again laughed at O'Brennan's comment and roared off in high gear. "The restating of one aspect of our youth is nothing more than a microcosm of the post-war period. American youth were stereotyped, catalogued, filed, cross-filed, counter-filed, you name it. We were told what to do, and for good measure, we were told how to do it.

"Not so with the Baby Boomers. They approached life with a 'damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead' attitude. I'll give you an example. In 1960 after Chubby Checker broke the mold and introduced the 'Twist', nothing was ever the same. I'm sure we all danced and loved it and inhibitions were a thing of the past about doing something like that marvelous dance. The young man who formerly had to go through the arduous task of learning to dance could now go out and have one hell of a time jumping around. There were no steps to learn, so he waddled around and threw all caution to the wind. He had it made. His shoes didn't have to be shined, he wore dirty clothes because he didn't have to smell nice, and it didn't matter if he had bad breath because his female partner's breath wasn't at an optimum level either. Jack, it appears you have a thought."

"I do, professor. As a policeman, I saw evidence of a dramatic swing in the values of these youths you talk about. What caused the young people to cross the line from docility to activism and hostility?"

"We saw change take place as you suggest in other areas of our culture as well. . .some for the good I might add. Our fair city of Bridgeton felt the unrest of the civil rights movement, and much to our credit, we were desegregation leaders in the South.

"When the country was swept up by student activists calling for desegregation, the young people were unsure what to do next. Here at the university, we didn't have the problem with sit-ins and campus building takeovers that other major universities experienced. We were fortunate, because the community and college had already addressed the subject and somewhat pierced the barrier of ignorance and intolerance. Granted, our students were active in civil rights, but their fervor was directed off campus."

"Professor Emory, when I was on the city force, we had a contingent of your students raising hell in the Fostertown area. Although they were out of our jurisdiction, we went out to help the Lancaster County Sheriff on occasion. As far as I was concerned, it was nothing more than a bastion of pain and suffering."

The Fostertown O'Brennan talked about was a small hamlet situated at the eastern edge of Bridgeton. The main bridge that crossed the Rappohanock from the peninsula to the immediate Tidewater area rested next to the hotel. The road passing through the community was an extension of Niagara Street and served as a direct route to Scots Harbor, Sands Beach, and Chesapeake Bay. The daily east and west traffic was the mainstay for the small businesses that thrived there.

"Yes, I agree about Fostertown, but you must understand that they were the exception to the rule. The students out there were on what I call the fringe and were unlike the average student we had here." Emory waved at the campus outside his window. "The student non-violent movement provided them with license to dissent, and they did that very well I might add. These kids were full of contradictions in that they wanted to improve everything about the world except themselves. You see, Mr. O'Brennan, the university was in a state of flux during that period."

"Doesn't change come with the times?" O'Brennan asked.

"Indeed, but much of it flew in the face of logic. Nationwide, there was almost a mass hysteria to physically enlarge the college campuses; huge libraries were built with not enough books to fill them, basketball courts moved from gyms that would accommodate three thousand people to arenas that seated 20,000, and so on. Did you go to college, Mr. O'Brennan?"

"Yes. I attended a small liberal arts school in Burlington, North Carolina, Elon College."

"Ah, then you hardly understand what I'm talking about. Small colleges like Elon provided a very sound traditional education and continued to do so during that period because of the financial constraints in which they found themselves. They were quite conservative toward physical growth and less tolerant and responsive to student demands."

Jack found the professor's discourse interesting but leading nowhere. Even though his narrative had moved to *Newsweek*, he didn't need to hear why society failed in the sixties.

"Professor, I appreciate the facts you're telling me, but I have to question how relevant they are to the case," Jack said.

Emory laughed. "You're like every policeman I've ever met, and that's a considerable number. Cops are accustomed to dealing with certain types, and you do it very well. But the individuals you'll encounter had a different mentality than the common criminal. I think you'll find their values, perceptions, lifestyle, likes, and dislikes were totally unlike what you perceive. And I am afraid to say many of them still retain that sharp edge of indifference. May I ask if you have children?"

"Yes, three grown daughters"

"Another imposition, Mr. O'Brennan, how did they turn out?"

This is getting a little personal for me, but what the hell. I opened up this can of worms, O'Brennan reminded himself.

"They turned out very well I'm happy to say."

"I thought as much. So, as I see it, your job-whatever it may be-will become more difficult because of your personal experience with them. What I am about to say is not an assault on the whole student body, heaven forbid, but rather a select group of people who were poles apart from the mainstream. I'm certain you will find these kids carried on like nothing you can even imagine," Emory said with a flick of his hand.

"Getting back to the fringe group you just mentioned. Can you tell me more about them?"

"I certainly can." Professor Emory reached for a well-worn pipe that he meticulously loaded and eventually fired up with a wooden kitchen match. The aromatic scent of maple and pine drifted around the book-laden office in a plume of light blue smoke. "I'd say there were close to a hundred students that drifted down to Fostertown and many, by their own definition, considered themselves academic dropouts. They rarely attended class, paid their tuition, or bathed. The hotel in Fostertown stood as an unbridled surrogate for *Busch Gardens*. They were headed for trouble and as you well know, the problem with trouble is it never gets any better. Many of us took their behavior as..."

"Professor, one quick question. You mentioned many of these kids rarely paid their tuition, and I find that revelation puzzling. One would think tuition was something their parents would have taken care of."

"In the old days, yes; the parents would assume such duties. Some parents did pay the tuition, but you must remember this was a new age and tradition changed. For more independence, the students' expenses were deposited in their own checking accounts, and you can take it from there. Why would a kid with a full

checking account chase the American Dream and pay for such mundane expenditures as tuition, cafeteria food, books, and incidental fees when they could gorge themselves with drink, dope and all the free sex one human could handle. One lie begets another; it was as simple as that."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of carillon bells, signaling noon had arrived.

Emory pushed back from his desk. "Let's walk over to the student union and have something to eat, my treat. We can carry on our conversation over lunch."

Nattily attired with a closely shaven pink face, John Alexander Beaumont III was never one to reach out to people, and many considered him a first-class snob. An extremely conservative Republican, he believed that he, like millions of other members of his political persuasion, made the system work. He supported all tenants that the right wing espoused in the doctrine of less government activity in the lives of the general public, and especially in the industrial complex of America. A hint of Coolidgism surfaced in his belief that what was good for business should suit everyone else just fine. He believed in corporate and business subsidies alike, but frowned on any mention of other Americans on the public dole.

When the Korean War broke out, Uncle Sam called Beaumont, but he wasn't listening. He sought and received a deferment based on his potential to provide a more meaningful contribution to his country on the home front, meaning, he hid away in college. What could he contribute in an insignificant land in Asia populated by Orientals? He could best serve his country by being a leader in business rather than carrying a rifle in Korea. So Beaumont finished his MBA at the Wharton School of Business and landed a high-paying job with the Circle Corporation of Bridgeton.

Beaumont didn't believe in spreading the wealth. When a colleague mentioned that Kodak, the giant film maker gave its workers an annual bonus, he muttered that if they wanted to run a business for nothing, that was their business. He felt workers could do with less, and as Circle's supervisor in labor relations, Beaumont worked endlessly to make that happen. He vehemently opposed benefit packages for the workers, and successfully suppressed a proposed profit-sharing plan.

When the buzzword *diversity* descended on the workplace, Beaumont reacted in horror that such a distasteful liberal tenet would provide blacks and women an entry into the business world. He felt swallowed up in a dark hole and believed diversity

would lead to a country filled with never-do-well, lazy Americans. He opposed this new movement at every possible turn.

While reading the *Wall Street Journal* he happened onto an article extolling the virtues of embracing diversity. A sensible man, he realized his misplaced beliefs should be revised and made an about-face while surrendering his entrenched philosophy.

By hiring blacks and women the company could replace long-serving employees at greatly reduced benefits and salaries. It was immediately evident to Beaumont that Circle Corporation would dramatically inflate its yearly profit ledger by complying with "Big Brother's" liberal agenda of equality for all.

The wealth of America would be centralized and what better way to accomplish this Marxist concept than to eliminate a considerable number of your highest paid workers under the guise of diversity. The aristocrats of business could care less about workers' welfare, and Beaumont became a staunch supporter of the new philosophy.

Although frugal with his own money, Beaumont was not above reaping the harvest awarded top management. He enjoyed membership in the prestigious Bridgeton Country Club and other select private clubs in the city, along the way purchasing a massive home in exclusive Bridgeton Heights. His three children attended Colonial Prep, a private school in town, and later moved to the Ivy League.

Family friends called his wife, Samantha, Sammy. Those around Beaumont who knew her often questioned how this woman with a vibrant personality could live with such a social disaster of a man for so many years. An obvious clash of personalities existed, but they co-existed in an all-show-no-go marriage.

It was a spur of the moment call that redirected his life. One morning Beaumont's boss informed him he was needed at a meeting in Raleigh. Directed to catch the first flight to Raleigh, he hurried home to pack an overnight bag. Pulling up in front of his beautifully

appointed residence, Beaumont marveled at the picture of tranquility he called home. Placing a premium on the good life, he had it all.

Full of himself and his accomplishments, he climbed the long curved stairway that led to his second-floor bedroom. Concentrating on the upcoming Raleigh trip, he heard the soft moans emanating from his bedroom he'd not heard in years.

Entering the bedroom, Beaumont discovered his wife Samantha giving the gardener the ride of his life in the sanctity of their king-sized bed. In a span of a few seconds, he had gone from a preoccupied business tycoon to a shocked witness to adultery. His mouth felt like a cotton field as he realized the scene playing out in front of him was a precursor to an ugly divorce. Samantha couldn't care less and laughed, continuing with what she was doing. Departing the illicit scene with her taunting laugh ringing in his ears, Beaumont left the house.

The scene he had just witnessed was not in keeping with a member of the social set of Bridgeton. He could feel his puritanical demeanor crumbling as he drove downtown to his club. His recent well-ordered life now shattered, Beaumont had missed the Raleigh meeting and found it impossible to sort his thoughts out while registering for a room in his cherished University Club.

From the moment he walked into the taproom, the next twenty-four hours floated by in a senseless blur. His drinking accelerated rapidly, turning into an avalanche of drunken days and nights. His besotted condition caused him to miss a beat at work, soon followed by other skipped beats. Within three months he had been relieved of his duties, and six months after that lost his wife and home. Beaumont quickly squandered what life savings he had salvaged from the divorce. In the brief time that followed, word passed among his friends that he was suffering a painful experience and rife with depression, he held his few remaining friends at arm's length.

One day the thought entered Beaumont's mind that several days more of this binge would play out and return him to his senses, but that reasoning was swept away by another drink of Jack Daniels. A week later his time had come, and Beaumont discovered he had become a victim of an uncaring society. At some point he couldn't pin down, the former executive became a wanderer in the *Flats*, a miserable part of town that formed the tenderloin district of Niagara Street.

Starting from the downtown inlet, the street led east toward Scotts Harbor and the Chesapeake. The business district consisted of run-down bars and shops that served the workers from the massive shipyard.

Beaumont lived in a world where greed superceded logic, and there was no such word as "risk free". Early on, he developed a knack for sensing danger found on the street. Even though he lived through a perpetual stupor, Beaumont's alcohol-soaked thoughts never let him forget a premise he lived by during his formative days: never trust a living soul.

Adrift in the part of Bridgeton he was not familiar with, wearing oversized clothes, Beaumont hated the thought of being the homeless person he had become. Although highly educated, he was a degenerate in the purest sense of the word. Beaumont occasionally reminded himself he wasn't a mental zero like most of his peers, the street people, but that thought was quickly absorbed in an alcoholic haze.

He had no idea what was happening to him, and didn't seem to care. Long forgotten was the memory of calling the shots at Circle Corp. He was trapped in a slippery slide to depravity and didn't realize it. His reclusive personality influenced his decision to travel alone. Early in his experience on the street, Beaumont discovered the men's room in the train station, located east of the shipyard on Niagara Street. Early in the day, the men's lavatory was the starting point for most of the homeless. He also observed varying degrees of degradation underway in himself as well as others.

The new arrivals on the scene maintained themselves with a shave and GI bath in a washbasin.

Both their physical hygiene and clothing reflected this daily ritual. Their clothes appeared to be newer and fresher, but their eyes were beginning to display a helpless sheen.

From there the men's personal hygiene deteriorated rapidly. Daily shaves and sponge bathes were missed, and ultimately they arrived at the bottom rung of existence. At that stage, little attempt was made to improve their lives, and most found themselves in a spiraling slide into destitution.

Following his morning train station visit, Beaumont headed up Niagara for his morning startup of Red Cup. He occasionally allowed his memory to drift back to the days when he was once was an important man, but found that an unpleasant reverie. Life wasn't the way it was supposed to be, he thought, but he couldn't rid himself of the intolerable guilt that constantly racked his brain in his more lucid moments. He had gone too far and realized his ability to reason had long since vanished, thus leaving him no reason to act otherwise. From the Circle Corp, he found himself in a spiraling decline to the "Flats", and in doing so learned the hard way life has a way of evening out.

After several eye-openers, his day continued like so many previous ones; he was on a treasure hunt. His diet consisted of scraps of food out of garbage cans, skimpy meals from various soup kitchens along the way, and whatever he could steal. Even though he earlier thought any public assistance was anti-American, he looked forward to the early days of every month. Being on the dole, which he gladly took in the form of Social Security monthly payments on the third day of every month bothered him only briefly. The only discipline he observed was on that day when he bought new underwear.

As his life collapsed, so did his choice of drink. From Jack Daniels, he slid to Old Crow, and finally bar whiskey. One morning, he found himself in the sleazy Red Rooster, a run down flop joint serving the cheapest libations in town. It was there Beaumont discovered Red Cup, a muscatel associated with the down and out drinker. The cheap wine offered more for the bang and a glow that shined his day ever so slightly.

Even in his drunken state, Beaumont realized he had to get to his hiding place while he could still make out the street landmarks. So he melted into the shadows of a cobbled alley whose surface had become rounded over the years. Slowly settling into his refrigerator box retreat propped against the back of a building facing Niagara, he had completed another routine day.

Resuming his pre-luncheon discussion about the renegade students at Fostertown, Emory appeared energized.

"Many of us, the old-time teachers that is, took their behavior as a personal affront to us and the academic community. Regardless of our personal feelings, for better or worse, they were ours for the duration. I should add this footnote. These non-producing students comprised only a small number of the student body whom I reconsidered productive." A realistic Emory looked at O'Brennan as if to say, everything passes with time.

"That being the case, how did the kids stay in school? When I was at Elon, if you took over three cuts in a single class, you were looking into the eye of an F."

Emory laughed. "That, my friend, shows that you are a living dinosaur from the old school of trust and honor and all that good stuff."

Laughter over Emory's good stuff bit spilled around the table.

"As the college enrollments grew and grew, so did the faculties and administrations. Here's a little known fact from the past that will get your attention. Starting around 1960, the nation's largest institutions tripled in size over the next fifteen years. With such rapid expansion came virile young professors with more liberal mind-sets than us old geezers. They couldn't care less if the students came to class. In fact, some of these young Turks were leading the charge against the traditional ways, and so it went."

"That may be true, but they still had to pass. How did they accomplish that?" Jack asked.

"Someone from our department did a study on that very question and you'll find the results interesting."

It seems this fringe group appeared to be layered. That is, they were somewhat diverse. The top level consisted of the exceptionally gifted students while the middle layer would be considered marginal by most standards. The sharp ones studied a little and sailed through with honors. The middle group studied a little more and just made it. The slower ones muddled along until they were dropped from school and fell into an abyss of apathy. I would suggest most of the latter stayed in Fostertown, choosing to lead less ambitious lives for themselves than those envisioned for them by their parents."

"Did you and your colleagues roll over to this revolution of ambivalence?" Jack O'Brennan liked this Emory character and was curious about his attitudes concerning the period.

He ran his fingers through a short Princeton cut and said, "Do you see this haircut? I've worn it like this since high school. I also notice you wear much the same style. Any reason for that?"

Cal Redout smiled as he observed Jack being pinched by a personal question.

"Yes, there is. I like it this way. When everyone was wearing long and fluffy hair with deep sideburns, I continued with the short cut because it made sense. I'll tell you a story that reinforces my point. Years ago when men's styles were taking off in all directions, my wife wanted me to buy a leisure suit. You probably remember those awful things that had the pointed collars and earth colors; well, she kept after me to buy one. I didn't want any part of them, but she raised so much hell, I got tired of resisting. One Sunday morning while reading the paper, she found a full-page ad displaying these suits. I finally gave in and told her to order one, even let her pick out the color.

"One day when I came home from work, there sat the box with the funky suit in it. I went up to the bedroom and put it on. You wouldn't believe what I saw in the mirror. Here was a man six-three wearing a pea-green suit with pointed collars that made him look like the

side of a green building." Emory and Cal laughed at O'Brennan as he finished.

"Jack, I never heard that story before. Did it actually happen?" Cal asked.

"It did. Cal, you haven't heard the worst part of it. So here I am standing in front of the mirror when Sue, my oldest daughter came in the room and started laughing. She left and went into her sister's room and I heard her say: 'Allison, did you see the ugly suit Daddy is wearing'. When I went downstairs to model this thing of beauty, my wife Mary started to laugh. You know what? She never bothered me again about what was current in men's styles.

"

"Ah, now the professional comes out in me. Mr. O'Brennan, you just answered your own question. I didn't change either because I liked the way it used to be. With the liberal movement of the sixties, sociology departments quickly grew because their study of social change was appropriate for the times. With these increased enrollments came a need to add sections to each course.

"Let me explain. I've taught American Family since starting here in 1957. Back then, I was the sole professor teaching that course. When our enrollment took off in the next decade, the students had a choice of professors, I'm sure you know the rest of the story before I finish."

O'Brennan nodded yes and smiled.

"Since I maintained the three-cut system and made the students do that thing with their i's and t's, my classes were filled with students who couldn't get into the other cushier sections. My reputation as a hard-ass quickly made the rounds. On the first day of class, I laid out the ground rules for the ensuing game, and then started to wage an uneasy war with those kids; but I won. There was blood spilled all over the classroom, both theirs and mine, but it was worth it."

Emory laughed as his face momentarily turned a page back to earlier victories.

This professor was O'Brennan's kind of guy, but Jack had to get on with business. He had come to learn Professor Emory could eat up the day talking about earlier times.

"I vaguely remember the anti-war demonstrations that blanketed the country as well as here at Bridgeton during the late sixties. Could you give me a little more detail on this element you earlier mentioned?" O'Brennan asked.

"We had considerable anti-war activity on campus, but I believe ours was more thoughtful and productive than others. If you recall, our demonstrations were of a nonviolent variety, but never-the-less they were out there." Emory peered through the window at the quad that centered the old campus and gestured with his hand as if seeing the students in the act of protest.

"Like anything else involving kids in their late teens and early twenties, their anti-war efforts were quickly losing steam.

"That all changed of course when President Nixon announced in April 1970 that he was sending troops into Cambodia. His action immediately rekindled the students' fires of descent and they were off again. All hell broke loose the following month when the tragedy at Kent State occurred. With the death of four young people, students around the country were galvanized for one final assault against the establishment.

"Colleges were closed down for a week to cool off the passions, including Bridgeton. After that, the students returned to finish the semester, but I believe the resentment was still there. They appeared to be emotionally burned-out and had lost their zest for further confrontation. You might be interested to learn that over fifty colleges never finished the semester and just sent the students home."

"What was the group at Fostertown doing during that period?" Jack asked.

"They couldn't have cared less, couldn't be bothered. Why would they take time to demonstrate when

they had more dope and free-love than they could handle?" Emory produced a long sigh. "But I've already mentioned that. They lived at Fostertown and formed their own Bohemian community, or as I called it, 'Hippieville'."

"What can you tell me about the drugs and free love out there?" Jack asked.

"The view from here is not much. I can carry on about drugs on campus and the deterioration of the moral fiber of those kids, but that isn't what you want, is it?"

"No, it isn't. I need some first-hand reporting, and coming from one straight-laced relic to another doesn't help much."

Emory went through the step-by-step procedure of reloading his pipe. He fired up the tobacco and absently looked into space. Pushing his horned-rimmed glasses high on his forehead he said, "Mr. O'Brennan, I'd like you to call me Tommy, while in turn, I'll call you Jack. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine to me, Tommy." With these words, a hard and fast friendship blossomed.

"Excellent. When Cal set up this appointment, he mentioned something about a case you had recently undertaken. Would you give me some background on it? To be honest with you, I'm plain nosey about why you are looking into student activities of the sixties."

"I'll be happy to tell you what I know. As I'm sure you've heard, Hurricane Edna raised hell down at Sands Beach and moved the Great Dune a hundred yards or so into the water. A friend of mine found the skeleton of a female where the sand dune was formerly located. I believe the remains are of a former college student at Bridgeton, but I must add that's not conclusive. Cal gave you information about the high school ring that was found, but I won't go into that. I believe drugs were involved, but I have no idea about such a thing. How about you, Tommy, can you give us a hand with this dope thing?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't help. Drugs scared me and I felt threatened by them. We raised our kids through those times, and right or wrong, I sort of looked away from what was happening. I developed a mentality that if I didn't dwell on it, the problem would go away. I know that wasn't a realistic way for an intelligent man to act, but that was the best I could do. "

"How well I know, because you just recited my very actions of the past. Could you give me a capsule glimpse of how you saw the students down at Fostertown?" Jack asked.

Tommy Emory fiddled with his pipe as he drifted into thought. The sound of a chirping bird in the quad drifted through the open door. Placing his pipe on the table, Emory began. "The kids at Fostertown were a group bent on self-destruction.

"As the semester progressed, new players entered the game. That is to say, there was new blood joining this cadre of beatniks every day. Their lifestyle was much like those who play football in that they didn't have to shower before they went to work." Delight shown on Emory's face as he savored his play on words.

"I never thought much about it before, but I found their lifestyle repugnant to say the least. Their personal destruction had reduced their self-worth to zero. The sad part about my scenario is this Fostertown contingent, out of their heads with drugs, is now nearing middle age, and only the very few have survived to contribute to society. But I haven't addressed the vast majority of our students, the baby boomers. They, as a group, have redefined the American workplace, family, culture, and politics. They took that same passion originally found and expressed in college and applied it to other aspects of their lives. . .at least those who survived the demonstrations, drugs, free love, and service in Viet Nam. I find them a fascinating generation."

"Tommy, I think that wraps up what I need to know unless you have another thought on the subject," O'Brennan said as he stood to leave.

"Jack, there is something I can do. I have easy access to the student files, and if you give me a scent, this old hound may be able to give you some direction."

"I appreciate that."

"Let me get back to you in a day or so. I just might find something."

"You've certainly enlightened me about the sixties," Jack said as he shook hands with Emory.

"Feel free anytime. To be honest, I rather enjoyed it."

Cal and O'Brennan headed downtown after the lengthy bull session with a true professional. They had gained little information that could be used involving the case, but had acquired a keener sense of the tangled period O'Brennan would be investigating.

Jack O'Brennan's second-floor office over *O'Hearns* restaurant afforded him a clear view of the Inlet and downtown. Looking out the window at the sparkling waters of the Inlet and yacht basin was a favorite pastime. He flittered away many pleasant hours daydreaming about this and that, but not on this day. Thoughts of the unearthed skeleton found on Sands Beach continued to cloud his mind. Repeated ringing of the phone snapped him out of his reverie.

"Jack O'Brennan."

"Jack, this is Tommy Emory over at the university. I put a label on the skeleton. The girl's name was Audrey Margaret Walther. Miss Walther was a senior accounting major here at Bridgeton, and was an honors student to boot."

O'Brennan had the phone lodged in the crook of his neck while furiously jotting down notes.

"She graduated from Canton-McKinley High School and her home address was 342 Buckeye Drive in Canton, Ohio. Walther achieved high grades and was involved in numerous school activities."

"So this Walther girl came down here after graduating?"

"Not so. This puzzles me, but I'm sure you can make something out of it. Remember now, she graduated from high school in nineteen sixty-one, but didn't start at Bridgeton until nineteen sixth-six. I know there are kids who get a late start in college after they get out of high school, but I'm intrigued by her late start. Often times students who start late are boys not girls."

"Walther graduated from Stark Institute with an associate's degree in accounting in sixty-five. Stark is an extension of Kent State and located in Canton,

her hometown. That indicates she started at Stark in nineteen sixty-three."

"Maybe she started late to work after high school to save money for college."

"Not really. My curiosity got the best of me so I called Stark Institute. You'll never believe this, but they have no record of her. She had never set foot in the place. At this point I was hooked, so I called her high school. They checked back and indicated she had in fact attended Ohio State."

There's something fishy here, O'Brennan thought.

"Then I called a friend at Ohio State who was in the same PhD program with me at Stanford. I told him about my interest in this Walther woman, and within the hour he called back with the damndest story you'll ever want to hear. She indeed attended Ohio State and graduated in 1965. A very bright girl, she majored in accounting and garnered Phi Beta Kappa honors. Talk about redundancy, this takes the cake. Now, Jack, I have to ask you this. Why would someone graduate from a quality school and three years later start their junior year in the same major at another school?"

"Tommy, I can't imagine. What I should do is try to check her parents out and go from there,"

"It won't work; believe me, I tried. The person I talked to at Ohio State was a personal friend of the family. Both parents died the summer after she graduated from high school. Apparently her folks were avid outdoors people and were on a fishing trip in Maine when they died in a fluke accident. Seems they were fishing in a row boat near shore when a moose ran amuck and charged into the lake and stomped then to death."

"That sounds too far-fetched for me" O'Brennan muttered.

"Exactly. Something like that was too much to take, so I called the *Bangor Daily News* to verify the story. Sure enough, the story is true. Jack, that's all

I have at the moment, but get back to me if you need more help."

"That was some piece of snooping you accomplished. Thanks, Tommy, you'll be hearing from me again."

"What do you expect to learn down at Fostertown?"

"John, that's a good question, and I frankly don't know. Maybe it's nothing more than a fishing trip."

"Can you tell me what you see happening in this investigation?" The persistent John Lloyd asked.

After his service stint in the army during the Korean War, Lloyd attended the police academy with O'Brennan. The close friendship they developed carried over to this moment. After retiring from the detective division, he accepted the position as head of security at the *Auditorium*, Bridgeton's entertainment arena.

"I've briefed you on its background, and you know exactly what I know. . .but I get the feeling there's something I'm not aware of. I don't know why, but it seems I'm going down one street when I should be going down another. I guess I'm outside the loop and don't know how to get back in."

"You know, Jack, you get a little weird on me from time to time. You're going down one street when you should be going down another. What are you driving at?"

"For one thing, the Walther girl met her fate under questionable conditions. What the hell, there can't be a legitimate explanation for a girl's death if she's found buried under a sand dune. She was an undercover agent masquerading as a student, snooping around looking for communist activity. The university she was looking at with its placid attitude toward the student revolution of the sixties was unusual, would you agree?"

Lloyd merely shrugged.

"Why would that be, John? Why would they, the FBI I mean, take an extremely qualified agent, and put her

in a dead zone? If they were looking for illegal activity, why wouldn't they put her up in Cornell? Now, I know before you tell me, that they probably had people in Cornell, and too many cooks spoil the soup. You would think they'd have put her in a school where she'd be more productive. Do you agree with that?"

"Yeah, I agree," Lloyd said with a shrug.

"No, there's something else. She wasn't here for the drug traffic on campus. Although there was a proliferation of drugs on college campuses including Bridgeton, but there were agents from other agencies looking around. No, she wasn't down here for that."

Lloyd absently gazed at the bridge that crossed the Rappahanock River as it came into view.

"Jack, hear me out on this. How about racketeering? That sounds good. Could she have come here for that?"

"John Lloyd, quit being a wiseacre. You know as well as I there wouldn't be racketeering on a campus such as Bridgeton, or any other campus in the country. No, there has to be something else. I guess that's the reason we're driving down to Fostertown to see this guy, Frankie Ames."

"Let's backtrack for a minute. What do you think about this Bowers? Do you think he's telling you the complete story?"

"Yes. I think he's a good man. He's given me an open file, everything he knows. At least that's what he told me."

"Could there be something he doesn't know?"

"Mr. Lloyd, you have hit upon the key question in my mind."

"What do you know about this guy we're going out to see, this...what's his name?"

"Frankie Ames. He was a member of the group that Walther ran around with when she was living down here. His name was included in some of the correspondence Director Bowers gave me. He appears to be a hippie who never grew up."

"By that you mean..."

"By that I mean he's a hippie who never grew up," O'Brennan said with a wave of his hand. "He runs that old antique and used furniture shop at the light. It's called *The House of Aquarius*. We'll know soon enough because here it is."

O'Brennan passed through the caution light and parked in front of a large gray building that at one time served as a hotel with a lengthy pedigree that dated back to the mid 1850's. A ferry service that crossed the Rappohanock provided easy access to the Tidewater area until the bridge was built in the early 1900's. The hotel, now registered as a National Historical Building, stood three stories high and was the oldest of the old in the small community.

"I've driven by this emporium hundreds of times since it opened, but never bothered to stop," O'Brennan said.

They walked into a room now full of knickknacks, dishes, glassware; and memorabilia too numerous to mention, and an eclectic collection of odds and ends that dated as far back as the Roaring Twenties. Perched on a stool in back of a glass showcase sat a man in his mid-fifties with the appearance of a recycled sixties hippie.

A dog lay on the floor with one eye shut, the other following their movement.

Ames had the look of a wheat field in a windstorm. His long brown hair was carelessly tied in a ponytail accompanied by a folded bandana around his forehead. He wore faded cut-off jeans, a red knit shirt with holes and beat-up sneakers, no socks and unaccountably, was clean-shaven.

"It's a slick morning, ain't it?" Ames said with a big smile.

A fleeting glance passed between Lloyd and O'Brennan.

"You're right, it is a great morning," Lloyd replied. "How you doing?"

"Stayin' busy. What can I do for you, gentlemen? Are you lookin' to buy somethin' for your wives?" Ames said the words casually.

"My name is Jack O'Brennan and I'm a private investigator from Bridgeton. This is my friend, John Lloyd, and he's helping on the investigation I'm now working on. A professor at the university told me the Fostertown Hotel was a hot spot during the sixties, so we thought we'd come down and nose around."

"I thought you had the look of a policeman. Straight answers are sometimes hard to come up with when talkin' to the fuzz. What's the reason for your visit?"

"We're not down here for any big deal, no reason at all" Lloyd said.

"There must be a reason why you're out here talking to me."

"Well, that's a long story."

"This morning, I got time for long stories."

"I'll start at the top," O'Brennan said. "Hurricane Edna didn't do much damage on her way up from the Caribbean until she reached Sands Beach, then all hell broke loose. Have you been over to the beach since the storm?"

"Yeah. I can't believe that...that hurricane moved the dune out into the water the way it did."

"You probably also heard about the skeleton that was found."

"Yeah, I did. Does your visit have something to do with the skeleton?"

"It does."

"They stamp it yet?"

O'Brennan nodded yes. "I'm talking about murder and that's why I'm here. This hasn't been revealed yet, but eventually it's going to get out. The skeleton has been identified as that of Maggie Walther. That's what we know so far."

Frankie's eyes blinked. "Wow, Maggie Walther," he exclaimed. Ames appeared stunned by the news O'Brennan brought him, and his incredulous look indicated he had no prior knowledge of her fate. "Maggie was that skeleton?" The odd voice that crossed the glass-topped counter was barely audible as he raised his hands in a helpless gesture. Reaching for a cigarette, he shook his head in disbelief.

"My information says that you and Maggie were tight. What can you tell us about Miss Walther?"

He nervously glanced out the window as his words came in rapid fire. "Wait a minute, man, lighten up. You. . .you don't figure that I pulled that off, do you? What are you driving at?"

"Frankie, it's too early to suggest you might be a suspect. We have no evidence thus far to support that speculation"

"Well, that's bullshit if you're thinking it's me! I'll tell you that right now."

"I know this is a tough sell for me, but you're the likeliest person around who can help us. Is that possible?"

"Yeah. She lived across the hall from me."

"Where was that?"

"Right here at the hotel."

"This place used to rent out rooms to students?" John asked, knowing full well it did.

"They certainly did; it was a hotel wasn't it?"

"How many rooms?"

"They had rooms on the second and third floors. I don't know ah...ah...how many rooms...ah, let's see." Ames appeared to mentally walk down the hallway counting rooms. "Ten, ten...yeah, there were ten rooms on the second floor and ten on the third.

"And she lived across from you?"

"Yeah, she...we were up on the second floor and were college students you know. Isn't that a bitch that she was the skeleton at Sands Beach." Ames reached for a cigarette.

"Can you tell me anything about yourself?"

"Absolutely. I'll tell ya' anything ya' want to know. What do you want to know? Ask away."

This guy sounds like he's in an echo chamber John thought as he took over. "First, I want to know about you."

Frankie fixed O'Brennan with a curious glance.

"If you're the PI, how come this guy," Ames looked at O'Brennan but pointed at John, "is askin' all the questions?"

"He likes to talk more than I do. Suppose you begin with what he asked. Can you tell us a little about yourself?"

"About me, what's to know about me? I'm just a guy trying to make a buck."

"I take it you were a hippie back then? What else can you tell me?"

"I was going through the motions of being an adult, and wasn't doing a very job of it." Ames laughed for the first time and it was a good hearty laugh.

"It would appear you're still showing signs along the hippie side." O'Brennan was enjoying his conversation with this character and found he liked him.

"So I'm told." This pleased him and he again laughed. "Come on, give me a break! I'm no more a hippie than you two old farts."

O'Brennan looked at Lloyd, "Hey, John, he looks like one, talks like one, and I'll bet he walks like one. What do you think?"

"Sure does. He could have fooled me. If he isn't a hippie, all the same he's doing one hell of a job of acting like one."

"Aw hah, you finally found out what I'm all about. That's the whole bit, that's my bag; don't you get it?"

"What do you mean, that's your bag?" Lloyd asked.
"After I graduated from college, I..."

John cut him off. "You graduated from college up here?" Lloyd asked with a wave in the direction of Bridgeton and the university.

Again the laugh, "Why certainly! What the hell do you think I am, a ninny or something? Believe me that I'm not. Well maybe I am, but if that's the case, I'm trying to keep it a secret."

O'Brennan laughed at the pony-tailed entrepreneur. He laughed so hard, Lloyd followed suit then Ames joined in. This Ames is no dim bulb, Jack thought.

"I'm sorry I laughed at your soliloquy, but you really are something. So tell us about after you graduated."

"I got drafted. Didn't want anything to do with that war, and once demonstrated against it. I even

burned my draft card and all that good stuff. But in the end, my conscious won out and I went in."

"Did you serve over in Nam?" Lloyd asked.

"Ask 'Charlie' whether I served over in Nam; the sons of bitches chased me through every wet spot in the jungle for fifteen months."

John Lloyd laughed at Frankie's carefree remembrance of long hard days served in Southeastern Asian jungles.

"What did you do after you came home?" Lloyd asked.

"I came back to Fredericksburg, my hometown, rammed around for a while, but nothing worked. I figured to hell with it and came down to Bridgeton. The first thing I did when I hit town was drive out here to Fostertown. Figured I'd get a beer at the hotel to help me along. Speaking of beer, I'm getting thirsty talking about it. Would you gentlemen care for one?"

John looked at O'Brennan, and then asked, "Is it hippie beer?"

Ames glanced at John, "What you're name again?"

"John Lloyd."

"John, you're pretty loose for an old guy." Frankie reached into a nearby cooler and pulled out three blue cans. "There you go, gents, Panama's finest."

O'Brennan studied the can. "Balboa, where in hell did you get this rot-gut?"

"From Panama, where else. I have it sent up with my dope supply."

O'Brennan left Frankie's last zinger alone. No reason to pick up on something he didn't need in the mix.

"Getting back to your earlier discussion, what did you do then?"

The question caused Ames to shake his head. "Well, I came down here for the beer, like I said, and, of course, it wasn't open. The hotel looked kind of sad, being closed and all. There was a 'for sale' sign on the hotel and just sitting here waiting to be bought. There was nothing else out there for me to do so I bought the hotel with a GI mortgage. I'd saved enough money to make the small down payment, but I didn't know what to do with the hotel.

"How did you get into this business?" John asked.

"I said to myself, 'what do I want to do with my life?' I sure as hell didn't want to run a bar and what else does one do with an old beat-up building like this?" Ames waved his arm at the old building. "My mother and dad had an interest in antiques and so forth." Frankie appeared to reflect to his youth. "I can remember chasing all over looking for hidden treasures as a kid. Not much fun for me, but I learned along the way and it now has paid a huge dividend. I strip and refinish most of the furniture that comes through the door and that makes up much of my business. It's what I do."

"Why do you...I know this isn't case-related, and doesn't make any sense to bring up, but...but I'm curious. Why this hippie charade? Obviously you're an intelligent guy acting like something he's not. When I first walked in this room and saw you sitting back there," O'Brennan pointed at Ames, "I said to myself, this guy has all the appearances of being a hippie, but there's something peculiar about his look. If you're not a hippie, why the subterfuge?" O'Brennan asked.

"It's good for business. I talk, hippie, look hippie, but when I leave here, I ain't hippie." Frankie assured them with a lop-sided grin.

"I like that." O'Brennan laughed. "Do you live in Fostertown?"

Again the laugh, "No, I live on King place, up on the Hill."

"You live on the hill!"

"Affirmative. How does that grab you?"

"You amaze me. I live on All-Saints Square; we're neighbors."

"All us classy guys live up there." Frankie Ames laughed at O'Brennan as he reached for another cigarette.

"Getting back to your operation, why the get-up?"

"If you want the job done correctly, you need the motivation of money to make it work, and I've got plenty of that." Frankie smiled.

"People love it when I wear funky clothes. As a matter of fact, they can't get enough. They come down here and I talk all that trash, and it reminds them of the old days. A fool and his money are soon parted. Ta-da, ta-da, ta-da and the beat goes on. Actually, most of my customers are my age," Ames waved absently at the backroom, "but it brings them back to a carefree period in their lives. I guess you could call them old days. It's a thirty years plus since back then," he explained. "You be the judge."

Swept up in Ames' Damon Runyon type of repartee and comic relief, O'Brennan suddenly realized much of the conversation was centered on Ames and not Maggie. I'll have to come back and start over. The line of questioning I've used may be partially to blame for the lack of answers, he reasoned.

"Frankie, I can see this is going to take a whole bunch of time, and we can't do this in one sitting. We know you're going to be busy, so we'll take off and come back at a later time."

Frankie returned to type in a flash.

"Hey, that's Jake with me." His eyes drifted toward the front door as several customers walked in and Ames waved at them while resuming his story. "Still have to act cool," again the happy laugh. "I'm going to square with you right now. I'll do everything I can to help you, but there's a lot to remember. Maggie was cut from a different rainbow than the R rated crowd that hung around here. She sparkled and was a knockout, pretty special to me. Of course I was a horse's ass at that time and never told her how I felt about her." He sighed and looked away. "It was a mosaic of bad fortune for me that I didn't speak up."

"You speak the words of a poet."

"No, Jack, what you're hearing is heartfelt."

"Never told her?" O'Brennan looked at the entrepreneur with questioning eyes.

"I was in love with Maggie but couldn't tell her," Ames replied with a biting honesty.

"But you had this hidden love for her."

The sensitive side in Ames showed as he rubbed his chin. "Well, at least I thought I was."

Margaret Walther must have been something special. At the time she was having a fling with the future Director of the FBI, her close friend was in love with her. I can't get everything today, but I need to know about her, O'Brennan reminded himself.

"Frankie, would you talk about Maggie?"

"She was a real looker and always came off clean and neat. And believe me that was a far cry from what most of the other girls looked like. It was incredible the way she knew everybody and everybody knew her. She radiated brightness like the sun on Sands Beach and never knew a dark moment. She reminded you of water that never stopped flowing."

"Can you tell me about this old hotel? Give me a feel of what it was like living here."

"Let me put it this way. This place was something else. They called it the Fostertown Hotel and it was just that, a hotel. Sammy had students on both floors and we didn't pay much for rent. Of course we shouldn't have because it was a dump. In here was the bar," Frankie gestured around the room, "Back then you came in through that front door into the bar. On the other side, to your right is another entranceway that went into a dining room. They didn't do a hell of a lot with the dining room, but the bar you couldn't believe. This is where I used to hang out."

"How many kids would be around here on any given day; the bar that is?"

"Down here was what you'd call a colony and it was just that. I'd say there were seventy-five, eighty of us. There were probably twenty in the hotel and the rest scattered around the hamlet. You know, we were all kinda' on the edge in varying degrees."

"How would you categorize the students here at Fostertown?" John Lloyd asked.

"They were pin-eyed romantics with dirty bodies and clothes who walked on the wild side," Ames said.

"That's a pretty harsh indictment of them wouldn't you say?"

"Not really, Jack. That's the way it was and I have to include myself in that description."

"They were all students?" Jack said, half question, half statement.

"Yeah, by in large most of them were. We had some of the university's finest drop-outs out here, but yes, most were students."

"I talked to a professor over at the university, and he said a bunch of them never bothered to go to classes."

"Well, ah...yeah...I'd have to agree. Ya' know a bunch of them were dropouts with no self-worth. I don't

think there was any question about that. I will say many of us did attend school and graduated."

"I gather drugs were big here. How would you describe their use?"

"The biggest...the biggest, man."

"You know all about that end of it?" O'Brennan threw the question out to see his reaction.

"I know all about it and was right in the middle of all the action! I ran the whole gambit; the whole drug thing. I went up the ladder from marijuana to LSD. Never shot-up, but did all that other wild stuff."

"You look straight enough now," Lloyd said.

"I am. That was the end of it when I left for the service. Oh, I smoked some joints over in Nam, but ah...I gave that stuff up after I left Asia. That gig was ah, that's a losing deal, a one-way street."

The sleeping dog came to life and found his way to Frankie to have his ears rubbed.

"How about you, John, ever try it?"

John started laughing, and then O'Brennan joined in, followed by Ames.

"Me, do drugs? You have to be kidding. At times I can't handle this stuff." Lloyd pointed to his blue can. More laughter followed.

"Can you talk about the individuals down here?" O'Brennan asked.

"What do you want to hear?"

"How they acted, that type of thing."

"There were students of every stripe down here, and I can tell you right now, there were no grand plots brewed here. It seemed many were controlled by hidden demons and their collective interest in abandoning

these demons seemed to bond them together. They wanted nothing to do with conformity and I think the one common denominator that ran through them was drugs.

"You see, a druggie's mentality is centered around escapism and his ability to rationalize vanishes under the onslaught of drugs. They did realize they were falling behind in school, and to a degree tried to catch up, but just fell farther and farther behind. Their future was devastated and their fate in the hands of others, so they gave up and said to hell with it. They had money to spend, and spend it they did."

"Though a lot were consumed by it," O'Brennan said.

"Consumed is the correct word. Yes, I agree."

"What was the normal day like around here for a guy like you?" John Lloyd asked.

"A normal day for me...it was not as it appeared. The guys who were going to school went to school. We tried to schedule everything in the morning, and then we'd come back and party. When we had work to do, and we had plenty of that, ah hell, let me give you an example. If we had a paper to do, or whatever, normally we'd go to the library and stay there until we got our work out of the way. Because you were screwed once you came back. There was no way...this was like a big carnival, and there was no bloomin' way you could get your work done here. It was party time all the time, and was so enticing you felt obliged to join in."

An older couple wandered in and started to look around. Frankie gave them a wave and picked up on his narrative.

"Big time. Where you are now, this barroom was the vortex of movement," Ames waved around the room, "the center of action."

"You're telling us everyone just hung out here," Lloyd asked.

"Not just here. We also hit the dune at Sands Beach and had beach parties that would knock your socks off."

O'Brennan had forgotten about the students at the dune. Thinking back, he remembered the raucous parties that ran into the early morning. When his friend, Charlie the beachcomber, returned from his morning walk, he'd stop at Jack's cottage for coffee, reciting the number of students stretched out on the sand sleeping off an all-night buzz.

"You've already said you were friends with Maggie?"

"Yep."

"Did she tend to isolate herself and hang around with a certain group?"

A slack look graced Ames' face as he eyeballed O'Brennan, "That was the strange thing about her. Like I said, she knew everyone, was friends with everyone. It almost appeared as if she made it her business to know what everyone was doing."

"Do you remember the last time you saw her? We understand she just up and disappeared, is that right?" Lloyd asked.

"Yeah, how could I forget? I don't know how it happened but I went over to the *Eclipse Festival* and..."

"What was that?" John interrupted.

"Well, I ah...I think, yeah, now I remember. I'd call it a smaller version of *Woodstock* up in the Catskills. I think they said there were only two hundred thousand, but it was the same deal. It was one gigantic party don't you know. It was a music festival and embodied everything that young people in their early twenties wanted. I guess you'd call it our Southern Woodstock."

"Where did this Eclipse thing take place?" John asked.

"Oh, it took place in a big field outside Harrisonburg. The event was to take place Saturday and Sunday, so we went out there on Friday afternoon. The festival was terrific, so good as a matter of fact, I stayed over Sunday night and missed classes on Monday."

"When you came back, Walther was gone?"

"You've got that right. She just disappeared. Never did hear where she went. Course I have my own ideas on that."

"Meaning?" O'Brennan asked.

"A lot of the kids went over, even the on-campus students. I dare say practically everyone from down here went, save for a couple of people."

"And?"

"Maggie was one of those who stayed."

"Do you remember who the others were?" John asked.

"Yeah, I sure do. One was Paul Getty, one was Cash Daft, and. . ."

John didn't let Frankie finish. "That's a screwy name."

"I don't think that was his real name, but that's what they called him down here. And the third one was Flip Alden."

"Was there a reason why they didn't go?"

"It seems to me Flip was involved with...he was a business major, and was working on an economics paper that he needed for graduation. All three of those guys were seniors. So, Maggie, Paul, and Cash stayed to help him put it together."

"According to what you just said, we have the three people who you knew were with Maggie, is that right?" O'Brennan asked.

"That's right."

"Anything to add?" John asked.

"There are certain things better left unsaid."

O'Brennan asked John Lloyd, "What do you think, do we have enough to get started?"

"I'd say so. Once we dig into this, we'll have more questions for Frankie, but yes, I believe we have." John pushed closer to Ames. "You'll help us out won't you?"

"If I can, I will. I just had a thought. When she didn't show, Sammy, the hotel owner came to her room and started throwing her belongings out. I went over and salvaged some of her stuff. I think it's around here someplace, but I have no idea where. Give me a couple of days and I'll see if I can find it."

On their return to Bridgeton, John asked O'Brennan if he thought there was a link between Maggie Walther's death and the Fostertown Hotel.

O'Brennan shrugged behind the wheel. "That goes without saying, however, over the last hour I think we helped the home team out a shade."

"You know, Jack, there's something that didn't surface when we talked with Ames."

"What's that?"

"I think he spoke with an indifference he didn't mean."

A puzzled look settled on O'Brennan. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, when Ames talked about returning from the festival, he didn't push the button."

"You're saying he has an idea who did it,"
O'Brennan said.

"Absolutely. How does that sound?"

"John, you may be right, but I'm going to get to
the bottom of this, one way or the other."

John Lloyd entered the *Eagle* without speaking, signaling Al Simons, the giant owner of the bar/restaurant, for coffee on his way to O'Brennan's corner table.

Jack picked up on business without ceremony as Lloyd claimed a seat. "Frankie Ames called this morning to tell me he found some of Maggie's papers. I drove down to Fostertown and picked them up. After reading the collection, I thought you should take a look." O'Brennan passed a white business envelope across the table and waited for his buddy to review it.

My dear beloved,

I was not prepared for the moment when I finished reading your letter. I pushed back from my desk and thought about you, feeling like I was swallowed up in a dark void. Words fail me and I don't know quite how to answer. This is a bit awkward for me but here goes.

You speak so fondly of the wonderful times we had together and they were that. Just the touch of your hand was enough. When people talk about the old days, they send a signal that they're not happy with the current ones. I don't consider the period we were together old times, and I shall never rid my mind of the extraordinary time we spent together.

I feel old and worn out while sitting here writing this reply to your letter. As I look at the small globe with a pencil sharpener in its base, I recall the day you bought it for me when we visited Williamsburg.

I didn't go after you with any intention of catching you, far from it, what happened was an accident. I can remember the first time we really looked at each other. If you recall, that was the soft night we first talked during our training at Quantico. As I look back, I don't know how it happened, but the first thing I knew I was in love, you told me you felt the same way. But that was another time.

Your letter painfully informed me that things hadn't gone right for us, and you were taking responsibility for ending our affair. That gesture is a credit to the integrity I knew you possessed.

I understand how you feel, but I'm still puzzled. If you don't love your wife as you suggested, why keep your marriage intact? That was cruel and should have been left unsaid, but something I had to say. I know you have a reason to act otherwise, and I realize this decision didn't happen overnight. Maybe it was inevitable that we were caught in the savage cycle of times. However, mistakes come with living life, and much to our credit we did that very well.

I'm not a starry-eyed woman being led down the garden path. One day an alarm went off in my thoughts that told me our continuing relationship wasn't in the cards. In truth, that thought never left my mind. With your letter I realized my luck had run out. Coupled with the nagging thought that wouldn't go away, I'm now faced with the harsh reality of your final word.

It never occurred to me our affair would end this way. Quite the contrary, I thought the elements of love were on our side. You constantly reminded me we lived for each other and I found that endearing and comforting. Even though we stepped over the boundaries of social and moral conduct, I have no misgivings about our love for one another. I cherished the thought of becoming your wife.

It has been said one should never look back but we do. Every time I see a man smoking a cigar, I'll think of you as a important person from my past, and that pleasant thought will mean a great deal to me. My mind will never be closed to your memory.

You are an incredible man with your own special way of interacting with those around you. That unusual quality will open a broader window to your future. There's little doubt you'll climb to unknown heights in the bureau, and I'm certain it will be high. Please remember that secrets are meant to be concealed, and be assured ours will remain just that, forever.

As is oft quoted in novels, 'the bloom is off the rose', thought I should always remember the last time you held me. I'll never experience love like this again. Not really wanting to admit the end has come; I realize this is a defining moment in my life. Granted, tears will come, but I can and will walk away from this hurt and accept that people dream one way while things happen the other.

I feel a serene feeling settle over me as I conclude this letter. It was my good fortune to know and love you. There is nothing more to say than goodbye.

I remain yours forever,
Maggie

"What do you make of it, John?"

"Your Maggie sounded like a woman with a heavy heart. She must have been pretty well busted up by this 'Dear Jane' letter from this guy Jake. Do you have any idea who he was?"

O'Brennan shook his head while pushing a sheath of papers across to John. "You'll find these an interesting read as well."

This is a memo to myself that I feel compelled to write. Jake's letter was an eye-opener to say the least, and one I hadn't expected to receive, but had fears it could happen.

As I look back in a reflective retreat, I must nudge Jake out of my longtime memory, and recognize the road of romance is sometimes scarred by numerous pitfalls. I realize he twisted the facts to meet his needs, but we all have our faults, so who am I to question his motives? He would have experienced a love with me that he'll never realize with his wife.

Though broken-hearted, I know in my soul he made a grave mistake by dropping me, and that's the only explanation I can make that will comfort me.

This is a part of the journal I've set aside for contemplation where I can take stock of my emotions. My

past with its straight ways is bumping into the present, and that is driving me crazy. Footnote. That observation may be closer to the truth than I'm willing to accept.

Reflecting on where my life is heading, I have to ask myself if I haven't lost control. It seems this assignment has gone awry because I lost all objectivity by drawing too close to the students. Am I digging myself a big hole, or am I jumping to an irrational conclusion? This is a question that needs my attention, but one I'm not prepared to answer at the moment. When you're part of the fabric, one loses sight of its texture.

Bridgeton University is a sprawling school located on the east side of the city. There is considerable construction on what they call the new campus.

Enrollment is quickly expanding along with the faculty. The quality of both students and faculty is certainly average, no more. I find returning to class and repeating the same courses to be old hat and extremely redundant.

An overview of student activities leads me to believe there is little activist behavior. I am amazed that a southern school would so readily integrate, and this in itself has taken the edge off the nationwide student movement. If anything, there appears to be an apathetic tone on campus. Some of the more active students travel to other college demonstrations, but little of their activity surfaces here.

The dorm room I have is not the answer. I talked to the Dean of Housing and, effective next week, I am dropping out of the dorm.

Some four miles east of the campus is the hamlet of Fostertown. The road that passes through the community leads to Scots Harbor and the Chesapeake. At the caution light in Fostertown, a bridge crosses the Rappahanock River and heads toward the Tidewater peninsula.

The town consists of a mom and pop grocery store, a gas station, a second-hand furniture store, and a small three-story hotel. There are about seventy houses in the settlement with the ones in what I would call the downtown rented to students.

I was fortunate to rent a second floor room at the hotel. This should give me a first-hand look at the renegade activities I believe go on out there.

The view from here leads me to believe in the picture I see. Since arriving at Bridgeton, I've kicked up my heels too much, and have been slow to realize that fixed habits are hard to undue, and that's a fact. This is the down side I feared. The savage cycle of my life hasn't measured up to what I originally planned. A gut feeling tells me there should be more to my broader plan of life than the thinly disguised problem I've become to myself. A matter of choice one might add, and I love every minute I have a beer in my hand.

I hate the hard question, but can I walk away from this drinking problem? I seriously doubt it can be accomplished today, or even tomorrow for that matter, but there will come a day in the near future when I can make it work and shape up. I dread the day when it happens, but it has to be inevitable for my salvation, though it seems impractical at the moment. This is an educated thought. I must keep myself together and look at the positive side. I can make this work and crack the shell of a new and rewarding life.

Now comes a brace of contradictions. The time is right to break from this assignment and walk away from the bureau. After the topsy-turvy life I've spent as an agent, how can I settle down as an accountant? My hands are tied. The catch is; I'm a firm believer in destiny, and cannot continue doing undercover work. It wasn't meant to be, so when this stint with the bureau is over, I'll walk away to start a new life..

To my surprise as I sit writing, something new and exciting clicked in my mind. A new twist is rolling around in my thoughts. To borrow a phrase from I know not where, I believe I have a gift for writing, and I don't choose to be of the garden-type variety. No, I

sense putting my creative juices to work by setting my experiences to paper, writing tales of my time with the bureau.

The FBI has trained me with the power of observation, so why not apply it for my personal gain? There should be a story in everything I've witnessed, and writing about these experiences should certainly be a logical approach to a program for success. I have to eliminate my policewoman's mentality and return to the common touch I once possessed. The ideas are coming quicker than I can jot them down, so I'll stop writing until I gather my thoughts.

The only thing that's changed is the new day. After planning for much of yesterday and early this morning. I believe my first novel, *Fostertown*, is set in my mind. There is a lifestyle down here that the general public doesn't know about. I've learned about it by being a face in the crowd, and I feel moved to translate it to fiction. I'll start by watching the university students down here from a distance while going through the motions of being a student. While developing the opening chapters, I need to emphasize that these young people are trying to grow up and doing poorly at it. Theirs is a subculture afflicted with indifference that I know and understand myself. The trick ahead of me is to convert my personal experience into a realistic novel. One look at them tells me that calling them students is like saying snow is hot to the touch. The facts speak for themselves; they are an incurious group of misfits so cynical for their years that they are being led down the garden path by their own vices. Tragically, they sit stewing in their own ineptness. Their audacious action outside the boundary of accepted behavior has given them a reputation. The manner in which they break the rules makes one question if they'll ever get enough. Their insatiable quest for gratification has a ripple effect on everything they touch.

All is not as it seems. Only the determined finish school even though at times they display inconsistent behavior. This may be an over simplification, but one my woolgathering can understand and put to use.

Now is the time to make a break with my past and walk away from the Maggie I knew since moving to Fostertown. As of Monday, I'll be flirting with something unknown, my abstinence from alcohol. This new life can never be the same, and I must accept that it isn't an end to itself but a beginning.

Sunday is another day, but much like today with one major change. Now I have in front of me, a rough outline for what I hope to be my first novel, *Fostertown*. I have mentally prepared to begin writing Monday, but I must finish the old segment of my life tomorrow. Paul, Cash and I plan on finishing Flip's term paper for graduation tomorrow. The work is pretty well completed, and we should finish by noon. We'll probably go down to the dunes and enjoy a job well done, and that's when this crazy romance with alcohol will end, at least for me.

In reading my briefs, I noticed the general activity around here has been omitted. So, for the purpose of a background report, this is a normal day around here.

There are ten rooms on the second and third floor, so I am talking about twenty students who are residents here at the hotel. The bar opens up at eight in the morning and there'll be roughly eight or ten regulars from upstairs who begin drinking. Add to that another twenty or so students who live in the immediate area. Save for Sunday, when the taproom is closed, the bar will be two-deep by nine.

I find this behavior outrageous, but I'm an observer and not their mother. To add to the merriment, there's a bunch of students from on-campus that frequently come down.

There is little doubt that a festive atmosphere exists around here most of the time. . .well, at least until noon. At that time most of the kids take off for Sands Beach. The beach, some nine miles north of Scotts Harbor, is a lovely crescent-shaped stretch of sand with the famous Great Dune located at its northern end.

Across from the hotel is a dirt road that is a shortcut to Sands Beach. It runs over the hill and wends its way to the water. This backwoods route saves the hassle of going through Spenser and Scotts Harbor.

The students have reached a compromise with the authorities down there. They stay on the north side of the dunes and don't bother residents or beach-goers. The sheriffs department in turn leaves them alone. This is where the partying gets serious. The students drink beer, but by-in-large pot is the stimulant of choice.

Come around five in the afternoon, the "site" as the kids call it, becomes a topless beach and most of the girls shed their tops. Yes, even I have gotten into the spirit of the moment, and surprisingly, rather enjoy it.

I've developed a friendship with Frankie Ames, a senior who lives in a room opposite mine. The first thing I noticed about him was his sun-streaked unruly brown hair that looks like a wheat field caught in a swirling wind going in all directions. His eyes sparkle over a crooked smile set in a facial complexion most women would die for. Frankie has a perpetual pleasantly surprised look, which quickly turns into a knock-over smile.

He is a gregarious sort with unbounded enthusiasm. His carefree laid-back approach to life carries with it a never-look-back attitude. Frankie walks through life in a constant euphoric state sparkling with enthusiasm. This happy person has a gift for seeing the bright side of everything that turns his way, and at first glance appears to have a screw loose because of his zany antics.

At times he is downright silly, and makes the most childish comments one can imagine. His ingrained confidence shines through the frivolous veneer he presents. Easy to laugh, unhappiness is not a part of his vocabulary; and I've noticed too, he has not one pretentious bone in his body.

This thinly disguised facade masks an enduring way about him that is as gentle as a soft spring rain. His

old-fashioned, undefined dignity makes everyone like him, including me. If it were not for my experience with Jake, I honestly believe I could spend the rest of my life with him.

I can't imagine how he got to be a senior, but he is a nice guy and fun to be around. He has an idiosyncrasy that puzzles me, and this may be the reason for his success. He gets up at four o'clock in the morning and studies until eight-thirty, and then goes to class. It doesn't matter if he only gets an hour or so of sleep, he still gets up. Frankie returns to the hotel at twelve-thirty and begins drinking. He is a confirmed beer drinker, and has an awesome capacity. I'm convinced he's not doing drugs. I feel he is the key to finding out about this odd feeling I have about my friends, but only time will tell.

Paul Getty has an impassive face topped by a crew cut resting on a substantial body. His ruddy face and box-like jaw with deep-set hazel eyes display an intense but not menacing look. If anything, I'd call his eyes anguished and pleading.

I'd say Paul possesses a complicated personality. He displays a collage of insecurity I can't account for. One minute he appears to walk around with a heavy heart, but he's not one I'd call reclusive. In the blink of an eye he reflects an extroverted voice loaded with happiness, and as quickly as it came, reverts back to the business at hand; that of being grave.

Paul is a quietly intelligent, stubborn, single-minded man; not a mental giant, but smart nonetheless. I feel he has a nimble mind with enormous potential. Bright as a flash of lightening, he walks around with a grave appearance that makes him look old beyond his years. He sometimes speaks in a detached manner, almost as if he were living in a dream sequence.

In the end, Paul Getty will experience a life of success tinted with peaks and valleys of agitation. He's like a palm tree in a severe windstorm that could tip over at any time. I feel helpless to understand him, but think a great deal of him. He is not one to do

anyone harm, and if push came to shove, I could trust him with my life.

Cash Daft mirrors Frankie Ames in many ways. I'd call him well groomed, which features a pleasant face quick to smile. He has the most beautiful head of hair I've ever seen on a man even though he wears it short with a part of the right. He has a bookish look loaded with sincerity that fits his self-effacing personality to the letter. I find Cash approaches others with a biting honesty that is in tune with his personal sentiments. Cash is one of the very few people I have ever met who understands his strengths and weaknesses.

A well-meaning person with a style all his own, Cash displays enormous patience when dealing with others and is a caring friend. He is a voice of reason in this swirl of chaotic behavior found in Fostertown.

Flip Alden is the other friend with whom I keep company. His dirty blond hair recklessly combed, covers an expressionless face with dark eyes that flick across you with a sometimes-feral glance. Topping a sinewy build is a face that sometimes displays black moments. Born with a glib tongue, Flip has a smooth way of talking, and has an odd way of turning a pout into a scowl. When he smiles, it's forced with little humor to it.

Flip possesses a quick mind with more than one-dimensional intelligence, but this quality sometimes betrays him when he occasionally looks into space with a vacant look.

Once annoyed, his smooth voice cracks like a whip as if putting on a front of being tough, though I believe Frankie Ames is the one who has iron coursing through his blood. His high-powered aggressive personality with a hair-trigger temperament can at times be unpleasant, but the others pay little attention to his overtly obsessive single-mindedness and pushy character.

When he drifts off to his own thoughts, it's difficult to know what he's thinking; a hidden agenda probably. Flip tries to hide his bluntness, but a touch

of scorn tints his words. Cool and unflappable, he considers himself the great and good in the manner he calls the shots in such an audacious manner, and this strange quirk makes one feel off balance when in his company. I believe he has delusions of being on the fast track to success, and this gives him the reputation of being a hot shot, but nevertheless he grows on you.

How Flip deals with us I find annoying, yet interesting. He appears to be impatient and blind to our feelings. He speaks with a constant indifference, and many times talks when he should listen, which I find has an irritating grain of sand in the eye effect.

It seems within our circle, there are two different life styles; one, Flip's close to the vest style and ours, more open and free wheeling. He displays a prominent haughtiness that implies his word is law in whatever he turns his hand to.

I continually ask myself why I'm swept up by his inexplicable personality, and for the life of me, I have no sound answer. He has an imposing presence that one would notice in a crowd, and has a gift where people are drawn to him like moths to light.

Slowly and with considerable care, Lloyd read through Maggie's papers, finally placing them on the table. There was a long pause before he answered. "Jack, I've got a feeling Jake's news killed something inside her. There's little doubt she was a sharp lady, but because of her abundance of intelligence, she was resigned but frightened by what she had become; you know. . .the drinking part."

"Kind of depressing." Lloyd's puzzled look caused O'Brennan to smile. "I'd like to have known this Maggie. She seemed like our kind of person."

Lloyd nodded in agreement. "What do you intend to do?"

"It appears she intended to use her friends as central characters in the novel she was planning. Maybe

I'll try and search them out, but that seems like quite a reach."

The phone rang the moment Ben Matlock pressed the killer on the hidden clue that had evaded O'Brennan.

"Damn phone. I should have thrown it out in the street years ago."

Jeanette smiled as O'Brennan headed for the kitchen. Missing the end of the show would ruin her husband's evening. She felt badly about their little tiff over O'Brennan's Sands Beach trip to experience Hurricane Edna, and she had told him so after their return, but was that enough? In his gentle manner he shrugged it off with, "It's okay." God, how I love this man, she thought.

"Jack O'Brennan."

"Jack, this is Bud...Bud Henry. I just received a call from an FBI agent I worked with in the city. He told me Director Bowers wants to meet with you tomorrow morning up in the capital at eleven."

"What's this all about?"

"I have no idea, but...I kinda' believe it's related to your discovery at Sands Beach. Can you make it?"

Jack thought briefly about meeting with one of the major power brokers in the nation. "Yeah, Bud, I can."

"We really don't have much choice, do we, old friend? I'll pick you up seven. See you then."

O'Brennan returned to the living room thinking about Bud Henry, a former FBI agent he had worked with on numerous occasions. Why would this sudden request come through a former agent instead of formal channels from the bureau? The agency worked in strange ways, and he thought this request was no exception. It was just very odd for the Director of the FBI to make such an appeal.

His troubled thoughts reflected on his face. Jeanette recognized the look and felt concern build as she asked, "O'Brennan, what happened?"

"Small world. That was Bud Henry, and he called to tell me the Director of the FBI wants to meet with me in the morning."

"What about?"

"I think it has to do with the skeleton down at Sands Beach, but I can't elaborate on it because I don't know." He smiled and the troubled look faded much to the delight of his wife. "Your husband will be rubbing elbows with one of the big shots up there, and that's probably as close as I'll ever come to the Oval Office. How did Matlock make out?"

Agent Springford, the director's aide led the middle-aged men into a different world. . . a plush carpet alerted O'Brennan to this. "Director Bowers, this is Jack O'Brennan and retired agent Bud Henry."

"Hello, I'm Jake Bowers." He beamed at O'Brennan. "And hello to you, Bud Henry, it's been years. Back then I was known as Gerald, but now my close friends call me Jake."

Gerald Bowers was reputed to be arrogant, demanding beyond reason, impatient, hot headed, and if the above didn't adequately describe him, calling him a sterling piss pot did. O'Brennan's first impression of the director was not of a gruff, full of self-importance and bluster, but rather an affable person.

His handshake was short and to the point. "Gentlemen, I thank you for your special effort of getting up to the city so quickly. I know my call was a spur of the moment reaction, and for that I apologize, but when we finish I think you'll agree that time is of the essence. Please have a seat and we'll get to it." Bowers' gentle manner demanded attention, so they sat down.

His pleasant smile displayed a substantial chin, a face more weathered than ruddy and blue-black

penetrating eyes. His demeanor appeared to be reinforced by a constitution of granite.

"Before we begin, I'd like you to call me Jake." The stocky bureau chief removed his suit jacket and turned on his heels to walk across the room to a wall closet where he nonchalantly hung it on a hook. He didn't use a hanger and for some reason the simple gesture appealed to O'Brennan. This guy has a common touch, he thought.

Returning to the largest desk Jack had ever seen, he rolled up his sleeves. The silent message he sent to the two visitors sitting apprehensively in front of him was. . .the time is right to get to work.

"Keep an open mind to what I'm about to say and I'll make this as brief as possible. This may seem out of character for the Director of the FBI, but hopefully when I'm finished, you'll see my drift. Bud, I know you're a retired agent. I've read your jacket and like what I saw. You never moved up the promotion ladder, did you? Any explanation for that?" Bowers reached into a cigar humidor and withdrew a long black cigar. He offered the box to his visitors, but was politely refused. He then reached into the top drawer of his desk and withdrew a scarred pocketknife.

"This is a knife I had when I was a kid," he said, pausing for effect before cutting the end from the thick cylinder he was about to torch. "I see you're checking my cigar. Yes, it's Cuban, and I know it's bad for the image but what the hell!" Bowers laughed as he ignited the kitchen match with his thumb. He then applied the flame to the massive cigar, and gleefully sent a grayish plume of smoke to the ceiling.

Nodding at Henry, the director started his pitch. "Getting back to you, Bud, there has to be an explanation."

Henry shook his head. "It appears my superiors thought I didn't have the goods, found me incapable of handling a higher position," Henry said with an embarrassed shrug.

"Put that notion aside. With all due respect, I don't think that was the case. I've talked to some of your former colleagues and they tell a different story. The word is, you were an enormous cut above what we call average around here. Any comment?"

Bud was at a loss.

Catching a quick glance at his long-time buddy, Jack laughed over Bud's discomfort. He was squirming like a little boy in desperate need of running to the bathroom.

"If you wish. There's no use beating around the bush." Bud desperately sought a reply to the director's question. Casting a somewhat bold glance at the cigar smoking chief, he began. "People understand what they want to, and the only thing I ever wanted out of the bureau was a career in law enforcement and promotions that would lead to more money. It was always the money, never the power or prestige that came with a better position. I have a large family, and it was their welfare I was considering. Over the years I was passed over for promotions that should have been mine, and at some point I realized that to go up the ladder you had to go with the flow. That's something I didn't choose to do. Mine was a job I was very good at, so I went along even though they knew where I stood. I assume you know what that means. There's nothing left to say."

Director Bowers nodded and waved Henry to continue, with little emotion showing as he puffed on the black stick.

"I did my job and that was it," Bud said without preamble. "I think it came to a head at the end of my tour when I found my immediate supervisor to be a consummate incompetent." Bowers laughed at Henry's indignation while knocking a long white ash off his cigar.

"I'd call that about right. That's an apt description, but I'm not surprised. I get the feeling you're telling me our administrative assistants have short comings."

"No, sir," Bud said. Bowers raised his hand much like he was stopping traffic.

"Bud, make that Jake."

Bud nodded. "Jake, most of the supervisors are terrific, but there's a handful out there who are lacking. I can't imagine how they arrived at their current positions, but those guys are a detriment to the agency, and that's a fact." Bud extended his hands toward Bowers, indicating his comments had concluded.

"I think the Bureau lost sight of its original intent somewhere along the way, and that thought prompted me to consider restructuring personnel management, but I've somewhat reached a dead end. My advisors tell me one thing; I think another. After studying your record I made a big decision after talking to some people who would be honest with me, I was prepared to offer you this little task. But before I did, I wanted to hear your sentiments concerning the political maze we're suffering through. When you stated earlier your strong opinion about some of our administrators, I was convinced I was on the right track and that you're my man." Bowers' infectious laugh brought a similar reaction from his visitors.

"I want advice, but it must be from an external source, and preferably from ex-agents. If they have an ax to grind, they won't spare the horses. Bud Henry, I'm going to break the rules and ask you to take hold of this vast network of retirees and get some answers." Bowers set the hook with a final tug. "You be the judge of how you do it and call all the shots."

Bud appeared to have a look of someone suspended in a time warp and displayed the scrambled look of confusion. One look at Henry's breathing problem caused O'Brennan to laugh. Bowers followed suit, then Henry joined in.

"What do you think of my proposal?"

"Do I have a choice?" Henry's smile quickly turned serious. "Jake, you've definitely made a statement and taken me by surprise, but I have to admit I'd be

pleased to help you in anything you ask. It's nice to be needed after one has retired."

Bowers continued to eye Bud with an unrelenting stare. "Yes. Mr. Henry, you'll do just fine. I had a packet prepared that will give you some initial direction. Plan on meeting again in two weeks and we can finalize everything."

Bud didn't quite know what to say so he remained silent.

The longer this meeting continues, the less I understand what is happening, Jack reasoned. Bowers has for all practical purposes given Bud Henry, a retiree from a lower echelon of field agents unfettered authority to reshape the underpinnings of the bureau's personnel structure, or at least influence him toward some rather dramatic changes. Why would he do a thing like that?

"Looking toward O'Brennan with a slight nod he changed gears and said, "Mr. O'Brennan, I'd like to call you Jack," O'Brennan feebly nodded as the director continued, "I admire the work you've recently done with some long-time unsolved murder cases. You have a God-given talent that eludes so many of us in this business," Bowers said thoughtfully. "I know this is a tired old chestnut, but you are an extraordinary investigator."

O'Brennan warmed to the kind praise.

"Mr. Director, I'm tired of being called extraordinary."

"Aren't we all," Bowers replied with a happy laugh. "I've been watching this very closely and Hurricane Edna played a little trick on all of us at Sands Beach. It's a question that needs answering. The department has been in communication with Sheriff Childs and he informed us that you are taking a preliminary look into our little mystery. I say our, because it is indeed that. Am I on the mark so far, Jack?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Director." O'Brennan replied.

I don't get it, he thought. Given the possible threat of terrorism invading our shores, buttressing up homeland security, plus a hundred other problems that cross his desk daily, why would he involve himself with a case like this? Maybe there's something personal involved.

"Jake to you," he smiled at Jack O'Brennan, and gave him a small wave of the hand. "Can you tell me what you've come up with?"

O'Brennan felt on the verge of hyperventilating as he crossed his legs, desperately buying time to settle down before answering.

"The girl's name was Audrey Margaret Walther, originally from Canton, Ohio. She graduated from Canton-McKinley High School in 1961 and from Ohio State four years later. The Walther girl majored in accounting and won Phi Beta Kappa honors during her stay." Bowers looked at O'Brennan with unyielding eyes. Seeing O'Brennan's hesitation, he again signaled him to continue.

"I have a problem with what I'm going to say next, but here goes nothing. My preliminary investigation indicated that Walther finished a two-year accounting course at Stark Institute in 1965, but didn't transfer to Bridgeton as a junior until two years later." O'Brennan gave Bowers a puzzled look then went on.

"There is something very strange about the facts surrounding her disappearance, and I'm especially perplexed about her activities between her finishing Ohio State and starting college two years later. We did find that she did not ever attend Stark. Otherwise, we have a lot of blanks."

"Director Jake Bowers absently fingered his earlobe while directing a brief but hard glare at an uneasy Agent Springford. Carefully weighing his words, Jake pointed to the youthful agent then spoke. "Young man, you are privy to a classic case of old-fashioned detective work acquired through hard work. I can speak

for Mr. O'Brennan when I say there was no computer science involved in this brief sketch, am I correct?" O'Brennan's nod answered Bowers' question.

Still having Springford in his sights, Bowers continued. "It should be evident to you that our guest has a sensitive pipeline to what is real as opposed to the flying bullshit that I am inundated with. You are now dismissed." His statement left nothing for the young agent to debate.

After Springford left, Bowers stretched and looked at his visitors. "You may think I was harsh on the youngster, and I have to agree. Well, I'm damned glad I jumped on that kid. He's going to make a fine agent if he accepts his new assignment with good grace, but not by the route he has been taking. You opened my eyes, Bud, and for that I thank you.

"An agent's worth should be determined by his performance in the field, and that's where our young friend, Agent Springford is headed." Bowers pushed a button, "Bev, I want transfer orders cut for Mr. Springford. His new station will be Billings, Montana, and he's due out there in one week."

Bowers returned his attention to his visitors while stubbing out his half smoked cigar in a foul-smelling ashtray.

"That young kid needs shaping up, and he can't get it here. Bud, what you said earlier rang a bell about there being too many ass-kissers around the bureau. I know that sucking-up is inherent in our business, and most assuredly in government. I'm not able to end it, but I'm going to put a crimp in it." A smile played on Jake's face.

Bowers shifted his gaze to O'Brennan as if appraising a fine piece of china. "Jack, your advance clippings understate your ability and for that I'm pleased. Let's get down to facts and dispense with the nonsense." The director stepped back in time. "After Korea, the years folded away while finishing my undergraduate studies and law school. I joined the bureau after becoming a lawyer and took my training at

Quantico. Bud and I were in the same class, and I've come a long way since, but I sometimes wonder at whose expense?

"Maggie Walther was in a later class back then." He stopped; apparently lost in thought for several moments. Images of Maggie flashed in his mind and filmed his eyes. "Secrets aren't meant to be put on loan, and I know better, but here goes. I'll give it to you straight. We became good friends and developed a close relationship. Actually, it was more than that. We had an affair that lasted until she disappeared." Jake sighed. "It certainly was something very, very special."

Maggie Walther must have been something special. At the time of her Fostertown days, she was having an affair with the future director of the FBI while two of her close friends were in love with her, O'Brennan thought.

Bowers' words made it evident her memory invoked more than affection for the long-deceased woman.

Bowers took his half-glasses off to rub his eyes. Continuing his stare at O'Brennan, he smiled as he looked back at years long since passed, and then haltingly began. "A bittersweet memory from the past. The simple truth is I guess we'd have married if she hadn't left. She was a cut above the quality woman we get at the bureau, and that's a mouthful. I might add that Maggie was prettier than cut flowers and she had a regal air about her that defied description."

O'Brennan caught a brief flash of torment that crossed Bowers' face before he continued.

"That's neither here nor there is it?" He placed a freshly lit cigar in the ashtray, toying with it, buying time.

"After finishing her field training, Maggie was placed on the Berkley campus early in 1966 to monitor student activities. Her undercover identity had been that of a precocious gypsy.

"After several months at Berkley, Maggie was unaccountably reassigned to the cozy confines of Bridgeton University. Bridgeton was unique in the South because early on the school accepted the mandate of change and silently desegregated as peacefully as a spring day turns from rain to sunshine.

"The university campus was extraordinarily quiet. But there were rumblings of communist overtones and anarchist trembling that later proved unfounded. It was in this setting Maggie's undercover work began. Without Edna, the former Maggie Walther would be buried until the end of time, but I'm sorry to say she's back and I have to visit her anew with my memories.

"Tragically, we don't have a clue as to what she found at Bridgeton. Oh, we have messages she sent up, but they stopped before she could divulge anything important." His eyes flashed a fleeting display of pain.

I have questions about you and Maggie that need answering, but this isn't the time, O'Brennan thought. He decided to wait for those answers that never came.

The awkward silence was interrupted by the quiet ping of the high-tech phone calling Bowers to the outside world. "Yes, Bev, I'll do it shortly." He attentively listened, finally replying, "Yes, Bev, right now. Thank you."

"Did you ever get the feeling your days were too crowded and were pushing you beyond your limits? Well, that's the way I feel at the moment. My trusted aide informs me I must leave immediately. It seems I have a luncheon with someone up the ladder."

Bowers reached across the desk and handed Henry and O'Brennan large manila envelopes, then stood and headed for the closet and his suit coat. Roughly slipping into the dark blue garment, he headed for the door. "Come on, I'll walk you to the elevator. Our discussion took much longer than I anticipated. What you now have will give you a start, so plan on a follow-up meeting."

The director led the way to the bank of elevators. He pushed a palm against his head in the manner people do when they forget something. "Damn, Jack, I forgot to ask you if you'll take a look on my behalf. You're a go-to guy. If anyone can find answers, you can."

"Jake, of course I will, and I certainly won't take it lightly."

"That's good to hear."

"By the way, I thought you'd never ask. Is there a time frame involved?" O'Brennan asked.

Bowers pushed the hold button. "Come on, get in. Turn back the pages of time and don't miss a beat. How you approach it is of little importance to me, but I'd like this matter resolved as quickly as possible with little fanfare."

They were quickly transported to the basement floor and the awaiting chauffeur-driven limousine for the director and a tired Olds Cierra for Henry and O'Brennan.

There was no mention of Jake having a wife, and if so, where did she fit into this interval with Maggie, before, during, or after the time of her disappearance. There's more to this request than he let on. Jake Bowers has a hidden agenda, and I can't imagine what it is, O'Brennan thought while settling into Henry's sedan.

O'Brennan made arrangements for an eleven o'clock appointment with a Reverend Portland at the manse of the Asbury Methodist Church. The name vaguely struck a cord in O'Brennan's memory bank, but he couldn't place it. Driving through the streets of Charlottesville, thoughts of the glorious weekend the past June when his friend, Red Ted married and graduated from the University of Virginia Law School came to mind.

He walked past a carefully tended lawn and multi-colored flower beds on the way to the manse. The secretary in the church office directed him to a walnut-lined office. Surrounded by highly polished wood, Jack felt like he was standing in a forest. The morning sun flooded the room revealing an immaculate and well-ordered study.

Upon entering, the Reverend Alfred Portland stood up to greet his guest. Though casually dressed in a sea of blue, his cardigan, knit shirt, Levis, and deck shoes provided an elegant but casual look. O'Brennan had seen this man before but couldn't place him. Damned, he thought, I know the name and the face that goes along with the man, but I can't place where we've met.

"Welcome to the Lord's house, Mr. O'Brennan. This is my spiritual residence and I find I do my best work here." Reverend Portland smiled warmly as he extended his hand in greeting. "Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable. Before we get down to business, would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, no."

"It's a lovely day, wouldn't you say? I just love the way the sun lights up my dreary office at this time of the morning."

The mention of the sun jogged Jack's memory, and pages from earlier in the summer flashed across his mind. The image of a minister standing in front of the

Rotunda conducting the marriage ceremony of Red Ted and Betty Green came to mind. That's it!

"Yes it is. I was certain I'd seen you before when I entered your office, but I just couldn't come up with an answer. It just came to me, you performed the wedding services for my friend, Red Ted early in the summer."

"Ah, yes, interesting that you would mention that, because I had the same feeling when you entered the office. Isn't that a lovely setting for a wedding? By the way, how is that young man doing? Strange that I would call him a young man when he's about my age."

"He took his boards in August, and there's no question he'll pass them with flying colors. I guess when you're number one in the class, such an obstacle as a state board should prove no major stumbling block. Interestingly enough, he has dedicated his career to helping veterans."

"That is certainly a commendable endeavor on his part. Now, Mr. O'Brennan, how can I be of help to you?"

"Just call me Jack, Reverend."

"And in turn please call me Al."

"I'd feel more comfortable calling you Reverend."

"Most men of the cloth prefer to be called by their title, but I choose to be called by my Christian name. I believe it provides for a more comfortable relationship with those whom I deal with."

Accepting his host's friendly reason for using his first name, O'Brennan began to speak. "As I mentioned in my call, I need your help. I'm investigating the mystery of the skeleton that turned up at Sands Beach. I'm sure you read about it, and it proved to be the former Maggie Walther. Her identity hasn't been revealed to the press yet, but secrets are difficult to hide these days."

For a good two minutes Portland stared out the window. The shock was clearly evident on his face as he reached for a nearby pipe. "The body was Maggie!" The color seemed to drain from his clear face as he lit his pipe.

Moments passed without conversation before O'Brennan picked up on Portland's distress. I'll try and redirect the conversation away from Maggie for a moment until he can gather himself, Jack thought.

"Before we talk about Maggie, I'm somewhat puzzled, and wish you'd help me out. I know this is personal and not really related to the case, but why the change in name? I was half crazy looking for a Cash Daft, and it took some heavy-duty work to uncover your new name.

Al laughed. "With the name Cash Daft, you need to ask?"

The Reverend could be described as an average man with slight build in a five-eight frame. Nothing set him apart from any other fifty-six year old male except for signs of losing his brown hair.

O'Brennan laughed in agreement. "Then of course I find you're the Reverend Alfred Portland, and that certainly was a revelation!"

"Why do you say that?"

"From what I uncovered about you, and that isn't much, you had somewhat of an erratic student career at Bridgeton, and maybe that's being benevolent."

"I don't like the way my story is unraveling, so let me digress. My childhood was a troubled one in that my father left when I was three and my mother abandoned me when I was six. From there, I moved from one foster home to another. During that period I suffered from abuse. I had minor skirmishes with the law as I grew up, but I'd say they weren't significant. With no other place to go, I came to Bridgeton and started at the university. High school had never been a real challenge

and I guess my brains carried me through college with little effort.

"But in retrospect I'd have to say my days at Bridgeton weren't much better. At the time, I guess you would have called me a young adult at risk. And then to top it off, I moved off campus to Fostertown which unknowingly further jeopardized my college career. Those times were outrageous, and I believe I made them so."

"If that was the case, why this?" O'Brennan waved his hand around the room. "What happened to cause your transformation?"

"Were you in the service, Mr. O'Bren...Jack?"

"Yes, during the Korean War."

"After finishing college, I found myself aimlessly going nowhere when I got my draft notice. As much as I was against the war, and as much as I had demonstrated against it, I said, oh well, and went in. One thing led to another as they often do when you're in the service, and the next thing I knew, I was firmly planted in Viet Nam.

"I certainly don't have to delve into that. You know the horrors that war brings. To be honest with you, it seemed that during my year there, my unit was in every major battle in the country. One day we got into a firefight with 'Charlie' and fighting was so intense, I was convinced I'd never live through the day. Death is so irrevocable, so total. From time to time, I think of the horrors of that day and remember how so many of my colleagues-in-arms lay destroyed on the jungle floor.

"Not willing to join my dead friends, I did the next best thing I could think of; I prayed. It was right then and there that I formed a covenant with the Lord. I vowed that if I ever got out alive, out of Nam that is, I'd be his servant for the rest of my life. I asked myself when my new future with God would begin, and a strange voice seemed to answer, with your next breath."

Al carefully reloaded his pipe more as a gesture to buy time than the need for a smoke.

"I know a lot of men under duress make the same promise, but as soon as the danger is gone, they forget about the earlier commitment. That wasn't the case with me. Up until then, I'd had only a nodding acquaintance with religion. Was I a believer? I rather doubt it. None of my foster homes were religion oriented, so it was easy to pass church by. But once I had made the personal commitment, I knew my life would change for the better.

"After that day I discovered a peace within myself, a sense of contentment I'd never encountered. I even cut back on my use of marijuana. By the time I left Asia, I was not a user," Portland laughed as he looked at the ceiling, then back to O'Brennan. "I made a commitment, and the routine was a new experience for me."

O'Brennan sat listening to the reverend and realized that this man was totally at peace with himself. He had no qualms about talking about his shady past, and appeared to be ego-less; those were the toughest kind. Portland wanted to talk, to purge himself of these past indiscretions and O'Brennan let him continue.

"As my tour of duty in Nam progressed, I started having thoughts that I might get out alive. I needed to make post-war plans and the more I thought about it, studying for the ministry seemed the right thing to do. Following my discharge, I entered the Rochester Colgate School of Divinity in Upstate New York and eventually was ordained. During my schooling, I served as a lay speaker in a number of small churches that didn't have a full-time pastor.

"After leaving Rochester, I had two small charges in western Virginia before arriving at Asbury about fifteen years ago. I picked up a master's degree in counseling at UVa, and that training has been an enormous help in aiding my parishioners. As you well know, there are a lot of troubled people out there, and in all modesty; I feel I have made a difference, at

least to some extent. My clients even come from outside the church community."

"Things have turned out well for you, and I would assume you'll soon be headed for greener pastures."

"No, that's not the case, Jack. I've been happier here at Asbury than at any other moment in my life. The good Lord willing, this is where I'll stay until I retire. I married a local woman my second year here, and we now have a young family of four. Sarah is an elementary teacher, so you can see we're very happy."

"You seem to be very content."

"I should say I'm content. I have all this," Al paused to wave around the room, "and Jesus Christ as well. Please accept this fable as an affirmation and not a sermon. However I must admit I'm sometimes accused of preaching when I should be listening. Once there was a king looking for contentment. He called his trusted subjects together and ordered them to search his kingdom for a man who was content and to take his shirt. They found such a man with contentment, but he had no shirt." Portland laughed and asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. Can we talk about Maggie Walther?"

"Talking about people in the past tense has always been a problem for me. When we reminisce about the old days, we tend to only remember the good times. But you're not asking me to reminisce, are you?"

O'Brennan shook his head from side to side as the silence that followed grew embarrassing.

"I guess there is no right time for talk like this," O'Brennan said, his voice barely audible.

"What do you want to know?" Portland asked

"Whatever you think will help me."

Al reached for his pipe, reamed it out, and refilled it with tobacco. He absently turned it around in his hands and gently returned it to the ashtray. The

reverend stoically looked into space, as his thoughts drifted back to the memory of Maggie Walther.

"I knew you'd eventually get around to Maggie." He sighed and reluctantly began, "That's a tough one. The last time I saw Maggie was the weekend of the *Eclipse Festival* out near Harrisonburg. She was as refreshing as a gentle spring rain and had all the appearance of money without the trappings. A lot of the kids from campus and most from Fostertown went over to the event. The only people around were Flip Alden, Paul Getty, Maggie, and of course me.

"Flip was finishing an economics paper he needed to graduate, so the rest of us stayed to help. We worked all day Saturday until about five when we went over to Sands Beach. There was a place where we partied at the north end of the dune. We'd buy beer in Fostertown and go over to have a campfire and party.

"The four of us stayed there until about midnight when we returned home. I use home meaning the hotel in Fostertown, it really was the only one most of us had."

"Had you been drinking?"

"When students went to Sands Beach, there was always drinking, but nothing heavy that evening. We started on Flip's paper early Sunday morning, and by noon had finalized the finer points of the paper along with the charts that Flip needed for his term paper. We bought more beer and headed out to the beach for some serious partying. The beer drinking continued into the late afternoon when we started a fire.

"The three of us sat around drinking and talking. It was a beautiful night and. . ."

"Excuse me for interrupting, but where was Paul?"

"He was completely out of it and finally passed out, so we just left him alone. I would say about nine-thirty Maggie passed out, so I decided to come home. Flip was bombed but insisted on coming back with me. I poured him into the car and headed back to Fostertown."

"You left Maggie and Getty there unconscious?"

"Oh, certainly. It was no big deal. If that happened, you just left them there. It was an unwritten law of the road. When they woke up, they woke up, and it was an accepted occurrence."

"How about you, had you been drinking like the others?"

"No, not that I was above it, but on this particular evening, I wasn't."

"Hearing you talk about this heavy-duty drinking out at the beach makes me think it had to be a dangerous trip for the students returning to Fostertown."

"Not really, because opposite the hotel in Fostertown was a back road that cut toward the beach and came out near the dune. It was hardly ever used and was safe for us to use."

O'Brennan thought about the shortcut. For all the years he'd driven through Fostertown to the cottage, it never dawned on him where that road went.

"Tell me what happened that night after you returned to the hotel?"

"I put Flip to bed when we got back to the hotel. He could hardly stand up he was so drunk."

"What did you do then, stay in your room?"

"No, I went into Bridgeton to get something to eat. I can't say when I returned, but probably early in the morning. I can guarantee one thing, I did not return to Sands Beach. In the morning I went next door and checked with Flip to see if he was going to school. He had a hangover that was the granddaddy of them all. He wasn't interested in school, so I went in by myself."

"When I returned around noon to the hotel, Paul Getty was there and I asked him where Maggie was. He said she wasn't around when he woke up. He couldn't

remember much about the night and that was it; we never saw Maggie again."

O'Brennan absently looked out the window kicking around the reverend's story. "Let me go back for a minute. You said that Maggie passed out from beer, is that right?"

"That's all she ever drank."

"Was she a heavy drinker?"

"The heaviest. I'd never seen a woman drink like she could. She never used drugs; but she sure was good at the beer."

"That's a different way of putting it. So what we have here is a young woman who was murdered at night, a Sunday night and buried in the dune. We'd never know otherwise if it hadn't been for Hurricane Edna's bizarre behavior, would we? Her remains would still be buried at the bottom of the dune, and she'd be missing forever."

"Yes, I believe you're right."

"Could you put a label on this Alden character for me?"

"Flip Alden was so full of himself, it was hard to imagine. He was like a fox in a chicken coop."

"Can you expand on that?"

"He loved to run the show, be the boss man. Flip was abrasive and made people feel uneasy. When you talk to him, and I'm sure you will, don't expect something for nothing. With him, it's something for something or as the legal profession calls it, *quid pro quo*."

"What are you driving at?"

"Jack, when you talk to him, you better have your hand on your wallet."

"I still don't get it."

Reverend Al Portland held his hands out, palms out, and shrugged. "That period was a state of reverie I sometimes visit in my thoughts, but only occasionally. Back then we walked near the edge most of the time. I guess, at the time, all roads led to Fostertown. We viewed the community as the land of milk and honey, and many of the students that lived there were wedded in the church of drugs, and unfortunately they never sought a divorce.

"It seemed there was a loud outcry from down there but no one was listening. The student's tolerance for degradation was astonishing. We thrived on moonlight and bonfires and all the drugs and booze imaginable. Some of us were lucky and got out in one piece, but unfortunately, not Maggie.

"As I look back, we all acted like we were possessed by the devil. Greed is an important commodity to have when you're shiftless and out for number one. I looked in the mirror and didn't like the view. Try as I might to get myself under control, it was seemingly impossible because of my environment. I could not have moved away from that setting; I was morally too weak.

"My senior year at Fostertown felt like I'd fallen into an abyss as deep as the ocean. Maybe that last statement is a little dramatic, but as I look back, it felt that way at the time."

O'Brennan felt the need to interrupt but refrained.

"I'll tell you what it was like. Have you ever walked around with a stone in your shoe and you knew you had to get rid of it, but you were in such a hurry you didn't want to take the time to stop and take your shoe off? Once you get in such a rut, you figure there's always a solution around the corner." Truculence crashed through his voice as he sat in a stoic position with his head bent as in prayer.

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. We've all had our windmills to fight, and it would appear you have battled yours very successfully," O'Brennan suggested.

"I can see it in your eyes. As you listen to me, you're asking yourself why would a professional like me be so open about himself with a total stranger? We all have our faults and I find it repugnant to talk about others', especially Maggie's." Portland looked very grave as he stood and walked to the open window. Turning to look at O'Brennan, he said, "Maggie wasn't what she appeared to be."

"That being the case, will you tell about her other side?"

The gentle ringing phone interrupted the moment. After several minutes of discussion, Portland returned his attention to O'Brennan

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I'm needed at the hospital. Feel free to return at any time and we can carry on our discussion."

After shaking hands with O'Brennan, Portland looked him in the eye and said, "Rest assured, I'll do everything I can to help you."

"Can I help you, sir?" The desk clerk asked.

"Yes, I need directions to the Pitt campus. I'm looking for the Cathedral of Learning."

"Is your car in our garage?"

"It is."

"Drive out of the garage entrance and turn left." The desk clerk pointed across the street, "Turn left on the Boulevard of the Allies and follow that until you see Forbes Avenue. Bear left and go up about eight to ten blocks and you're on the campus. You'll see the Tower on your way up Forbes Avenue, can't miss it."

Searching for answers, O'Brennan hustled into the lobby of the massive skyscraper, checked the building directory, and walked to the bank of four elevators servicing the upper floors. He stepped out on the sixteenth floor and momentarily checked his bearings.

A passing student stopped. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm looking for Professor Getty's office."

"Sure, mister. You're looking for 'The Loony Bird'. Go down that hallway," the student pointed to the hallway over Jack's shoulder, "it's down at the end on the right."

"You called him 'The Loony Bird', any reason for that?"

The student's laugh floated in the air. "Obviously you haven't met him yet." He turned and walked away.

I wonder what he meant by that, O'Brennan questioned as he opened the office door. The moment felt awkward as he crossed the threshold. The room was

reminiscent of Tommy Emory's office on the Bridgeton campus.

Lodged behind a paper-strewn desk sat a man on the higher side of fifty reading exam booklets. His hair was styled in a perfect crew cut with horned-rimmed glasses perched on his forehead. His appearance reminded O'Brennan of what a newspaper editor should look like in the movies.

"Dr. Getty, Dr. Paul Getty?"

"You've got it right. Come in and sit down. And who might you be?" Getty said with a shrill rumbling voice.

"My name is Jack O'Brennan."

The professor stood and enthusiastically reached over his desk to shake O'Brennan's hand. Getty, he noticed, was a shade less than six foot and well groomed. He sat down and intently studied O'Brennan like he'd tried for years to terrorize hundreds of incoming freshmen that walked through his door. O'Brennan could not hide his reaction to Getty's strange behavior and laughed. His mind kept repeating what the student said in the hall, 'The Loony Bird'.

After some small talk about the weather, Getty closed his eyes and diligently scratched his arm, all without an introduction. "So you're The Man from Glad."

This man is used up and an embarrassment to himself. Jack made a mental note to contact Al Portland about Getty as he moved to counter the professor's initial thrust. "How did you guess? I was sent here to package you up in Cling Wrap."

"Yes, I like that. Who are you, masked man?"

"Like I said earlier, I'm Jack O'Brennan, a private detective from Bridgeton, Virginia."

"Ah, an infidel from the South, a non-believer." Getty talked like he was in a senseless dream.

"I wouldn't say that." O'Brennan felt an uneasiness sweep over him.

"Of course you wouldn't. Interesting you should pay me a visit. I did my undergraduate studies at Bridgeton. What a place! Tell me, Mr. O'Brennan, what brings you here today?" He looked like a short Abe Lincoln with half-beard and pink rosy cheeks.

"I came up to Pittsburgh to talk to you about your Bridgeton days."

Getty rubbed his mouth as if thinking of an appropriate answer. "Let's give it a go and return to our regularly scheduled programming?"

That's the most inane statement I've heard recently, Jack thought as he looked out the window at the distant Ohio River sparkling under the bright morning sun.

"You have a great view of the river from your office."

"Let me think it over."

"Say again," Jack said. The stupid remark left him nonplussed with the only answer he could muster.

"How does that grab you?"

"Dr. Getty, have you ever heard of *Black Sunset*?" For the first time since Jack entered the office, Getty's eyes displayed a keen alertness. His was a questioning scholarly look, almost hungry in nature.

"*Black Sunset*," he slowly shook his head, "no, never have. I have absolutely no idea who or what it may be."

Getty left his desk and walked to a wall of books. Pulling his glasses down, he appeared to be looking for one book of knowledge that would solve this mystery. Finding it, he turned to the index and shook his head. "I was afraid of that." Getty said calmly as he

returned to his seat, and then opened his hands, palms up, toward O'Brennan.

"I'm sorry I can't help you, but there's nothing in my PAC book."

"Your PAC book?"

"Yes, it's a book on Political Action Committees.

"Are you saying this *Black Sunset* whatever, is a PAC?"

"I'm not saying anything of the sort. To me, it has a ring of one, that's all I'm saying."

"But there's a sinister sound to it, *The Black Sunset!*" O'Brennan shook his head.

"I agree. Most PAC's work in concert within the framework of the legislature they're trying to influence. In the broadest sense of the word, the organizations are nothing more than pressure groups. They have the usual motives and are structured to meet their own specific needs. Obviously, their ultimate goal is to direct legislation that will favor their cause. They are well padded financially and spread money around like everyday was Christmas. But there is a darker side to some pressure groups that are not common knowledge."

"Can we talk about this other side?"

"Interesting, I'm flattered you'd ask."

Strange, O'Brennan thought; I walk into this man's office and he doesn't even bother to ask why I'm there, and carrying on like he's known me for years. If I hadn't introduced myself, I doubt whether he'd even ask.

"Now there are others who chose to work behind the scenes. They never identify themselves, and this anonymity provides a freedom they otherwise wouldn't enjoy. They honor no one and dispense duplicity all over the place. They are well-ordered marauders of the night and take no prisoners."

"As an example; if someone creates a problem in achieving their goal, and if it becomes necessary to take a life here or there, so be it. They are an unheard cry in the wind because they shed no tears. You don't need to be a brain to figure out that everyone involved will be sharp."

"This has the distinct smack of Machiavellianism," Jack said.

"Yes, I agree, Mr. ...what did you say your name was?"

"O'Brennan, Jack O'Brennan."

"Yes, the private eye. Their formula for success is centered on clandestine eliminations of those who unwittingly cross their path to success. But there are political cells out there who aren't interested in lobbying and that sort of stuff."

What kind of professional thinker uses such language as "that sort of stuff"? O'Brennan silently laughed at his thought.

"The groups I refer to as being on the darker side are what I consider to be old money. They are niggardly on how they guard their privacy and portray themselves as rugged individuals. Their interests tend to lie in two categories, economic and social, but of course there are others. They consider themselves watchdogs of social change and detest handouts of any description. They watch the nation's economic progress like hawks, and are very much in favor of keeping the status quo. They feel they know better than the masses what is morally right and wrong. Power corrupts, always did, always will. They do not trust a republican form of government and want a return to the old ways."

This Getty is lecturing me like I was a freshman, Jack thought. Maybe a push down memory lane will activate his reality button. He scanned Getty's once handsome face that now looked tired and worn. I'll have to handle this guy with kid gloves, or he'll fly off to the moon.

"I'm sure you heard that the Great Dune at Sands Beach was moved by Hurricane Edna."

"Yes, Edna moved it into the water. We also have newspapers up here. As a matter of fact, it mentioned a skeleton was uncovered."

Getty mentally studied the reason for O'Brennan's appearance, and then it hit him. He pushed back from his desk and dropped his head to his chest.

"Yes, you've guessed it. The skeleton proved to be that of Maggie Walther." Jack was not proud of his pronouncement, and felt uneasy with it. But what's new? During his career at Bridgeton, he had delivered many messages of death to relatives and friends, and it never got easier. Whether the announcement was about a recent death or one thirty years old, the hurt was always there.

During the next ten minutes, Getty's head remained on his chest. At last he looked up at O'Brennan and a different man appeared. There was no longer the loony facade, but rather a serious middle-aged man sitting in obvious distress.

He finally broke out of his emotional retreat. "How can I help?"

"I have every reason to believe that someone who lived at the hotel was accountable for her death."

"Are you suggesting I was responsible?" Getty nervously asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. I've started talking to her close friends, and from there I'll expand the investigation. Do you still want to help?"

"Yes, yes, you can count on me." Getty displayed a subtle dignity that appealed to O'Brennan.

"I need to get an inside look at the goings-on at Fostertown. I'd also like to know about your relations with Maggie."

Getty thought briefly, and then replied, "Our perverted lifestyle down there was a thing to behold."

"What are you driving at?" O'Brennan asked.

"We revered the poison that drove us to lower depths. Obviously I'm referring to the drugs we took. The students at Fostertown were like bombs waiting to go off. We had what could be called inconsistent dispositions and were free-wheelers. By-in-large, many of us were destined for trouble, but it never seemed to come."

His thoughts seemed to drift, but he soon returned with a big smile, his first of the morning. "Damned, but I have some pleasant memories of those days. Did you ever raise hell when you were a young man, Mr. O'Brennan?"

Jack laughed. "Everyone thought I did."

"We were awfully young to be so cynical, but I guess that's part of growing up. I suppose our ears led us in that direction."

"I don't catch your drift, 'our ears led us in that direction'?"

Getty didn't bother to answer, but continued his personal recollections.

"We listened to what we wanted to hear; sucked up all that bullshit flying around about not trusting anyone over thirty and believed it. We sealed our fate when we starting hitting those damn drugs. What we did was a shame, and I never understood until I got older what harm we did to ourselves as well as others. What the hell, that's what everybody says after the fact.

"Everything was open-ended where we were concerned." Getty shook his head. "There was such enormous potential out at Fostertown, and so much of it was thrown in the toilet."

Silence followed the protracted speech, although somewhat disjointed, it made its point with accuracy.

O'Brennan felt the best strategy for this dialogue was to let Getty talk himself out. Early in his career, O'Brennan had learned that by remaining silent, others tended to talk to fill the silence.

"By the way, the dune is where we used to hang out." Getty smiled and pushed his hands, palms up, as a signal to his visitor that he had finished.

"Could you tell me about it?" O'Brennan asked.

"We partied there, that's all."

"Could you tell me about Maggie and the last night you saw her?"

"Well, Maggie was pretty as a picture, but I'm certain you've heard that before. She was a beautiful person and there was a quality about her I'd describe as high profile. Maggie had a style of her own, and once you experienced her subtle touch, you never forgot it." His once expressionless eyes now possessed a new-found fire as his mind drifted back in time.

That's a nice way of describing her, O'Brennan thought and got the feeling they were heartfelt.

"I can't recall who is responsible for the quote, but it fits the moment. 'A pessimist might call it hate, but I, the eternal optimist, would call it love'. I'm not now, but at that time, I was that eternal optimist." Getty raised his hands in frustration. "I know I portrayed the Fostertown gang as uncivil and callous, but we all weren't like that."

"When I wasn't around her, there was an empty feeling about me, and when I was near her, she drove me crazy. Make sense? I suppose not, but it did to me. I had to come to terms with the reality of our relationship, but didn't have it in my heart to say it wasn't so."

Jack responded with a questioning look.

"Yes, I was, Mr. O'Brennan. You were wondering if I was in love with her."

O'Brennan shrugged and turned Getty's thinly veiled question aside. "Could we talk about the last day you saw Maggie?"

Silence again claimed the office as the professor prepared to lead him through his last night with Maggie.

"That was the weekend of the big music event in Harrisonburg, the *Eclipse Festival*. I'd dare say that Cash Daft, Flip Alden, Maggie, and I were the only ones around Fostertown. The three of us had stayed to help Flip wrap-up a term paper he needed to finish for graduation. I can't believe I was such a fool to have stayed to help."

"I take it you didn't like Flip."

"That was an odd deal. We used to be the best of friends, but there was an incident at the dune that queered our friendship. It was only a speck on the mirror of life, but one I shall live with for the very rest of my shattered time."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was late one night down at the dune, and we had been drinking. Apparently I appeared to be sleeping because Maggie and Flip slipped away from the fire and were gone for what I thought to be a half an hour. When they returned, his ego all puffed up, Flip gave me a thumbs up sign and laughed. For a couple of weeks, Flip had been all over her, and for the first time I assumed he'd been successful. Afterward, he continually reminded me of how he was banging her, and that made me sick."

O'Brennan could feel the hostility Getty had for Alden beginning to surface.

"I thought it shouldn't be that way, that I should be the one to be with her. How many choices did I have? I could have walked away from my friends and Maggie, but I just couldn't do such a thing. Flip was a complete master of the situation and that nearly

destroyed me. That bastard was getting his moments of pleasure and didn't give a damn about Maggie."

Getty looked O'Brennan in the eye. "Do you know, I could have accepted his conduct if he loved her. My life has become one big lie since that night." Getty's bitter words poured out.

O'Brennan didn't understand what the big lie might be, but chose not to question it.

"Could we get back to the last night at the beach?"

"That was on a Sunday and we'd finished Flip's rough draft around noon. The four of us went out to the dune and partied until early evening. Sometime in the evening Maggie passed out and that's about all I remember, because I must have gone out shortly there after. My memory is pretty well clouded after that. When I woke up in the morning I was alone at the dune."

"Anything to add? I've heard pretty much the same story before, and this doesn't help much. You're sure you haven't left out something? It may not seem important, but one never knows."

Getty seemed to turn back the years as he stared at the wall. "There is one thing I vaguely recall. I'm not certain of this, but I seem to remember Flip walking around. That's all it is, a faint recollection, almost dream-like in composition. It seems the fire was still burning and Maggie was on the blanket sleeping, but I don't know. Such a heinous crime! There's only one person who could have sent Maggie on her way," he nodded his head and very slowly said, "Flip Alden." O'Brennan detected a troubled note in Getty's voice as he slowly shook his head.

The thought hit Jack as he watched this gentle man slowly come unglued. Getty has suffered guilt for years because he blamed himself for her disappearance. Now that I have established her death, I wonder how he'll react to my message?

"Professor Getty, you certainly can't blame yourself for her misfortune."

"Of course you're right, but I do. A wave of the wand won't make me forget her memory, but the finality of her death is here to stay." He placed his hand on his chest.

"All right, you can't walk away from the memory, but what's the point in destroying yourself over something that happened thirty years ago? As you said, Paul Getty had no control of the outcome."

"It won't help, Mr. O'Brennan."

"Yes, you're right." He knew well enough to leave him alone.

Jack thanked Getty for his time and left the Cathedral of Learning with an empty feeling.

Reverend Portland's voice filled the receiver after the fifth ring.

"Asbury United Methodist Church, Reverend Portland speaking."

"Al, this is Jack O'Brennan, and I'm calling from Pittsburgh."

"Pittsburgh!"

"I just finished meeting with Paul Getty, and you're the only one I can talk to."
"

"Paul Getty. Good grief, what's he doing?"

"He's a history professor here at Pitt. I'm rather shaken by our discussion and can't put a face on it."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Well, he's not your average next door professor. He's in and out like the sun, and I personally think he's poignantly crazy or certainly deeply troubled."

Portland paused to take a deep breath. "Jack, that's a rather harsh indictment of a man you barely met."

"I agree, but he certainly is troubled."

"Can you explain?"

Jack O'Brennan led Portland through the events at the high-rise tower of education. He even mentioned the student calling Getty "The Loony Bird".

"Anything else to add?"

"Yes. He talked about how his life had washed away and something about the sands of time moving faster than ever. Getty said he felt overwhelmed by lingering doubts."

"I don't understand that last part."

"Neither did I. He explained how he felt responsible for her disappearance. The poor guy talked about the strange forces out there he didn't understand, and to fend them off, he built a barrier around himself at the university. When I asked him what was really bothering him, he replied, 'I doubt if I can make it'." O'Brennan's sentence caught in his throat.

A silence momentarily settled over them.

"Al, I learned from a long history in law enforcement how to recognize people under emotional stress. I pride myself as being a consummate professional, and never venture into areas of human behavior I'm not trained to handle. This is why I called you.

"I could have blown him off by forgetting his problems, but there's something else. I really like the guy, and want to help him."

Sensing O'Brennan's concern, Portland replied, "You did right by calling me. I always liked Paul, and if I can, I'll be there for him."

"There's something I didn't mention. When we were talking, he mentioned he was stressed-out. I asked him what stressed-out sounded like, and he replied, 'Like I was when you came in the office'. One last thing, when I asked him about seeking professional help, he laughed and said, 'It's little late for that.'"

"I agree, he sounds like he's having a severe bout of depression. Thanks for calling and I'll get right on it. I need to know where to get in contact with him."

Jack gave him the pertinent information and asked one question, "Can you keep in touch with me about Getty?"

"Indeed I can. With the grace of God, maybe we can all help the poor lost soul."

Sin pays beautifully, O'Brennan thought as he closed the door of Alden's place of business. His corner office on the fourteenth floor of the Regency Arms was bathed in rust tones. Ceiling to floor windows provided a bird's-eye view of much of southeastern Bridgeton and the Rappohanock River. The massive table was appropriate for Bridgeton's answer to the TV character, Ben Matlock.

The most successful defense attorney in town, Phillip Alden, formerly known as Flip, was dressed in a three-piece blue suit. There was a dramatic flair about him, but O'Brennan couldn't quite place it. Though neatly dressed in casual attire, he felt like a slob compared to Alden.

Seated behind the Matlock table, Alden's eyes indicated a handshake wasn't needed. Medium build with a florid face, Alden gestured for O'Brennan to approach the desk. I wonder if he's going to slap me on the hands with a ruler? O'Brennan wondered.

Alden insensitively stared at O'Brennan. "What is it you want?" He said through a gin-scorched voice that reeked of confidence. His dark eyes locked on the stranger as he waved O'Brennan to a seat.

I'll bet this control freak doesn't have a smile in him, Jack thought as he settled into a rust colored chair. "Like I told your secretary yesterday, this isn't a social call."

"Don't patronize me, old-timer. My time is valuable and you have ten minutes, starting now." He looked at the simple upright grandfather clock in the far corner.

"You know about the Great Dune on Sands Beach and the skeleton found after Hurricane Edna departed?"

"Only what I read in the papers." His condescending smile displayed straight white teeth, probably at the hands of an expensive orthodontist.

O'Brennan's chair was hardly warm when he left it to stand in front of the glass wall of windows.

Strange, O'Brennan thought, Getty made roughly the same comment yesterday. The dark shadow of distrust that crossed O'Brennan's face went unnoticed by Alden. This guy takes no prisoners. A brooder if anything, his reputation of being a hard-thrower is justified.

"Well, get on with it!" His icy stare followed O'Brennan to the window where he stood looking at the river.

"I'm searching for answers. We have identified the body." O'Brennan said as he turned to look at the successful mouthpiece. Alden played with a yellow pencil, finally starting to doodle on a legal pad. "You don't appear to be surprised by my news."

"That goes without saying." Alden spoke through a cruel appearing mouth.

"The skeleton just so happens to be that of the former Maggie Walther." Alden displayed not the bat of an eyelash, just a business-as-usual front.

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I know it's provincial of me, but so what?"

Alden sat impassive as a granite monument. This is like a bad dream, O'Brennan thought.

"I heard no cry of passion in your voice."

The hotshot lawyer appeared impervious to O'Brennan's comment, all the time displaying a bored "Why are you such a fool?" look. He touched the lapels of his well-tailored suit, a dark shadow settling on his face.

Alden presented Jack with a mean, hard smile. "That's childish of you, Mr. O'Brennan, and I find you

to be literally a mental pygmy for saying it." The man O'Brennan increasingly disliked by the minute appeared delighted with his verbal assault.

Jack O'Brennan was stunned by his comment, and while looking at the Bridgeton downtown traffic silently mouthed the words, "You belong to me."

O'Brennan returned to his chair and gave the attorney his hardest look. "We have to cease this tap-dancing, Mr. Alden. I think someone from Fostertown killed her."

"That's preposterous." Alden's stare was sharp enough to cut Jack's throat.

"If you think that's preposterous, give a listen to this one. I think she was killed by one of the following; Paul Getty, Cash Daft, or a guy named Flip Alden, take that from your friendly neighborhood detective. How preposterous am I getting, Mr. Counselor?"

O'Brennan anticipated presenting Alden with the hint of a smile, but his attempt got away from him and turned into a four-star beauty.

"I would keep your observations to yourself, Mr. O'Brennan, and I would suggest your heavy-handed manner pedestrian."

"And I suggest, sir, what we're talking about is cyclical in nature, wouldn't you say?" O'Brennan said as he entered into a staring contest with Alden.

Alden's gaze flicked past O'Brennan while advising himself that he had grossly underestimated this man. He has a sharp mind and although no genius, he's a far cry from the dullard I suspected him of being. It will be in my best interests to play along with him. I don't like this man, but I can live with that. Tension impedes one's judgement, and I must be keen in dealing with such a person.

Displaying a softer smile, Alden turned to face this new nemesis.

"I have no idea where this investigation is taking you, but first off, you should be made aware that I had nothing to do with that poor girl's death. As I mentioned earlier, I'm running short of time, but I'll try to fill you in on whatever you need to know."

Why the abrupt change in attitude? I'll start him off with a shot in the dark. "Have you ever heard of the *Black Sunset*?"

Alden was too quick to respond. "Never have."

"I'm surprised you'd admit to a shortcoming."

Alden's sinister eyes flashed a loathing directed at O'Brennan.

"Could you briefly tell me about Fostertown?"

Several minutes passed before Alden began to speak.

"Fostertown was a wild place by any standard, and most assuredly couldn't be confused with Palm Beach." His attempt at humor amused him and it showed on his face. "The students were obsessed with the more trivial pursuits in life, and I must admit I should be counted among those numbers. It was not a pretty picture, and many of those students dropped by the wayside. When one went, another arrived to take his place, and it continued to be business as usual. I'm certain you heard about the drugs and drinking, so I won't explore that sordid tangle."

"Could you talk about Maggie?"

"Straight forward answers are difficult to come by, Mr. O'Brennan. Maggie was the busiest person I've ever known. She was enormously intelligent and friendly with everyone. But there was something else; she seldom listened to anyone, and, at times, had trouble keeping herself together."

The thought screamed at O'Brennan; he's lying. There's no need to pursue his appraisal of her if he follows that course.

"Could you tell me about the last day you saw her?"

"It was the weekend of the *Eclipse Festival*, and I was pushing to finish an economics paper I needed to graduate. Maggie, Paul Getty, and Cash Daft stayed to help me. I might add we were about the only ones left in Fostertown. I'd say we finished up around noon on Sunday and headed to Sands Beach to party.

"We sat around drinking until sometime in the early evening. Later on, Maggie and Paul passed out, at which time Cash decided to drive back to the hotel. I was bombed out of my mind, cold, dirty, and wanted to sleep in my own bed." Alden's thoughts seemed to drift back to that ominous night, but soon returned.

"Normally, we'd just stay there if we were in that condition, but for some unknown reason I wanted to get home. Cash and I drove back to the hotel and hit the hay." His eyes appeared to flutter as if he had second thoughts about leaving it at that.

There's something he isn't telling me, O'Brennan thought.

"When you and Cash left the beach, was Getty in any shape to possibly do bodily harm to Maggie?"

"Absolutely not."

"That leaves but two," Jack observed

"I must correct you, but one. When I got back to the hotel, I could hardly stand up. I had no way to get back to the beach, and I couldn't walk it, not all nine miles."

"You could have used Cash's car."

"No, that wasn't possible. You see when I hit the bed, it started flying around in all directions. I sat up so I wouldn't be sick, and it was then I heard Cash's door close."

"What are you inferring?"

"Cash left the hotel and I heard him drive away in his car."

There goes the bloom on the rose, O'Brennan thought. This bastard has thrown me a curve; now where do I go? O'Brennan was angry and upset with himself, upset with this blustery windbag who talked a lot and said nothing. O'Brennan had liked the reverend, and believed him innocent of Maggie's undoing. As for Getty, he didn't have it in him.

I don't like this repugnant bastard, and it would have been all too easy to put Maggie's death at his doorstep. I know he shapes the facts to meet his needs, but this doesn't look good for the reverend.

In his frustration, O'Brennan asked, "Could I ask you a legal question?"

Alden pushed an open hand in O'Brennan's direction as if to say, "why not!"

"When is murder not a murder?"

After a brief moment the reply came. "I would suggest it is determined that a murder has been committed only when the body has been found."

He didn't finish it. Alden should have continued and said only when it has been proven to be a murder. This guy is still screwing me around.

"Are you satisfied?" Alden asked abruptly with a straight-laced smile.

To this point, a very slick individual fully in charge of the situation had outmaneuvered him. Anger and dislike rose in O'Brennan's voice.

"No, not really. I'll be back." O'Brennan felt inadequate dealing with this man, but thought that each dog has his day.

"That's out of the question." Alden displayed a hostile sneer fighting hard to become a smile. Each man eyed the other.

"Mr. Alden, you don't listen very well, do you? I've never given up on anything in my life, and will go to any length to prove I'm right. Count on us doing it again in the very near future." O'Brennan said with finality.

"Do you know what I think?"

O'Brennan couldn't care less, but mustered up a shrug.

"You possess a reckless manner in arriving at conclusions."

Alden stood, indicating the session was at an end. For the first time O'Brennan realized Alden's height to be near six foot.

"Well, I must admit it hasn't been pleasant, Mr. O'Brennan," Alden said with considerable satisfaction.

O'Brennan displayed what Jeanette always called his mean smile and said, "But this isn't a perfect world, is it, Mr. Attorney?"

If Alden agreed, he was reluctant to show it. He merely dismissed his visitor with a nod at the door. The next thing O'Brennan knew, he was standing on the sidewalk.

Jack O'Brennan questioned whether he had tipped his hand, and found he was growing increasingly annoyed for allowing his end of the conversation to get out of hand.

O'Brennan pulled up in front of the church office and noticed a profusion of multi-colored flowers blending with varying shades of green bushes and grass. Everything appeared the same as his earlier visit except he had logged considerable mileage in the last two days. From Bridgeton he had driven to Pittsburgh, returned home to meet with Alden, and then drove the four hours to Charlottesville.

By innuendo Alden had neatly packaged a scheme that pointed a finger at Portland. Comfortably seated in the Portland's office, O'Brennan found it difficult

to ask the one question that needed answering. He would bide his time and inquire about Getty.

"Is there anything to report about Paul Getty?" He hadn't phrased the question properly, but so what. This investigation was taking some odd twists, so why shouldn't he allow himself the luxury of a little game playing.

Portland folded his fingers together in back of his head and immediately recognized the undercurrent of scorn in O'Brennan's voice. His sudden visit had nothing to do with Getty, so obviously it was a follow-up to Maggie Walther.

"I talked at length to Paul immediately after your visit yesterday and again this morning. You were right in alerting me to his problem, and may well have saved his life. Your presumption about Paul having deep emotional problems was correct, and I might add, very timely."

A soft breeze drifted through the window, its crisp air carrying a scent of dogwood blossoms with it.

"I'm a trained counselor but don't have the expertise required in Paul's case. He needs psychiatric help and that I can't provide. In our talk I persuaded him to seek help, and that's a start."

"Could you explain?"

"Jack, when we attended Bridgeton, Paul dropped signs I should have heeded and didn't. I called the Pittsburgh Methodist District office and talked to the superintendent about Paul's problem or problems, if you will. Arrangements have been made to meet his immediate needs, but you didn't drive down here to talk about Paul, did you?" Portland gave Jack a blank experienced glance.

O'Brennan started his discourse cautiously. "Not four hours ago, I talked to Flip Alden and gleaned some discomfiting information. Are you aware he's the top defense lawyer in Eastern Virginia?"

Portland nodded yes with a blank stare.

"Your name came up in the conversation." O'Brennan permitted his voice to hesitate. "He talked about the last night Maggie was seen alive and substantiated much of what you mentioned with one exception. Interestingly enough, your story is somewhat different than the one I heard from Alden."

A long moment passed before Portland dropped his eyes.

"Are you questioning my veracity?"

"Yes, something like that. Alden said after the two of you returned to the hotel he tried to lie down but felt sick. He sat on the edge of the bed, and heard you leave your room. Shortly there after, he heard your car start up in the hotel parking lot. I believe an explanation is in order."

"Jack, I'm pretty much an old-time preacher." Portland again returned to a blank stare, but his thoughts soon appeared to snap back from the past. With an expression displaying deep consternation, Portland tightly closed his lips and gave his head a slight shake and sighed.

"Straight forward answers are sometimes difficult to come by at times. I thought better of it, but didn't have the heart or guts to tell you on your last visit. I know it's the thing to do and will reveal the truth, all of it. Flip's right of course. I didn't stay at the hotel, but I didn't return to the beach, either."

O'Brennan shook his head without conviction. What's coming next should be something, he thought as he stood. Portland looked up at the imposing figure, all of six-three with his arms crossed.

He opened his hands to O'Brennan in defeat with hardly a whisper crossing his lips. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's something that has to be checked out."

Portland thought for a moment before nodding his understanding.

"I had a date in Bridgeton."

"Why didn't you mention that earlier?"

"I'm ashamed to say I was seeing a married woman. I was like a derelict wanting more wine and couldn't get enough of her. She was young like me, and wasn't getting on with her husband. He worked the graveyard shift, and that's when we'd meet. I..." His voice stopped while bringing his hands to his head. "The Devil is always working, and I was guilty like Cain."

"Can you give me her name?"

"No. Enough is enough and what is there to be gained?"

"For one, I must check on your story."

"As God is my witness, I did not kill Maggie Walther because I was in Bridgeton committing adultery."

O'Brennan liked the unpretentious manner about him even when making an embarrassing confession.

"Al, I believe we're all entitled to burn some bridges along the way, and please realize that I need her name. I understand there is little comfort in that thought, but by answering it gets you off the hook and narrows my investigation."

Nothing came from Portland's lips for nearly a minute before revealing his secret adulteress.

"There is one last thing I must ask. Have you ever heard of the *Black Sunset*?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, but I don't know what is it?"

O'Brennan extended open hands toward Portland, "I don't know either."

On his return to Bridgeton, O'Brennan sifted through the little information he had on Maggie's former running mates. He believed Reverend Portland. Here was a guy living with a past moral indiscretion that ran counter to what he now stood for. I guess if I were in his predicament, I also would have conveniently forgotten the Sunday night trip into Bridgeton.

As for Getty, he had a nimble but confused mind. There is no way he could have been responsible. He was deeply in love with Maggie, and when I asked him about the *Black Sunset*, he was mystified in a scholarly way. It was one of his more lucid moments when he went to his bookshelves and attempted to research the name. No, his intellectual interest had been piqued too intensely to be a put-on.

Alden has led a charmed life and I'm certain he's the one who killed her. When I asked about the *Black Sunset* he was too quick in denying he knew nothing about it. There had to be give and take in my business, and hopefully, there will be more give than take. And another thing that makes it easy to point a finger at him, I don't like him.

Short and stocky with dark hair worn in a brush-cut, Tony Gerald was an old-fashioned gangster without a gun who had more good than bad in him. With an ever-present cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, he resembled the stereotype of a Hollywood gangster. There was a gentle presence about him, and with his soft voice Gerald sounded much like a parish priest saying the *Hail Mary*.

A pure gambler with a tight-fisted control over all gaming activities in the greater Bridgeton area, Gerald had followed in the family tradition of the eldest son assuming control after his dad retired.

He was tougher than an old shoe, and worked up through the ranks from a lowly numbers runner to the head of a one hundred million-dollar operation. This was no great feat, it was expected of him and he acted accordingly.

There are rules to play by and rules that could be flaunted, yet Tony refrained from what he considered the lowly aspects of crime: prostitution, extortion, protection, and drugs. Four trusted lieutenants surrounding him in support served more as managers rather than expeditors of his vast gambling network.

He had what some called a working agreement with the city police. Early in his career as boss man, an ambitious district attorney tried to put him behind bars with no success. From that moment on, he appeared to lead a charmed life. To the police, Tony Gerald, was a known entity, and with a blind eye they allowed him to pursue his chosen vocation.

Gerald was more of an itch than a throb and was treated as such. Because he was an honest operator, this in itself made it easier for the police to overlook. When questionable characters attempted to horn in on his enterprises, the long hand of the law made it so uncomfortable they didn't stay around. It

was like he had a secured contract with the city for gambling services.

Jack O'Brennan first met Gerald when the gangster's eldest son, Jason, got in a jam his junior year in high school. At the time, a rash of spray-painted graffiti was finding its way around the city's municipal buildings causing O'Brennan to be assigned the case. He eventually tracked down the gang of free-spirited amateur artists, of which Jason was one. During the follow-up, he was impressed by what a nice kid the Gerald boy was, and equally impressed by the father's concern over the matter.

Although O'Brennan had known of Gerald's reputation, they had never crossed paths prior to Jason's maiden voyage into the world of petty crime. After ten minutes of discussion, Jack realized how upset the father was with his son. Like so many parents, Tony Gerald was scared and troubled by the thought of the direction his son was taking.

O'Brennan sensed from their initial meeting what he was made of. Here was the gambling czar of Bridgeton, a city of three-quarters of a million people desperately worried about his young son. Jack sympathized with Gerald's dilemma and liked him for the position he took. With his drag, the distressed father could have called on his connections downtown to ease Jason's pain, but he told O'Brennan he wanted none of that.

Based on O'Brennan's recommendations and a favorable report from juvenile, the court slapped the young group of marauders' wrists with community service time, six months probation, and a two-thousand dollar fine for damages.

Their relationship that started with the investigation developed into a lasting friendship. The common denominator, a leveler of sorts that cemented the friendship was their interest in golf. Gerald loved all aspects of the game, and with his powerful frame attacked the sport with a wild abandon similar to how a blacksmith would inspect the wares in an antique shop.

When headquarters first found out about their social activities, O'Brennan was called on the carpet for consorting with a known criminal. Jack took the admonishment in stride, but continued to play with Tony. The difference being, they played at courses located away from the Bridgeton area.

One day while walking off the eighteenth hole at the Capital Country Club in Richmond, Tony again reminded O'Brennan that he had never called in a favor for helping his son. At the time, Jack insisted their relationship remained as was, and no favors were to be asked or given by either party.

When O'Brennan's wife Mary died eight years ago, he quit playing golf and the relationship between the two friends became more like two trains passing in the dark.

"Hello." Tony Gerald's soft voice drifted through the receiver.

"Tony, Jack O'Brennan."

"O'Brennan, I haven't seen you in a dog's age."

"I needed to talk to a young guy and I thought of you."

"We're too old to even be young at heart."

"That's a bit overstated, don't you think?"

"We're hiding in the gulf of middle age, and you know it."

"Rather profound, where did you hear that?" O'Brennan asked laughingly.

"On television, where else?" I've heard a lot of things about you lately."

"Good or bad?"

"Good, my friend, good. Seems you got married this summer and this pleases me. Do you like her?"

"Of course I like her. I wouldn't have married her if I didn't. What kind of question is that?"

"Just curious that's all. You're playing golf again and this also pleases me. I read about the Gill case awhile back and your most recent venture, the Smithbury Skeleton case. I'm pleased with your success."

"Seems you're very pleased, Tony."

"Where you're concerned, yes, I am. What's this call all about, business or pleasure?"

Tony smiled to himself, knowing full well that it wouldn't be business.

"No, this is business. I need a favor."

"Over the years I've begged to do something for you, but to no avail, now you want one. Any way I can help, you've got it. What can I do for you?"

"I don 't want to talk over the phone. Let's talk privately."

"Come out to the house."

"Okay, I'll be out in a couple of minutes."

Gerald lived all his married life in a middle-class neighborhood near the university and never sought anything different. He was an unpretentious man living in an unpretentious house, and couldn't care less what others thought. Pulling the Blazer into Gerald's driveway, Jack marveled at the modesty of the house. It was a story and a half structure with a massive picture window and two large fireplaces, the front one brick, the side one fieldstone. Black wooden shutters adorned the white-shingled house.

The morning sun felt like a blowtorch as Jack unfolded from the Blazer. Gerald displayed his usual tough look as he shook hands and smiled. "You look fit, Jack. When are we going to play some golf?"

"Any time you wish, Mr. Gerald. You should be forewarned that my game is at its peak, and I'm prepared to tear the flesh off that magnificent body of yours."

"That will be the day." Tony laughed, "Damned, it's good to see you." He pointed to a nearby chair. "Take a load off and we'll sit a spell and talk." Over coffee, the two friends reminisced about earlier days.

Finally, Tony's curiosity won out. "Jack, tell me about this business you mentioned."

"Before we get to the serious stuff, I have to ask about Jason. How's he doing?"

"My Rembrandt started in Washington and then got the greatest break he could imagine. He was offered the head job of Internal Medicine at Bridgeton General and jumped at it. Jack, I can't believe he's done so well, and he's only thirty-five."

"Well, I can. Jason's a pretty bright young man; must take after his mother."

A knowing look settled on Tony's face. "Haven't changed much, have you?" he said, delight showing on his face. "Getting back to Jason, I'm sure proud of him. I don't know whether he'd have made it without your help."

"You know better than that. If he wasn't such a good kid to begin with, and didn't come from a quality family, then it might have been tough." O'Brennan thought the time was right to shift gears, so he started. "I don't know how to begin but here goes. This has to be off the record." Gerald tilted his head to listen. "First, I have to digress for a moment. I'm certain you've read about Hurricane Edna and the dune at Sands Beach," Tony merely nodded. "There was a little problem out at the beach."

"There's no such thing as a little anything."

"Be that as it may. I'm certain you read about the skeleton found out there?"

Gerald again nodded. "Yes, and I'm equally certain you're going to tell me."

O'Brennan didn't react to Gerald's gentle unbraiding. "I'll start at the beginning. The remains turned out to be that of an FBI agent named Maggie Walther. Director Bowers asked me to look into it in an unofficial capacity."

Mention of the FBI nudged his interest and Tony excitedly reached for a fresh cigar in his shirt pocket. "You're telling me the body was an agent!"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Why doesn't the bureau investigate it on their own? It doesn't make sense to have you do it."

"I agree. But there's another side to the story I haven't told you." O'Brennan replayed his meeting with Director Bowers and how he'd been commissioned to investigate Walther's death. "I think Bowers doesn't want to officially get dragged into an investigation where his relationship with this woman might surface."

"What type of relationship?" Gerald asked.

"They had an affair when they were going through training at Quantico."

"So?"

"Bowers was married at the time."

"Ah, there's the rub."

"Yes, that's the rub, and he didn't tell me about his little escapade when we met."

"How did you find out about it?"

"That's the other side of the coin." O'Brennan explained Bud Henry's role in the meeting and what he was commissioned to do. "As Henry started to follow-up on his assignment, he heard first from one agent then another about Bower's extramarital activity. He told me and here I am."

"Is that it?"

"Yes, Tony, that's everything. Let me apprise you of what I've found since my meeting with Bowers." Again, Jack painstakingly followed the investigation through yesterday's meeting with the Reverend Portland.

Gerald refilled their mugs with coffee and asked with a blank look, "Does this have something to do with who killed her?"

"It does. I have a short list of three main suspects, Paul Getty, Reverend Al Portland and Phillip Alden."

"Is this guy, Alden, the hot-shot lawyer uptown?"

"One and the same."

"Are they queer?" Tony asked, having never accepted the politically correct expression, gay.

"How would I know?" O'Brennan wasn't sure what he was driving at, but when something crossed Tony's mind, he didn't keep it a secret.

"Now the sixty-four dollar question, what can I do to help," Tony asked.

"The thing is, our arrangement has to be on a need-to-know basis. I currently have a quilt-like pattern of nothing meaningful. Deep down, I have a feeling one of the three had an unhealthy avocation called murder.

"I can give you a general background on them, but that's about all. It appears all three took similar roads after graduation. Let me start with their background. After the three graduated from Bridgeton in May of 1968, they went into the service. Both Alden and Portland saw combat in Viet Nam. Alden caught a break and was attached to a special service unit; Daft was in an infantry company and Getty on the other hand served in Germany.

"All three continued their education after they left the service. Getty got a PhD and is a history professor at The University of Pittsburgh. Flip Alden who now goes under his given name Phillip, went to law school and is now a hotshot lawyer in town. After graduating, the reverend changed his name from Cash Daft to Alford Portland. Can't say as I blame him much. He went to divinity school and currently is serving as a pastor in Charlottesville. I want to know as much as possible about them."

"Come on, Jack, I'm a crook and you want me to check out a schoolmarm, a minister and a shyster lawyer?"

"Something like that. And you know as well as I that the traditional use of the word schoolmarm infers a woman teacher. I have to know whether any of them had a criminal past, or for that matter, are still on the shady side. You're the only person I know who can help me. I want to investigate them in a backdoor fashion. Can you check through your underworld sources on these birds?" O'Brennan smiled. "Tony, let your heart be your guide."

"You never let up, do you?"

"Never. And if I can find a loose end, I'm on it."

"Jack, I wouldn't know where to begin," Gerald said matter-of-factly.

"You know exactly where to begin. The people you talk to have their eyes and ears on everyone's business and secrets, and you know it."

Tony sighed but didn't answer. He just sat soaking up O'Brennan's pitch until he finally started to speak. "Yes, I guess I do. Do you want to hear what I think?"

O'Brennan looked hopeful but didn't speak.

"My friends and I swim in the same water, and this feels like it runs against the current," Tony said thoughtfully.

"I appreciate how you feel."

"It sounds like someone had his fingers in the cookie jar." The gambling czar of the eastern peninsula smiled and then continued. "It will take some time, but yes, I'll check these cats out; consider it done. Where do they live?"

"I have broken down all the information I could round up. Included are their home and business addresses and other incidental information that might help. May I ask how you'll go about this little search?"

Tony Gerald looked over his half-lens glasses with a shifty look, but didn't reply.

O'Brennan laughed, "I thought you'd say that."

O'Brennan received the call to meet at Tony Gerald's house five days after their first meeting.

Gerald's eyes flashed a certain something O'Brennan couldn't decipher as he was directed to a patio chair.

"Jack, I have contacts in Las Vegas that helped me." Gerald sighed. "We are living in a savage cycle of times."

Long moments passed before Tony spoke with a razor-like quality to his words. "What I'm about to say won't leave you with happy thoughts." With little hesitation he continued. "To put the worst possible face on it, Phillip Alden goes around zipping people. Not a very nice man."

I love the way you use metaphor, O'Brennan thought. He could feel his eyebrows shoot up as his breath blew out in a rush. The fact screamed at him that there was much more to the Maggie Walther case than he originally imagined.

Tony spoke forcefully as he pushed ahead, not giving O'Brennan a chance to reply. "Alden is associated with a loose-knit organization of misfits calling themselves *Black Sunset*, a pretty rough lot. I'd call them the dark-hearted buddies of the devil. The name of their game is murder for hire."

"That still doesn't explain Alden's association with them."

"I haven't finished, Jack. Alden's weapon of choice is a stiletto, while his colleagues specialize with other instruments of death. For example, close killing with a pistol, long range shooting with a sniper's rifle, death by accident, and poisoning. By my count including Alden, that's five; but there are other ways of taking a life."

O'Brennan looked at Tony with little emotion.

"You know this better than I, but here goes. There are hard cases around who would literally kill for a glass of beer. Don't forget this isn't true with the *Black Sunset* bunch. I'll walk you through what I know. These killers work for budget basement prices and take a contract for the hell of it. Money can turn most heads, but not so with them. It's the challenge of the hit, don't you see. They won't accept easy assignments. Far from it, the harder the better."

Tony took his time emptying their untouched mugs and refilled them with fresh coffee.

"The old friend I mentioned called them demented killers who leave no trace. He labeled them as loose knit fellowship of psychopaths and mentioned Alden's code name was 'Pick'. That's all I came up with."

A relentless morning sun beat on them while O'Brennan silently assimilated the news about Alden's avocation as a killer for hire. Finally, O'Brennan broke the silence. "I might have suspected something like this. I knew there was a catch, but at least the picture is clear. He's just what I thought. The man is totally amoral."

Tony nodded in agreement and picked up his end of the conversation. "There is one thing I forgot to mention. All contracts and arrangements are made through a broker. Let's say you want to have someone rubbed out, feelers have to be put out to contact this broker."

"I want to take another look at this, but from a different angle. Tony, how would you go about getting Alden to reveal his hand?"

Tony didn't answer for several minutes. "You know what a no good bastard he is, and probably the most dangerous adversary you've ever come up against. To understand his actions, you must first get in his head and think like he does. Jack, give me your impression of him."

O'Brennan replayed his meeting with Alden and added his own observations. "I've heard the rumor he calls the shots in everything in which he's involved. Alden displayed a patronizing attitude during our brief meeting, and a cold unaffected veneer appeared when I identified the Sands Beach skeleton as that of Maggie Walther."

"Now that you've met him, is he full of the swagger that his reputation suggests?" Tony asked.

"That and more. I sensed he walks under a dark cloud of his making, and I instinctively disliked him."

Tony nodded his understanding. "One of my associates in town told me Alden was born with a smooth tongue and has a king-sized ego. He also said he was a first-string womanizer and would have sex with a snake if someone held its head."

Tony's gossip caused Jack to laugh.

"Laugh if you like, but I don't like the sound of this guy. He's too sleazy for me."

"What you're saying seems about right, but Tony, this glimpse of Alden flies in the face of logic."

Gerald motioned with his hand that an explanation was needed.

"Here's a man who has the best of all that life has to offer: money, prestige amongst his peers, the satisfaction of being the best lawyer in Bridgeton, and a behind-the-scene mover and status in the local Democratic Party. Yet, from what you've told me, he deals in contract killings for the hell of it. How can his Jekyll and Hyde persona be explained?"

"The son of a bitch has a twisted mind, it's that simple."

"Well, whatever the answer, I am about to serve notice on Mr. Phillip Alden that he has a tiger on his tail. He made a permanent enemy when he treated me like a numbskull, and his time is about to come."

"It might have started already. Jack, hear me out. What happened to the Walther woman occurred over thirty years ago, and now it's nothing more than history. You can point a finger at him and put him in the cross hairs, but how do you propose to flush him out?"

The meeting with Alden kept distracting O'Brennan's thinking as he looked at Tony.

"You haven't explained how you'll approach this mess."

"I know his little secret about Walther can be unraveled and I'm just the guy to do it."

"Where is this leading you to, and how are you going to accomplish such an unraveling?"

"I'll do it the old-fashioned way, dig and dig until I find his blind spot."

"There's nothing to tie him to her death," Tony observed.

"I'm tired of hearing that! John Lloyd told me the same story," O'Brennan forcefully replied.

"Jack, listen to me. The picture is wrong and you have no legal cannons on your side. You'll go round and round driving yourself crazy chasing this low life."

"Can I help it if I'm stubborn? I'll keep my own counsel on this matter, but granted, I'll need help from some of my friends, and that includes you."

"Jack, hear me out. I've gone as far as possible. Because of what I do, my hands are tied. I can't afford to get involved. Believe me, I'd like to help, but it's just impossible."

"Tony, I understand your position, and appreciate what you've already done."

O'Brennan felt uncomfortable as he eyed his friend. Had he asked too much? O'Brennan wondered as he prepared to leave. Tony's friendship was more important

to him than the chasm that would develop if he continued.

"Back off this. The elements are on his side and remember obsession does not take a vacation. Because of the very fact, you'll be a marked man."

"How do you know Alden hates me?"

Tony Gerald shook his head in frustration. "You talked tough to him on your visit, and practically accused him of killing that broad on the beach. To compound your problems, you made too many inquiries about this bird. Word gets around, you know. I have a gut feeling Alden will be in no mood to cut you a break, and in the bargain, you'll pay with the price of your life."

O'Brennan sat mulling Tony's observation, not responding. He'd heard enough of Tony Gerald's cynicism and stood up to leave.

"Jack, sit down. I'm not done yet!" Tony said sharply. O'Brennan followed his lead and sat down.

"People understand what they want to, but listen to a guy who has been around the horn. Treat Alden like you would an 800-pound gorilla. Understand?"

O'Brennan nodded affirmatively.

"Something is going to happen; count on it. Dig your heels in before it does."

"That I understand."

Tony asked point-blank: "Are you playing the game or is it playing you?"

"I'll be the judge of that," O'Brennan answered dismissively.

"Can you handle him?"

"I'm good at what I do."

"So is he, maybe better. Don't take him lightly and certainly don't give him a chance to attack you. Remember, he uses a knife and works up close, all knifemen do." Tony hoped to put the thought of danger out ever so gently, but strong enough to make O'Brennan have second thoughts.

"Don't fly solo with this guy. The elements are on his side, and you'll find yourself on the end of a short stick." Tony paused to carefully calculate his words. "The only way to get at this Alden is to beat him at his own game."

"And that is?" O'Brennan asked.

"Kill him before he kills you. Follow?"

O'Brennan sat considering Tony's admonition.

Somewhat annoyed, Tony blurted out: "You didn't hear a word I said."

"Oh yes I did. I'm not going to take the law into my own hands and you know it. I'll do what I do best, and down the road my time will come."

Tony sighed but kept his silence.

"When I get things sorted out, I'll make my move. That's the way it has to stand. It's something I have to do alone."

"If you have to, so be it. There's nothing else to say other than don't leave home without your rod."

O'Brennan laughed. "Thanks for listening and your help."

"That's what friends are for."

All roads lead to Sands Beach, O'Brennan observed as he drove away from Tony's home.

Jeanette appeared annoyed as she rose from the dinner table to answer the phone. Moments later, she called, "O'Brennan, it's for you."

"Jack O'Brennan."

"Jack, this is the Reverend Al Portland calling from Pittsburgh. I just got out of a session our church psychiatrist had with Paul Getty, and I have some startling information for you."

"How's he doing?" O'Brennan nervously asked.

"That's still up for debate."

"And that means?"

"Paul was well on his way to self-destruction when you alertly realized his condition. I flew to Pittsburgh yesterday morning, and spent the rest of the day with him. When we first talked, he seemed emotionally up and down, but strangely, he was a model of propriety as the minutes passed. I've got something that may interest you that isn't clear to me. He told me that life is hard and then you die. That snapshot of his thoughts threw me for a loop, and his next words gave me hope. 'We should never look back, but we do.'"

"What was your take on what he said?"

"Jack, I felt excitement blended together with anxiety; but the experience left me unbalanced. As I look back, it was a puzzling scene at best."

"Can you start at the top and describe for me what you discussed?"

"That I can do. I'll detail my experience with Paul as best I can."

"I walked into his university office, not knowing what to expect. We greeted each other like we were

strangers. Well, not necessarily strangers, but you know what I mean. An odd silence followed until I started speaking.

"Jack, what we expect and what we actually get may be totally different; it certainly was with Paul. For a fleeting moment the reclusive personality that I knew in college disappeared to be replaced by a nervous, aggressive voice. Shortly after we started talking his demeanor changed.

We spent some time talking about nothing until our happy Fostertown days entered the conversation. Finally, for no reason I understood, he opened up and started talking about little things concerning Maggie of which I knew nothing. Unexpectedly, I felt the barrier that existed when I first entered his office melt away. It was like his mind had slid back to when he was as bright as a flash of lightening. He spoke of images of Maggie frequently invading his mind dating back to the day she disappeared. His detached air made me feel like I was living in another world.

"As quickly as his happy spell came, his state of mind returned to its earlier disposition. He sat behind his desk in a stoic position as if in a dream, which made me feel uncomfortable. It was one of those moments when most people are at a loss as to what to say or do. He broke the silence when he blurted out: 'There's no such thing as reality'. Paul's sentence just hung in the air as he threw his hands out in a helpless gesture.

"I was so frustrated by my inability to reach Paul, I had thoughts of walking away from the disaster I was close to creating. Morally, I felt compelled to stay."

O'Brennan sat quietly not knowing where the conversation was going when Portland's next words prompted him to refocus.

"Paul told me he continually experienced an intolerable guilt that racked his brain, but he was at a loss to understand what it was. I'll

never forget the eyes that revealed his anguished thoughts. When I first started with Paul, I had no idea what to say that would motivate him to meet with Dr. Sanders, the conference psychiatrist. Strange as it may seem, he readily agreed to meet with Sanders as soon as I mentioned it.

"Everything seemed to fall in to place after I talked to Dr. Sanders. He cleared his appointments for today, and scheduled a full day session at his Methodist Center office with Paul; that's when I took over. We went out to dinner and then stayed at his home overnight. After delivering Paul in the morning, I settled in the viewing room and looked through the one-way mirror at Dr. Sanders and Paul sitting opposite each other over a table. Over the next hour, the two talked of general topics not germane, or so I thought, to Paul's problems. Do you have any questions?"

"Not so far," O'Brennan said.

"With a delicate approach, Sanders guided the conversation around to Maggie's last day at the beach by starting with the physical layout of the student retreat at the dune. Even though aware of his own situation, Paul appeared lost in thought for a moment until he started talking about our beach hangout. He hadn't lost his eidetic memory that I so long admired, and displayed extraordinary recall of the visual images involved. It was something to behold, and turned me upside down. Interestingly enough, I felt swept up in the conversation and pictured myself back there with the gang. In the space of a handful of minutes, he had reached back in time some thirty-five years and reminded me of sweet memories from the past.

"I knew Paul was carrying around a lot of baggage, but it wasn't until Dr. Sanders turned the conversation to Maggie Walther that I realized he was suffering from a broken heart."

O'Brennan's thoughts bounced around trying to picture the scene with Paul and the psychiatrist.

"Whatever Sanders said prompted Paul to replay the events at the dune that last day. He told of Maggie

sleeping on the blanket and remembered Flip and me sitting by the fire. When Paul awoke in the morning, he was totally alone at the beach. This was when Sanders bore in. When asked, Paul seemed to vaguely remember Flip walking around, but couldn't remember what I was doing. He did mention the fire had died down causing imposing shadows to flicker on the sand dune; he couldn't remember anything that followed. A wise man once said the only thing one remembers from the past are the good times, but not true with Paul, however. Paul threw his hands out in a defeated gesture as if suggesting the conversation was ended."

I haven't learned a thing about that fateful day, O'Brennan thought.

Portland must have read O'Brennan's mind because he picked up the narrative with a startling twist.

"I sat looking into a quiet room expecting the consultation had ended when it took a sudden turn. Dr. Sanders retrieved a silver pocket watch from his vest and absently fingered it. At that moment I realized he was attempting to hypnotize Paul. After several minutes it must have worked because he gave Sanders a knowing look. I'll never forget what happened next." O'Brennan's interest quickened. "He said to Dr. Sanders, "Why do you make me remember?"

"Dr. Getty, you have to get this out in the open so you'll enjoy a happier life," was Sanders reply. Several minutes of silence passed before a sudden awareness appeared on Paul's face. He spoke slowly at first, and then his recall gathered momentum.

"I can remember like it happened yesterday. Apparently, I dozed off again, because when I came to, I noticed Flip moving toward Maggie. He reached under her shoulder, took hold of her right arm, and then pressed down against her. With his other hand he seemed to rub her face with a beach towel. Paul said he wondered why Flip would be washing her face when the sudden realization came that he was smothering her. Maggie started kicking her legs while her body quivered." Paul released several sobs before he could continue. "Suddenly, all was quiet and she didn't move.

Flip had murdered the woman I loved, and I was in such a drunken state it was impossible for me to help her. My daze continued as I watched Flip head for the dune. He turned to look at me, and at that moment I closed my eyes. When I opened them, he had started to dig a trench at the foot of the hill. After finishing, Flip returned to pick up Maggie and carried her to the dune. The tragic part of what happened was when he threw her in the hole. He then started dragging sand down to completely cover her. I can still remember how the sand covered her. Flip then dragged a towel across the surface to get a natural appearance. That's all he remembered.

"After telling the grimmest story of his life, one leaked from his sub-conscious memory, exhaustion seemed to overtake Paul. He snapped back to the present and was overcome by a complete surrender to sobs. Not a nice story and it hurts me to recount it," Portland said with a pained catch in his voice.

"How seriously can you take his statement?" O'Brennan asked.

"I believe every word he spoke. After his session with Paul, Dr. Sanders called me into his office and began explaining what happened. The professional terms he used sailed over my head, and that's when I stopped him. Knowing full well I didn't understand what he was telling me and thinking I needed to give you an accurate account of what he had said, I explained my shortcomings. The two psychology courses I had taken at Bridgeton have long since been forgotten. At that point Sanders laughed and told me he understood my problem and would make his explanation as simple as possible."

"He told me when people encounter a shocking experience they can't handle, they suppressed or eliminate the incident from their conscious mind. And this is what Sanders believes happened to Paul. He added that sometimes these repressed experiences lead to mental illness. Put simply, Sanders explained that Paul's guilt feelings over not helping Maggie led to his depression, with the resulting trauma forcing him to block out the memory."

"That's all there is, Jack. They just announced first boarding for my flight to Charlottesville, so I have to get underway. I'll be talking to you again, so be careful."

"Before you leave, there's something I have to ask. Has the music stopped for Paul, or are there happier times on the horizon for him?" O'Brennan asked."

Portland thought for a moment before answering. "The facts speak for themselves. Paul Getty has crossed a demarcation from not remembering to the horrible world of consciously knowing the facts. He has to come to terms with what happened at Sands Beach, and whatever the future holds for him will come from Dr. Sanders and a benevolent God."

"I can live with that," O'Brennan said to an empty phone.

He sat thinking. The instincts he had developed over his career alerted him that he should concentrate on Phillip Alden. Al Portland's recounting of Getty's mental retrieval of Maggie's death had tipped his decision.

Turning Alden over would be his goal, but where to start could prove to be a problem. Minutes drifted by before he reached a decision. Tony Gerald, a friend dating back to his police force days, came to mind.

O'Brennan returned to a cold dinner. "Jeanette, we have to talk."

For the next half hour, he unfolded the details of his investigation to his wife.

Phillip Alden had long accepted and cherished the fact he was living a secret as an assassin-for-hire. Realizing he was prone to occasional fits of rage, he lived a life of discipline while continually guarding against revealing his hidden fury.

The image of Jack O'Brennan flashed in his mind. Alden uncomfortably recalled how driven this private eye had been at their only meeting. O'Brennan's aggressive manner in drawing a line in the sand was something of which he could not let go.

Alden spoke softly to himself. "How does one exercise a threat to one's existence? Put simply, you cut out his gizzard!" A soft smile crossed his face. In one of his dark moments he realized an operation done silently was in order. It was the natural thing for him to do.

He stared into space, lost in thought; his steadfast gaze failing to notice the rolling clouds loaded with rain threatening to invade the city. Questions flooded Alden's thoughts while he attempted to organize his reasoning. His interest quickened as he snapped back to the present, and then turned his attention to coming to terms with a scheme for killing O'Brennan.

An hour later, from the recesses of his mind, a plan began to form. Fifteen minutes later he thought its design was just right and reached for the phone, the shadow of death looming in his eyes.

The voice that answered came from a man after his own heart, a colleague up to the mark with numerous layers of fury. Alden carefully explained what he had in mind, formatting what he expected his friend to say. He admonished Cajun that he had to get his part right and was counting on him. Alden listened to the New Orleans voice, gave it some thought and replied in a cold ruthless voice, "I don't play games and neither do you."

Alden's instructions, short and to the point, directed Cajun to make his conversation with O'Brennan brief as possible, and not to get cagey.

Hanging up, Alden exhaled heavily as a feeling of satisfaction swept over him. Crafty and assertive, he sat thinking about his mission of death. And then another thought gave him pause; one he hadn't dare consider. What if killing O'Brennan backfired? He quickly reasoned that thought was one-dimensional, an unspeakable possibility. He mentally started to map out a scheme where the Tête-à-Tête with O'Brennan would end up with what he did best.

Swelled with the thought of future success, Phillip Alden left his office with a spring in his walk that revealed a newfound energy.

O'Brennan sat in his office absently gazing at the downtown lagoon. While thinking about a murder case going nowhere, thoughts of Al Portland's disturbing call about Paul Getty's meeting with the church psychiatrist prompted his reasoning ability to momentarily vanish. The ringing phone nudged him out of his reverie, interrupting the quiet period he so desperately needed.

"Jack O'Brennan," he answered in a detached manner.

"I'm from New Orleans and I need to talk to you about a subject to which you've grown very close." A rich Cajun tone laced with a hint of French seeping through the voice brought O'Brennan's mind to focus, rearranging his attention in a hurry.

"Your voice doesn't ring a bell. I have no idea who you are."

"My identity's not important. I've heard the rumor about how you're trying to tie Phillip Alden to that poor girl's death at Sands Beach."

Jack uncomfortably recalled his lone meeting with Alden and didn't like the thought.

"Does this have something to do with the *Black Sunset*?"

"As a matter of fact, it does. There's something I think you should know about Phillip Alden. He will become a treacherous opponent if you continue to pursue this misguided chase."

His caller's indictment of Alden sent his mental rollers spinning around. "What's this about?" he acidly asked.

"I'm not at liberty to reveal specifics at the moment, but hear me out. You know little about Alden, while I on the other hand know a great deal. Small world isn't it? I want to give you the word on him, both chapter and verse! There's never been a better time than this to turn the tables on him." An unpleasant laugh caused O'Brennan to sense an undertone of danger.

Jack sighed but didn't answer. He realized his conversation made him feel uneasy as he watched traffic circling around the lagoon.

"Word gets out, you understand. I know Tony Gerald put feelers out to check on Alden, so be forewarned not to believe everything you hear from him."

O'Brennan sat in a confused state, eager to believe his caller's words, while thinking how his situation had abruptly changed.

"As a matter of curiosity, how do you account for your actions? I want you to explain why you're willing to blow the whistle on him." O'Brennan waited for the answer that he felt would eventually come.

"We know each other," the voice bitter, "and I don't much care for him. We never got on well." That I can relate to, O'Brennan thought as a brief picture of Alden flashed across his mind.

"If that's the case, why don't you take him out yourself?"

"It's what I wanted to do for a long time, but if I do what you suggest, it will be rather dicey for me in the organization. So I can put a new spin on the old game by having you eliminate my problem."

His words began to register. A clever way of getting back at Alden for whatever reason through me, O'Brennan thought. I should feel concerned, but I'm not.

"We have to meet tonight."

"That's impossible. I've made other arrangements for this evening, so I'd like to meet tomorrow."

"Unfortunately for you, I'm leaving Bridgeton in the morning, so you'll have to fish or cut bait. It's either meet me in the alley across from the *Eagle* bar at eleven, or lose out on the opportunity of a lifetime."

"How do I know you're on the level? Jack asked. "It doesn't make sense to meet someone I don't know in a dark alley."

"Whoa, relax, buddy. Don't bite the hand that's going to feed you. Make up your mind and, remember, it's out of my hands when I leave town. Look at the positive side and think of it as going on a treasure hunt. Just say the word."

O'Brennan instinctively disliked his glibness. So driven by his desire for information, he failed to recognize the caller's dangerous proposal was wrapped in an attractive ribbon of deceit.

"You're making this sound like a game," O'Brennan said grimly.

"Mister, I don't play games!" The voice replied aggressively.

O'Brennan didn't know how to respond.

"This is a business not a social call, so make up your mind in a hurry. My terms are not negotiable. I'll

call you back in five minutes and you better have an answer, or there's no deal." He hung up before O'Brennan could answer.

O'Brennan knew the clock would keep running, and his time for reflection was but a brief block of time.

Get a grip on yourself and settle down. Time is running out on making a decision, so think this through.

Jack speculated whether he was up to such a challenge, but quickly dismissed the thought. Common sense told him that doubt creates fear, yet his law enforcement background reminded him that tension colors one's judgment, and what you fear may prove to be meaningless. So quit thinking about what your instincts tell you and decide what to do.

His indecisiveness caused him to feel like a corkscrew was at work in his head. He nervously tapped his fingers on the desk, fighting through a wave of conflict. O'Brennan felt reluctant to make a decision, but instinctively knew one had to be made in a hurry. The stakes were too high.

While absently observing the calm waters of the lagoon in front of his office, a decision came to him loud and clear. There was no way he'd meet with the caller. Knowing he was made of sterner stuff, O'Brennan found himself unhappy with his decision. It was at that moment he decided to rethink his decision.

I'm too pigheaded at times, but what the hell, I have to cut myself some slack. Looking at my position, I'm driven by my own selfish vanity, and have become a victim of my own wrath directed at Alden. I feel like I'm being swallowed up in a dark crevasse, but I'm going to change my mind and give it a shot. I know there's a catch, always is. He returned his concentration to the lagoon while dismissing his ambivalence with a shrug.

A plan about how to handle the alley meeting started to take shape in his mind. He'd check the physical layout and determine where he'd stand while

waiting for the caller. For added insurance, he'd plant a revolver easily accessible if trouble arose.

Two minutes later, the ringing phone ruptured his anxious moments, causing him to jump.

"O'Brennan."

Cajun resumed the conversation with, "What's it going to be?"

"All right, I'll meet you."

"Good choice. I'll look for you across from the *Eagle* at eleven tonight. So long, pal."

Misgivings swept over O'Brennan as he sat looking at an empty phone. Why did I change my mind and agree to meet this guy?" Meeting an unknown is a start, but I don't like the direction it's taking me. Nevertheless, it's a new twist that may help this investigation. My action is out of character for me, and that's disturbing. I normally think matters out before acting, but this situation is different, he thought as a sense of self-doubt swept over him.

Am I stepping into the oldest trick in the book by allowing myself to be isolated from all possible help if things turn bad? All is not as it seems. I smell a rat, but down deep, why don't I believe trouble is around the corner? That's motive enough to forge ahead. If this works, some of the empty spaces concerning Maggie will disappear. Other unanswered thoughts cluttered O'Brennan's confused mind. The foremost being: How did his caller know Tony was helping him? There was something else important that didn't surface, but he was at a loss to recall what it was.

On his way to the alley across from the *Eagle*, a sixth sense alerted him that the pot was beginning to boil.

As expected, the call came at the appointed time.

"This is Cajun. The hook is set, and the pigeon is ready for the taking. I made it easy for you."

Cajun replayed his conversation with O'Brennan, noting how he displayed a quiet reluctance to agree to meet.

Alden nodded but didn't reply while eying the boat marina.

"I got the feeling when I talked to this O'Brennan that he's tougher than he sounds."

"He's nothing for me to worry about." Alden laughed at Cajun's concern. "How tough can he be at his age?"

"Considering the circumstances, I believe, my friend, that you have the matter well in hand," Cajun said generously.

"The less said, the better. I'll tell you how it came out when the organization meets next week in Memphis," Alden said as he hung up.

Alden couldn't repress a smile thinking about how he had pushed Maggie under the dune thirty-five years ago. "Now it's time to think about doing Mr. Jack O'Brennan in this evening," he said while stretching his arms high over his head.

Jack O'Brennan called John Lloyd to meet him at the *Eagle*. It was near ten o'clock when John climbed onto a stool next to O'Brennan. About the same time John Alexander Beaumont III was nestled in an old discarded cardboard box across the way.

Al Simons, proprietor of the *Eagle* and longtime friend, drifted down the strip to settle in front of the retired detectives. Standing the same height as O'Brennan's six-three, he tipped the scales at an even three hundred. More muscle than fat, Simons was an imposing figure no matter how you looked at him

"Out for an evening stroll, boys?"

"Not really," a reticent O'Brennan replied.

"We just came down to see what you have on the menu," John said.

"You know we've been through this before. Sometimes when you visit, the larder is full, but sadly for you tonight, it's empty. What's your pleasure?"

"Give me a draft," Lloyd said.

"I'll have a bottle of O'Douls."

The immense bartender arched his eyebrows at O'Brennan as he pulled the tap for Lloyd's draft.

"On the wagon?"

"No, this isn't a night for drinking."

The *Eagle* Hotel was a busy place from the time it opened at eight in the morning until around seven when the dinner crowd left. Upon their departure, quiet settled in until after ten when the B shift from the shipyard wandered in. Only several customers remained from the after work dinner crowd, and they appeared on their last beer.

Although concerned, John didn't mention O'Brennan's eleven o'clock meeting across the street until later. It was forty minutes later in fact before John broached the subject.

"Jack, you and your stupid ideas. I think you'll be walking into the jaws of disaster. You're going over there without a back up, is that right?"

O'Brennan nodded.

"The only thing you know about this meet is what you heard on the phone."

O'Brennan made another nod.

"You received a call out of the blue from a person you don't know. This voice tells you he wants to meet in a dark alley under the overhead at eleven O'clock. It sounds lethal to me."

Any bartender worth a grain of salt is constantly tuned in to interesting conversation on the strip. O'Brennan and Lloyd were the only ones at the mahogany bar, and John's comment caught Simon's ear. He moved closer while occupying himself by filling empty bowls with bar snacks.

"And he wants to meet you where there's no one around?"

O'Brennan again nodded and made small rings on the bar surface with his glass.

"It's dark and lonely back there."

"Yes, John, I know all that," said an irritated O'Brennan.

"Jack, you've made a career in this treacherous business of cops and robbers by not making mistakes. Your success has been based on the fact you think things through before you act. You never jump into something on a whim, and always. . . ." Lloyd never finished.

"John, you once said there were no shortcuts in this business. You know and so do I that it has to be this way! The meeting was the caller's idea, not mine. Now I ask you, what could go wrong out there?" O'Brennan motioned his head toward the street. "On the other hand, a lot of things could go right. Did you ever hear of *Deep Throat*?"

Lloyd twisted his head with a questioning look. "You're talking about Watergate?" O'Brennan's face looked blank. "You are! Lighten up and get real. Do you think someone is going to write the great American novel of the nineties about you getting your ass shot up in some lonely alley in Bridgeton?" I think not, and neither do you. Come on."

"It's the only chance I have."

"As matters now stand, you'll be pushing your luck going off half-cocked like this."

"I'd say that was well-directed advice," Al Simons said. "Your life won't be worth a plug nickel out there by yourself."

O'Brennan gave Simons a stern look. "I don't want to hear anymore about this!"

The massive bartender broke off eye contact and raised his hands in a defensive position as he backed away from the bar. "I know, it isn't any of my business, but John isn't completely wrong. I think you've misjudged the danger of this venture." Simons reached over and wiped the bar. "Jack, you've probably forgotten the meaning of danger."

"When I rub elbows with danger, I'll know it, believe me."

The three friends disappeared into their own thoughts.

"Now to phase two," O'Brennan said as he pushed away from the bar. "Be here when I return."

After the door closed, Lloyd felt his stomach turn over while he made a helpless gesture to Al Simons.

Following his slide down the road of degradation, John Alexander Beaumont III found himself adrift in the part of Bridgeton he did not understand. Lacking the street smarts needed to successfully function in this unknown world, he chose to operate in the shadows. His native intelligence guided him through the learning stage of street life while the prosperous stage of his life seemed decades ago. In fact, it was but a mere four years ago that he was a shining paragon of leadership and stability.

Upper Niagara Street, a miserably depressed part of the city possessed a distinct flavor much like any port-of-call in the world.

Making his own rules for survival, he learned to maneuver around the pitfalls of street life that waylaid many of its occupants. Acquiring an enduring respect for its dangers, he felt confident and secure, but remained guarded as he made his way along his home area. At one time no stranger to humility, his brief stint of street life caused him to display the look of defeat in his eyes. Much to his credit, he faced the truth and recognized the fact he had become a loser.

Even though he existed in a constant stupor and had crossed off his puritanical demeanor long ago, his alcoholic thoughts never forgot a premise he lived with during his formidable days. Never confuse what you think you know with what you know.

Waves of fog drifted by as he made his way down the dismal street. Stopping to glance upward, his eyes moved from one spot in the sky to another. The vagrant could smell rain in the air, and noticed the sky was showing the first streaks of darkness with the bluish-gray Bridgeton dusk soon to follow. The start of a light mist settled in, causing the pavement to glisten. At about the same time the streetlights systematically started to pop on. He sensed it was time to head home.

Trudging along, he surveyed the street with clouded eyes. There was something different in the air he failed to account for, and this annoyed him. He had trouble sorting out his thoughts and couldn't remember his last decent meal. The thought of sitting down to a nice dinner crossed his mind, but was quickly forgotten when he lost control of himself and wet his pants, not an uncommon experience for him at that time.

Beaumont moved along the street with an army of tired men who had passed through the prism of hard knocks. They had drifted back to the street from all corners of the city to begin their daily trek in their quest for a secure haven. He was part and parcel of this wave of defeated men, many of who walked along mumbling some unintelligible words to no one in particular. Many of these poor souls were often labeled misfits with their buttons in the wrong holes, while the rest of them earned the deadbeat label Beaumont was given.

He turned into his home, a cobblestone alley some twenty feet wide that ran under the overhead tracks and continued to the river. Across the street under an amber-colored streetlight stood the *Eagle Hotel*, a comfortable workingman's bar that served quality food in the back dining room. Regardless of how under the weather he might feel, Beaumont knew he had arrived home by the sight of the red neon sign that identified the hotel. Thoughts came back to one night when he wandered into the bar and had been unceremoniously ushered out by a huge bald man.

At the end of the building on the left, a small alcove provided an excellent haven for him. Stillness settled over the alley as Beaumont crawled into a discarded refrigerator box that he claimed as his current home. Waves of exhaustion washed over him while settling in to sleep it off, not realizing the night would be unlike any he had ever experienced.

He dozed until he heard footsteps heading his way. Beaumont rubbed his eyes at the sight of what he thought to be a man walking slowly toward a support structure of the elevated subway. The tall figure came to rest against a rusted girder. Beaumont momentarily

mustered a modicum of interest as the figure idly shifted back and forth, apparently waiting for someone. The cheap wine he had consumed won out; forcing him to drift off into another troubled haze.

O'Brennan left the *Eagle* for his appointment with fate. Before crossing the street, he absently looked to his right at downtown and observed the business district had closed down for the night.

He found the earlier shower had cleansed the grime off the street and filtered the air to once again smell clean and pure. Crossing Niagara, he entered a dimly lit thoroughfare more like an alley than a street. An area that time had passed by.

The streetlights glazed the wet street with an artificial appearance expected on a Hollywood back lot. O'Brennan positioned himself against a two-foot girder, one of many that supported the elevated subway. Looking out from his vantage point, the *Eagle's* red neon sign flashed on and off. An unsettling thought came to him. I have placed myself in the worst possible situation imaginable. Possibly John Lloyd was right about me being a sitting duck out here, and maybe the odds against me are mind-boggling. I could be waltzing around with a technician of the deadly art of murder who would not deliberate before killing.

O'Brennan looked into space with a vacant stare and could sense the ghost of death looking over his shoulder. He made a permanent enemy in Alden, now how could he match up with such a pro? A thought of Tony Gerald telling him that Alden was a living legend in the killer-for-hire business added to his discomfort. O'Brennan didn't like and accepted the fact that Alden was a metaphor for trouble. "You mustn't, I repeat, you mustn't panic," O'Brennan muttered to himself.

His eyes remained clouded as he thought of Reverend Portland in Charlottesville. If I'd become a minister like Portland, I wouldn't be in this jam right now. He tried to grasp the severity of the moment, but faltered. How does one find a faceless figure in a crowd? O'Brennan felt his emotions ricocheting up and down like an elevator after realizing he had

incorrectly thought he could stop Alden. Standing here makes me too vulnerable. I have to minimize the risks, he thought as he shifted from one foot to the other.

Beaumont's wake-up came earlier than expected. The thunder of a passing train, which normally didn't disturb him, stirred the quiet while nudging him out of his drunken stupor. He felt a bit dazed as he tried to shuffle his thoughts through a Red Cup haze. Mental clarity came and left him like wisps of fog lazily drifting across a street.

Rubbing his eyes with the back of his fingers, he spotted a narrow shaft of moonlight resting on a six-by-six patch of cobbled surface in front of his temporary shelter. Strange, he thought, when he had arrived home, the sky was a sullen overcast, now the moon was out. The sight of two feet highlighted at the far end of the splash of light puzzled Beaumont. He felt he could reach out and touch the person in the dark. He wondered why a person would be standing in such a dreary place as this. His answer never came as a renewed stupor closed over him and sleep returned.

Later, he knew not how long, Beaumont stirred from a troubled sleep to see the same scene as before, but with an added dimension. Drinking in the silent scene playing out in front of him, he observed a collage of various blacks and grays comprising the backdrop of his limited view. A second shape appeared to step out of the darkness at about the same time and moved effortlessly toward the support beam.

The moon slid behind the clouds, abruptly altering the atmosphere in Beaumont's garden spot. Time passed but silence remained in the alley, only to be broken by the occasional faint sound of a passing vehicle on Niagara Street.

Somehow he missed the obvious as the shape silently moved forward like a cat stalking a mouse on a mission of death. Unbeknownst to Beaumont, something unsettling was about to happen. The screen was about to rise on an emotional drama he was unprepared for. Events were picking up, moving too fast for him to comprehend.

The alcohol-driven haze that perpetually clouded Beaumont's mind unaccountably drifted away. He clearly noticed the second figure from the dark glide to a halt in back of the first man. Shaking his head in a defeated manner, Beaumont found himself not knowing what to do. His heart beat so fast he thought it would explode. Slowly reasoning he was in the gripes one of the many hallucinations that happened, an uneasy awareness overflowed his muddled thoughts. The fact screeched out, forcing him to wonder how he got into this situation. What he had witnessed was real. Knowing full well that he should cry out and warn the person at the support beam, words failed him as he raised his hands in frustration. It was at this moment he felt threatened and vulnerable.

O'Brennan didn't notice as a subway train banged and shuddered while passing overhead.

Everything I do is the hard way, but that's the problem about being old-fashioned. O'Brennan, you might as well accept the facts because that's the only way you know, he reasoned. He had long ago learned to be patient and old ways never left him.

At first he missed the stillness that settled over the scene, and only now realized the heavy haze had suddenly blown away. Low-lying patches of gray fog came and went in a strange marriage with nature. Suddenly the evening sky waxed clear, displaying a full moon. The overhead light caused him to think of several moon related titles. The songs: Moonlight in Vermont and Carolina Moon came to mind, but the moon in the movie Moonstruck was the topper.

His anxious feelings caused his mouth to go dry as the spooky silence reminded him this was a different night than most. The inner recesses of his mind told him to leave immediately.

A discarded refrigerator box lying in the open to his right appeared to move. The movement caught O'Brennan's eye as what seemed to be a grubby bum started crawling out of the open end.

The figure spoke, his voice sounding worried. "Watch out, mister!"

The knife stormed through O'Brennan's back, penetrating his rib cage. He winced while raising his hands in a defensive gesture against an unseen assailant.

Swallowing hard, he released an audible gasp, and then felt a myriad of sensations roll over him he'd not experienced since Korea. A strange darkness washed over him as his strong body began to wilt, following a sea of pain that caused him to feel detached from his body.

I don't know what's happening to me was his last conscious thought as the wet cobblestone lay in wait for his arrival. Shallow breathing accompanied the stream of blood that flowed like the river next door.

In the blink of an eye, he saw a shiny object flash comfortably into the side of the man with the black shoes. The assailant appeared to momentarily appraise his efforts, then steal away as secretly as he appeared. The victim seemed to step or fall out of the darkness, landing on the spot where the moon shone brightly. An unconditioned flinch grabbed Beaumont as no anxiety he'd ever experienced seized him. This guy's troubles are greater than mine, he thought.

The bum had been present and a witness to this whole crime, yet he hardly fathomed what had occurred. Trying to keep his self together, the fact hit Beaumont hard. He had just crossed the fault line of innocence and observed the commission of a crime, causing him to become a witness to murder.

The fear that consumed Beaumont prompted him to think of running away. This was his nighttime home, but where could he run? His well-honed street smarts took over, and he realized opportunity only strikes once a night and here it was at his doorstep.

He couldn't make out O'Brennan's cry of anguish for it was lost in the roar of a passing overhead. It was the only sound the victim made. A faint moan followed by silence claimed the area as life slowly began to leak from the victim's side. "Whoa," Beaumont whispered to himself. He felt like a clenched fist was squeezing his brain as a cold wave of terror consumed him. He needed Dutch courage to help him over this stressful time. In the past, cheap wine had always worked, but there was no Red Cup available when it was needed most.

The thought crossed his mind to break the rules and take whatever he could find from the victim. Greed is a constant on the street and why not feather his nest?

A quick search of the victim's pockets would probably present an opportunity to upgrade his drink of the day from Red Cup to Gold Bond, a cheap bar whiskey. The fallen man did not move; was he alive? Beaumont asked himself.

He stumbled across the alley anticipating an easy mark in lifting the man's billfold. His face appeared frozen as he surveyed the scene in front of him. Standing over the fallen figure, a strange dilemma swept over him. Should he report the attack to the police, or steal the victim's money and walk away? His past instincts of right and wrong that had been a part of him for so much of his life won out, and he understood he could not steal from a gravely injured man. A dead one was one thing, but Beaumont believed him to be alive and that was something else.

The scene playing out in front of him kept brushing against a memory that returned him to his more responsible days. A message from his subconscious told him he was facing the litmus test of character and to back off this. Again he had trouble sorting out his thoughts, but finally arrived at a decision. He was now facing a question of honor, and regardless of what he had become, right over wrong prevailed. He wheeled around, half staggering, half falling while trying to catch his balance as he headed out of the narrow alley. Try as he might, his drunken gait was nothing more than an abbreviated run. In his haste to get to the lights of the *Eagle*, he fell on the pavement of Niagara Street. A car with a blaring horn came to a screeching halt not four feet away from Beaumont. He picked himself up as best he could and moved to the sidewalk. What to do? His status at the bar was *persona non grata*, but someone in there would know what to do.

John Lloyd sat contemplating the outcome of O'Brennan's meeting across the street; concern evident on his face as the clock over the bar slowly worked its way past eleven.

Here I sit doing nothing to help my friend while he undertakes a dangerous mission, one he doesn't want my help. It's poor judgment on his part; however, Jack made it clear this was his show.

Simons nudged Lloyd's thoughts. "How about a recharge?"

Lloyd put his hand over his empty glass. "No thanks. Since Jack left, the beer has a sour taste."

"I know what you mean."

His nightlife spent mostly in shadows, florid-faced John Alexander Beaumont III wearing a beat-up anorak, pushed the door open swinging his arm around as if he were tackling the world. Inside light caused his eyes to squint and then blink rapidly. The fall he had taken crossing Niagara Street made his legs feel unsteady.

Hearing the door open, Simons directed a suspicious eye at the drunk silhouetted in the doorway. The usual buzz of conversation quieted at the sight of the unsightly bum who coughed and nervously hopped from one foot to the other.

Beaumont waved his watch cap while looking through drunken eyes at the recent arrivals from the shipyard's B shift. As Al Simons approached the scruffy derelict, their idle conversation ceased except for one lone, barely audible voice, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Disgust showing on Simons' face, he called out to the regulars, "LuLu's back in town. The smell's the same and so is the name. Beaumont, you've been warned

before, so get out of here and take a walk." The bum looked at the hulking bartender through bloodshot eyes.

Simons stood pointing a finger with authority in front of the dirty drifter. "Didn't you hear the first time? I don't want you in this place!"

Fearing the large shape would strike him; Beaumont put his hands up in defense. "You don't understand, give me a chance to explain."

"The hell I don't understand. Now get out of here before I call the cops." Simons gave him a dismissive wave of the hand.

Lloyd empathized with Simons' consternation over this bum from skid row.

"But there's a . . ." He never finished. Simons opened the door and swept him out into the parking lot with one powerful thrust.

Simons returned to the bar and glowered. "You know, John, that's the worst part of this business. Those deadbeats will drive you wild if you give them a chance. The guy I just threw out is off the wall." Simons shook his head in disbelief. "You'd never know by his actions, but he once was a big shot with Circle Corporation until the booze got him. He lived at the heights, had the whole ten yards, and look at him now."

A few moments later, the door opened again; this time a cautious Beaumont stuck his head in. "I've got to tell you something."

"What is it with you, Beaumont? Wasn't getting thrown out of here good enough for one night?" A furious Simons turned to Lloyd and said, "A touch of madness in that man."

"There's a dead man out there!" Beaumont blurted out.

Lloyd bounded off his perch and was on the bum before he could back away.

"Don't hurt me, mister." Beaumont looked at Lloyd through raised hands, his eyes displaying fear.

"I'm not going to touch you. Just tell me about the dead man."

The bum shook his head helplessly as he began to recite the facts. "He's this way." Beaumont waved toward the street. "He's down in the alley under the overhead. You know, across from here."

"Tell us more!" John cried frantically

"Do you think that's booze talk?" Simons worriedly snapped over John's shoulder.

"I'm not waiting to find out."

Lloyd dashed across Niagara Street, narrowly missing a passing car. Simons, surprisingly nimble for his size followed closely. A shocked John Lloyd surveyed the situation as he pulled up to a puffing stop over the substantial figure of O'Brennan lying in a pool of his own blood.

"Ah, shit!"

He knelt on one knee and felt the victim's carotid artery. Withdrawing his hand from O'Brennan's neck, Lloyd called out, "He's alive, but barely."

"Hope we're not too late," Simons said as he fought for breath. "John, can he hang on?"

His belly filled with rage, Lloyd ignored his question. "Call 911 and tell them O'Brennan is badly hurt!"

Al Simons was too shocked to move. "Don't just stand there, make the call!" Lloyd commanded.

Five minutes after Simons' call, the emergency ambulance screamed to a halt by O'Brennan's unconscious body. Quickly placed in the rear by two attendants, Lloyd and a mortally wounded friend, more dead than alive were propelled up the near-empty Niagara Street

to the nearest hospital, Bridgeton General. A trauma team took one look at the blood-soaked figure and wheeled him into the emergency room.

John knew Jeanette was strong, but the call he was about to make would test her constitution. He had no choice but to reach for the phone. The simple task of punching out numbers seemed to take forever; as did the time he waited for an answer.

"Red Squire Restaurant, Jeanette O'Brennan speaking."

"Jeanette, this is John Lloyd. Jack has been stabbed." The sound of her gasp carried over the line. "He was found under the elevated across from the Eagle. He's here at Bridgeton General."

"Is he all right?" Her voice bordered on a scream.

"As much as I hate it, I'm not going to sugarcoat this. He's badly wounded. They've already taken him to surgery and only the good Lord knows when he'll be out. I called Sheriff Jimmy Childs and he'll have a car pick you up within minutes."

The sobs Lloyd heard continued to ring in his ear long after he hung up the phone.

Jeanette's once cherished reverie was broken when John Lloyd called.

The hate came quicker than the hurt as an unconscious Jack O'Brennan, pushed by two attendants, was guided down the hallway to the ICU unit. Jeanette had braced herself for the moment when her O'Brennan would suffer such an attack, and it had happened.

The hurt finally slid over her as she watched his fallen body pass. There will be a time when the playing field is leveled, she thought, but that will come with time.

Following the gurney with the squeaking wheels down the corridor, Jeanette felt a dull chill overwhelm her. He isn't going to make it, she told herself. If he'd only listened and backed himself up with some help, this never would have happened.

The nurse in charge of ICU raised her hand to stop Jeanette from entering O'Brennan's assigned cubicle. "I'm sorry Mrs. O'Brennan, but it will be at least twenty minutes before we get Jack settled."

Jeanette flinched at her words and then her effort at self-control shut down causing unabated tears to flow. She spent what seemed like the longest time of her life on a bench waiting for the nurse's signal to see O'Brennan.

She called him Jack. How would a nurse who has spent so little time with him be so familiar with O'Brennan to call him Jack? Jeanette thought.

A gentle touch on her shoulder brought Jeanette back from her thoughts. "It's okay, Mrs. O'Brennan, you can see him now."

Following her lead, Jeanette trailed after the nurse into the curtained enclosure. The scene playing out in front of her caused a sinking feeling. She

looked forlornly at O'Brennan who appeared to have every contrivance of medical science poking in and out of him. She couldn't shake the nagging thought that her husband was fighting for survival

With a heavy heart she searched for strength to face the difficult road ahead. "You're everything I ever wanted. My life will be empty without you. Jack O'Brennan, don't you even think about dying on me, you bastard!" His strong-willed wife whispered while looking at the rapid deterioration of a once robust man now delirious with pain.

The tears she had fought back returned. Her heart filled with a sinking feeling as her head dropped in prayer. Looking up at the long, lean body of her husband; he seemed to shrink before her eyes. She didn't understand his gray pallor and didn't like it.

Jeanette appeared dazed as she looked up at the hand that touched her shoulder. "Hang in there, old girl." Cal Redout looked down with a concerned gaze.

"Cal, my dream of happiness is lying in bed with tubes running into him."

"Don't worry, he'll be all right."

Jeanette returned her eyes to the tragic figure on the bed. "Cal, can he overcome this?"

Strange words for such a moment, overcome this, Cal thought.

"Jeanette, he's strong and has the courage to battle back. You have no idea how tough this man is." Cal nodded toward the bed, knowing full well that the odds of O'Brennan making it were negligible. He placed a caring hand on her head. "He's the best of the litter, so don't worry. More importantly, at this moment, tell me how you are doing?"

She glanced at the ashen O'Brennan. "Not very good. I'm still shaking from seeing him this way."

Insider laughter drifted from the nurse's station. For the first time since arriving at ICU, Jeanette noticed the noise.

"Cal, why is it so noisy around here?"

"The people who work here are geared to death, but their lives center around the living."

Jeanette understood his candid appraisal of life around the near-dead and nodded.

"Just tell yourself this isn't happening. The more you worry, the worse it gets. You need faith and trust to see this through," Cal swept his hand toward O'Brennan, "and there's not much I can say that will help. It's as simple as that."

"You don't understand." Her eyes bore into Cal. "I feel so responsible."

"We all are responsible, Jeanette, every last one of us. His friends let him go out on an ill-advised meeting with Alden that shouldn't have happened. Jack told me about the meeting and I just accepted it as another event in the life of a detective. I'll tell you right now," Cal pointed directly at the dying man, "each and every one of us figured Jack was invincible, well guess what. The hard reality of our misgivings lies before us. With Jack O'Brennan; what you see is what you get."

"Cal, there's nothing I can do."

"You know that's crazy talk, so get off that line. We're here for him. Jack has a challenge no man can face alone. His friends will be here shortly, and what else can a dying man ask for?" Cal realized he'd blundered as he spoke the words.

Alarm filled Jeanette's eyes. "You said a dying man."

"Yes. I'm sorry, but from early reports, Jack's condition may be worse than we know."

Cal's words brought Jeanette a fresh flood of tears, and then her face fell. "What are you saying?"

Cal didn't reply.

Her eyes smoldered as she eyed Cal. "What was that business you told me about him being strong and having the courage to fight back?"

Cal was far less calm than he appeared, causing a pained grimace to spread across his face. "I wasn't strong enough to tell you the truth."

O'Brennan's curtained room was silent for many minutes, interrupted only by the quiet hum of the ICU unit.

"Cal, when I was a kid, I dreamed of having more. And when more came my way, I discovered it wasn't much at all." Jeanette's voice caught as she tried to control her emotions. "And then out of the blue I met O'Brennan." She turned to look at the pathetic bedridden figure. "He gave life to a person with no purpose, and taught me the meaning of love. I'm terrified by the thought of him dying."

Cal knew his words would come up empty at comforting the distressed wife of his best friend, but plunged ahead.

"This guy," Cal motioned toward O'Brennan, "should have died on the operating table, but he's still going. Jeanette, the resiliency he's shown is real, so take heart."

O'Brennan's doctor parted the curtain and motioned Cal out. He knew the sign but didn't speak.

Cal thought out his words as he left Jeanette and O'Brennan. "Alex, what are your thoughts?"

Dr. Macario placed his hand on Cal's shoulder, a glimpse of doubt registering on his face. "I'm sorry, Cal, but the chances for your friend are not good." The surgeon caught Cal's fallen look and added, "He's still hanging on, though barely."

Shaking his head in defeat, Cal said, "Damned! I knew he shouldn't have gone into that alley alone."

"Cal, I'm going to talk to her. This is the part of medicine I detest. There's nothing you can do, so I would suggest you go home and wait."

"Alex, you know I can't do that."

Compassion showed on Macario's face. "I know, Cal, I know. Go down to the doctors lounge until something happens."

Dr. Cal Redout, former Chief Pathologist for the City of Bridgeton, current university professor of pathology walked dejectedly away with waves of tiredness settling over him.

The surgeon hunched his shoulders and headed toward Jeanette.

"Mrs. O'Brennan, I'm Dr. Macario. I operated on Jack."

Jeanette seemed not to hear the doctor's greeting, nor initially realize his nearness. Large enough to play defensive tackle in college, Macario possessed a ruddy face anchored by a box-like jaw. She finally sensed his presence and looked up. Their eyes locked in a momentary stare until Macario shifted his gaze past Jeanette to the unconscious O'Brennan. Words weren't needed for her to understand the situation.

"Be honest with me, doctor. What do you know that I don't?"

Her toughness manifested itself in her question, making Macario's task become easier. He carefully thought out his words before answering. "On balance, my prognosis is not good. Your husband lost a lot of blood, and his age is against him." Dr. Macario paused to look at his watch. "It's nine o'clock and the next six hours are critical. If he can last into the late afternoon, he may have a chance, but it's out of our hands."

"What does that mean?"

"Are you prepared for the worst possible news?" Macario caught her knowing look and proceeded. "Doctors live with questions we can't answer. The odds are against him. As for you, I suggest prayer. During the critical hours ahead, I want you to continually talk to him, and occasionally squeeze his hand. Your voice and touch may trigger a reaction in the deepest recesses of his mind. If he is as strong-willed as Cal suggests, there is a small window of hope. I have stated the facts as candidly as possible. I'll be in and out until we know more."

An uneasy silence followed. Macario shrugged and walked out.

Over the next two hours Jeanette dozed fitfully, occasionally waking to speak to her husband.

The nurse who earlier called O'Brennan, Jack, entered the ICU enclosure.

Jeanette looked at her identification tag. Printed in blue lettering on a white plastic shield were the words, Bridgeton Memorial Hospital, Janet Carpenter, Nurse Manager, ICU Unit. Suspicious feelings settled over Jeanette as she eyed the nurse. "How do you know O'Brennan?"

An awkward moment passed before the dark-haired nurse smiled. "We go back a long way. I know he's your man, but if you only knew." Tears flowed from a tough appearing woman. "When Jack was a young patrolman, on any number of occasions we'd meet in Emergency. He made my work, all our work, easier in the manner in which he handled the various situations we continually faced. He was sensitive and understanding and to us he made it easier to do our job, well certainly on those occasions. Jack is priceless.

"I can see it in your eyes. You're jealous because I called him Jack." Tears continued to stream down the nurse's face. "There's no reason for you to feel that way. My husband was a crane operator at the shipyard, and one day he keeled over and died on the job. Jack

heard the call, investigated, and came to the hospital to break the news. Because we were friends, he took over and made all the arrangements. My children were young at the time and couldn't help. That wonderful man did what Hank, my husband, would have done." Nurse Carpenter struggled for a deep breath. "Jack O'Brennan has touched many people in his day. I knew his first wife, Mary, and I might add she was a peach. Let me put it another way. I don't know what your thoughts are of me, but at this moment, your likes or dislikes really don't matter, do they? His welfare is our main concern. Each and every one of us."

"I have something to say, Nurse Carpenter."
Jeanette's voice lowered and quickly stopped.

The nurse interrupted before Jeanette could continue. Her hard line faded, and she said, "Call me Janet."

"Yes, it does matter, and you're right. For an instant I was jealous about the way you called O'Brennan, Jack. I can sense how you love O'Brennan. Not as I do, but in your own way.

Jeanette reached for the supervisor's hand, and at that moment an undeclared bond was formed. "Janet, thank you."

Three o'clock rolled around and Jeanette wondered if the dark side of the day had passed. Looking at the gray figure in front of her, she reached to squeeze O'Brennan's hand; the effect meant something different every time they touched. In doing so, she accidentally touched the urine receptacle with her foot. She hadn't noticed the catheter tube that drained O'Brennan's kidneys. So many tubes in one person, how could that be?

His shallow breathing reminded her he was at death's door. She whispered to the fallen detective, "You're going to do it your way, aren't you, O'Brennan?"

She sensed Cal's presence before he spoke. His soft voice drifted through the cubicle. "Any change?"

Jeanette looked up at him with a vacant stare. Cal had never seen her so disordered. Unadorned with makeup, her pitiful appearance forced him to look away.

"Cal, my worst nightmare is on me."

"What's the point in hurting yourself. Jack is going to pull through."

A nurse entered the cubicle to check O'Brennan's blood pressure, wordlessly going about her task. After entering figures on the chart at the foot of the bed, she left as quietly as she had entered.

"That's the way it is around here. The nurses come and go without a word spoken. It's like I had the plague," Jeanette said.

Cal shrugged. Minutes passed before he spoke.

"Jeanette, this is nothing more than a day at a time. No, not that. It's more like an hour at a time deal." O'Brennan had passed the critical three o'clock witching hour, and Cal felt a ray of guarded hope sweep over him. "You're going to look back at this bad dream and find Jack as good as new. Well, maybe not as good as new, but certainly better than he is now."

Jeanette replayed O'Brennan's last words to her. "I'll see you later, honey."

"Do you know, Cal, I've seen all kinds. Going back to my dating service, big shots abounded like water running out of a faucet, but never the likes of this gentle man."

"You know as well as I, there are few who pass our way like Jack," Cal said quietly.

"My heart aches for what my man is going through. Believe what I say, Mr. Coroner, the person responsible for this, and I'm certain who it is, is going to pay a severe price." While Jeanette sat looking at O'Brennan, her thoughts drifted back to what he had said about Phillip Alden.

Her blank look turned to a hate-laden stare that settled on Cal. He had seen Jeanette when she was determined, but her look was more than that. It smacked of obsession, and there was no denying her intent. Unbeknownst to Jack's attacker, he had become a target where no exceptions would be asked, and none given. Here was a woman sitting next to her dying husband, and she was thinking about revenge.

Cal looked at O'Brennan and thought of him as he was before this vicious attack and started to laugh.

Jeanette's eyes attacked Cal like she was soldiering for General Patton. "How can you laugh at a moment like this?" She pointed a finger at Cal to reinforce her rebuke.

Cal's embarrassment showed as he answered, "I was thinking of Jack at Red's wedding when Colby blew the yellow feathers on him."

Jeanette looked at O'Brennan with misty eyes and laughed as her thoughts drifted to the wedding. "You're right, Cal, that was a marvelous time."

At about the same time, and even though it was nothing more than a reach, a plan that would deal with Alden started to congeal in her mind.

The next twenty-four hours floated by in a senseless blur that saw Jeanette doze from time to time when she wasn't looking at O'Brennan. The first light of morning, along with the start-up sounds erupting from the nurse's station, caused her to wake from a fitful sleep. The first thing she remembered was O'Brennan opening his eyes and looking around late last night. He didn't recognize her or speak, but for him to enter semi-consciousness was reward enough for her. She remembered thinking that little gesture was an important sign, and his life had slowly returned to him. Turning to stare at O'Brennan, she recognized his once imposing presence was no longer formidable, and this dramatic change had happened over a short two-day period.

Feeling despondent, she sat impassively thinking of her early days when they first started dating. Glancing at the bed, she helplessly said, "Speak to me, O'Brennan." Jeanette's thoughts returned to several of O'Brennan's investigations where she had been involved. Namely, the Freddie Gill case, the Smithbury skeleton case, the Frontenac Island incident off the small Upstate New York village of Union Springs, and now the Sands Beach remains that currently occupied O'Brennan's time.

Her mind came back to the present when Dr. Macario, accompanied by Jason Gerald interrupted her thoughts. "Mrs. O'Brennan, Dr. Gerald and I are going to examine Jack. I'm sorry but so you'll have to leave the room. You need a break and now would be a good time to go down the cafeteria to get some breakfast. Come back in half an hour, and at that time we'll have some answers for you," Alex Macario said, his face completely inanimate.

"Doctor, I'd like you to call me Jeanette," she said in a whisper.

"Very well, Jeanette, and in turn please call me Alex."

She simply shrugged while leaving the room.

Thirty minutes later, Jack O'Brennan's bedraggled wife was greeted with a nod from Macario when she entered the room. Dr. Gerald exchanged a quick glance with Jeanette and winked.

"The blush of a once again happy life you formerly enjoyed may be on its way back," Gerald said with little excitement in his voice, but his smile said there was good news to come. A sudden exhilaration caused her to flush with excitement while her shining eyes filled with tears.

"Jeanette, I'm going to step aside and let Alex explain where we stand," Jason Gerald said.

Dr. Macario's pleasant, informal style set Jeanette at ease.

"I'll start at the beginning and play through Jack's ordeal up to the present. I can describe his condition when I first saw him in one word, which was hopeless. He was fast approaching death when they brought him into emergency. His blood pressure was down to 52/40 and it was up and down like an elevator. Time was a factor in getting him to the OR. As the initial phase of the operation progressed, my major concern was that he might have a cardiac arrest. Fortunately, he didn't." Macario ran a hand through his thinning hair and gently shook his head in a questioning manner.

"He held on like a tiger. I think his strength got him through the operation without incident, but there is something else I should mention. I believe divine intervention played a role in this exercise, and that's the only explanation I can give." In the time that followed, his expression didn't change as he patiently explained his thoughts on the unknown.

"The unvarnished truth is, there are strange forces in our business," Macario looked over at Dr. Gerald, and then returned his gaze to Jeanette, "that guys like Jason and I can't explain. Jack O'Brennan's experience was truly an anomaly."

Jeanette's eyes displayed a baffled look

"Jeanette, one of the things that saved your husband's life was an accident of anatomy." Macario patiently explained.

She looked at him with a dazed look.

Macario smiled through a shrug. "Life has a way of evening out. I'll explain later. Jason and I are to meet with Dr. Redout in a few minutes, so please excuse us for leaving. Don't get upset before I explain why we're meeting with the good doctor. He has offered to oversee the regimen we draw up for Jack's recovery, and our plan couldn't be in better hands I might add."

Jeanette's hard edge immediately surfaced.

"That may be all well and good, but why would you have a pathologist such as Cal oversee O'Brennan's recovery?"

Dr. Macario broke up laughing while turning to his colleague. "Jay, I see what you mean."

"Jeanette, I misspoke when I said Cal would oversee Jack's regimen. Instead, I should have said he'd act as a facilitator. You know, make all the arrangements that are needed during Jack's lengthy recuperation." Macario released a happy laugh. "And be assured Jason and I will set the tone of his treatment and not Cal."

Jeanette sensed Dr. Macario was laughing at her for being such a hard thrower, but she didn't care. He brought O'Brennan back to her, and as far as she was concerned, he could laugh all he wanted.

Jeanette sighed with relief as she watched the doctors leave. Turning to O'Brennan with gratitude, she spoke in barely a whisper, "Jack O'Brennan, you can't hear me yet, but when you can, there's so much I must say."

Several hours later, John Lloyd jauntily entered the ICU, startling Jeanette out of her thoughts.

"How's he doing?"

"Much the same. John, I had a feeling you'd be here early."

"Man alive, Jack looks better than he did yesterday. He's still on the clock, and that's excellent. When I first saw him, thoughts of Jack being in his last inning settled around me. But look at him now, he's going to beat this thing."

Jeanette sensed his breeziness was too contrived, but was secretly pleased that he offered a positive note.

"What have you learned about the assault?" She asked with a mission of death on her mind.

"I replayed the scene in the alley a thousand times, and reached the same conclusion. It never should have happened, but it did. Jack bent the rules when he went in that alley alone. I should have stopped him, and he wouldn't be stretched out on that bed."

"Don't blame yourself, John. You've known him longer than I have, and know how he thinks. I've never seen him like this before. Finding that skeleton seemed to touch a nerve he had no control over. It was like he was possessed in finding the killer. When I talked to him about this strange obsession, his mind seemed to wander off like he was in another world. O'Brennan never mentioned the meeting in the alley. Maybe that's something I should hear now."

Lloyd replayed the last minutes he spent with O'Brennan before he left for his ill-advised meeting.

"Take heart. I'm searching for answers that have yet to surface. Bits and pieces of the puzzle refuse to mesh at the moment, but I'm slowly putting together a picture of what happened," John gloomily reported.

"Strange journey, isn't it?"

"It is that, and it started when Beaumont entered the *Eagle*."

"You're telling me that you have nothing to offer?" Jeanette hopelessly asked.

"That may not be necessarily so. What I have is probably of little value, but nevertheless worth considering. Alden's car was ticketed for illegal parking in the Yacht Club parking lot the night of Jack's assault. You know, of course, the *Eagle* is an easy walk from the marina."

"It was Alden!" Jeanette said, not even approaching control

"How do you know?"

Jeanette's face displayed the darkness of her thoughts. "I just know," Jeanette said emphatically.

"But Jeanette, you don't know for certain."

"The next time we meet, Alden will feel death around him, and it won't be mine," she said with hate-filled eyes.

No good will come from this." John's admonition carried with it a sense of doom.

"That's where you're mistaken. I simply don't care what you think."

"You don't have what's needed. It's not in you," John said with little emotion.

Jeanette directed a bristling glare at Lloyd while dismissing his suggestion from her mind.

She couldn't conceal her emotions any longer. "My life has been based on being tough and giving no quarter to anyone. It's not becoming, but that's what I am; and please note, John Lloyd, I'm not about to change for the likes of Phillip Alden. Sooner or later, Alden is going down. Bank on it!"

John offered a deep sigh before thinking, guys like Alden are no commonplace adversaries, and common

sense tells me she would be overmatched on her best day.

Knowing there was nothing left to say but goodbye, John waved as he left Jeanette. "I'll be back."

A series of flashbacks returned to carry Jeanette back to her early years in Bridgeton before she drifted off to sleep.

The early light of dawn, filtering through Venetian blinds that closed the ICU to the outside world, caused Jeanette to awake with a start. Her pillow was damp with tears that flowed from the relief she felt. The downpour of tears that consumed her had lasted much of the night.

Momentarily unaware of her surroundings, she stared at a sleeping O'Brennan before recalling last night. Dr. Macario had given her news that finally provided an answer to her silent prayers. O'Brennan was going to recover. The darkness of Jeanette's excruciating ordeal that washed over her was a living nightmare of the past. She desperately needed an edge toward a fresh start, but had no idea what it would be. I'll do what I have to and figure out something along the way; it's that simple, she told herself.

After freshening up and changing clothes, she returned to sit and observe a sleeping O'Brennan. Cal Redout, the voice of reason interrupted her thoughts.

"How is Jack doing?"

"I have no way of knowing," she evasively replied.

"Jeanette, that can't be the case. I talked with Alex last night and he told me he was heading down here to give you the good news."

After a brief time, Jeanette gathered her emotions and slowly began to recite what facts she'd been given.

Cal sensed her frustrations as she tapped her fingers on the chair's armrest.

"He told me O'Brennan was in a holding pattern, but would recover. That's all he said." She gestured toward the nurses' station. "I can't get anyone to talk to me."

"Jeanette, everything will pass, believe me."

O'Brennan made a complying grunt as if agreeing with Cal. His reaction brought the start of a smile on Jeanette's lips.

"That may be true in the foreseeable future, but not next week," Jeanette said in a strained voice."

"What you say is on target, but there is a consideration that you haven't addressed. Each morning when you wake up, you'll find Jack on a different plateau. Meaning, every day his improvement will be gradual but steady."

"Where do I go from here? I have no options left except to pray him through this." A tear rolled down her cheek, followed by a sigh.

"Jack could be worse off. He had the good luck to have a guardian angel looking over his shoulder, and of course the God-given talents of doctors Gerald and Macario."

Sound erupting from the nursing station interrupted Cal's train of thought. He stopped talking and waited for Jeanette to respond

Dumbfounded from lack of sleep and overwhelmed with stress, many questions floated through her mind. After several minutes, Cal broke the silence.

"Come on, young lady, I'm taking you home to get some rest."

"I want to stay with O'Brennan."

"Do as I say. You must remember that I'm the doctor," Cal admonished.

"In that case, I'm going to church and then I'll go home and get some rest. There's a higher power than you where I'm going, my friend."

"Before you leave, I have one question."

"Jeanette looked unyieldingly at Dr. Cal Redout.

"Are you emotionally all right?"

"No, that's the reason I'm going to church," she replied with conviction.

After leaving Bridgeton General Hospital, conveniently located within walking distance of her Ford Ashland home, Jeanette O'Brennan, a woman driven by hate and revenge, contemplated the choice of churches available. The little one at the foot of the hill would meet her needs.

The small brick church she stood in front of looked well worn with a shabby cast to it. Wood that framed the church's sign was badly in need of paint, but that didn't matter to her. Her heart felt heavy with despair as she studied the worship program. The lettering read:

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF BRIDGETON.

Established 1804.

Rev. James Dorsett, Pastor.

9:00 A.M. Service.

Today's message: THINGS MAY NOT BE WHAT THEY SEEM.

"Yes, this church will be just fine," she whispered to herself.

A tormented woman of sixty slipped unnoticed into a back pew of the house of worship. Services had just begun and at that time she was going to square herself with the Lord. Jeanette looked around at a half-filled church with a seating capacity that would accommodate roughly one hundred worshippers. The small sanctuary lacked the glossy look of biblical scenes and the ostentatious display of wealth. Dark wooden pews once glistening under coats of varnish now appeared dull with scratches and gouges in the wood that indicated lack of attention. Mismatched seat cushions that covered empty seats matched the once red carpet, now threadbare and faded to drab reddish pink.

This church is in trouble, she thought.

Several minutes into the sermon, Jeanette's mind drifted to O'Brennan and the good news she received of his anticipated recovery. The tribulations she was experiencing of killing Alden came into play, giving her no rest. How can I think such thoughts when I sit in God's house asking for his guidance? Ten minutes later, her mind snapped back to the present and the remaining sermon.

A short heavy-set man with a full head of snow-white hair badly in need of a haircut stood behind the pulpit. Not a pompous high profile man full of himself, but a leader of his small congregation humbling himself before God. His gentle manner commanded attention as his words drifted down to a conclusion.

"Dismiss the thought you have about living life and carrying your burden alone. Go where your heart leads you and don't forget salvation comes to those who wait."

"Why do good people have bad things happen to them, you ask, and why did God let this happen? The truth of God escapes our capacity to question his workings. Let go the thought that God is responsible for everything. Lean on each other for understanding and comfort. The solution to your problems will fall in place with help from those around you." His words rang with sincerity.

Reverend Dorsett had captured Jeanette's undivided attention.

"If troubles get you down and make you feel near the breaking point of no return, don't second-guess God. Find strength through your faith, and with this faith you'll be of greater comfort to yourself and others less fortunate.

"So what is God waiting for, you ask? Is it possible he's waiting for you?" Reverend Dorsett paused to take a drink of water. "Some will ask what God has done for them lately. This is a question you must answer within your heart, and your heart only. When you leave our humble service, carry away one positive thought that should sustain you throughout the day.

Sunshine follows rain and the only thing you should remember about the past is the good times. Amen to these words."

"If there are those among us bothered with thoughts that seem too difficult to fathom, don't be hard on yourself." Reverend James Dorsett ended his sermon with a ray of hope. "You are here because of God's will, so let your heart be your guide, and remember, His creation is good, and nothing is impossible in His eyes."

Dorset's last sentence prompted Jeanette to focus on a religious life she'd long ago abandoned.

Finally, concerns relating to friends and relatives' illnesses, safety for those traveling, and other worries filtered out from the worshipers

Time passed as Jeanette sat in silence, mentally reviewing what she was about to say. An unusual quiet settled as she stood to speak with eyes that displayed anguished thoughts. Heads turned to the rear of the church with each eye of the congregation riveted on her. She was a woman who owned a room when in attendance, but this attention was a different experience.

"My name is Jeanette O'Brennan. I have no idea how to approach what I am about to say, so please forgive me for the halting manner in which I speak. I feel moved by the words of Reverend Dorsett's sermon. Standing in front of you, I find myself flying under anything but true colors. I was what one might call self-centered and asked quarters from no one."

Jeanette's voice, soft and uncertain caused the congregation to strain to better hear her words.

"My well-ordered life is shattered, causing me to barely hold up. The dreams we entertain sometimes turn into nightmares. There are many bad people in the world; I'm certain there is some here today who can attest to that. Late Wednesday evening, one of them attacked my husband, Jack O'Brennan, in an ambush. He

was found bleeding to death under the elevated off Niagara Street."

Jeanette's eyes filled with tears as an unfamiliar peace settled over her

"Jack O'Brennan, not one to put on airs, is a retired detective from the Bridgeton Police Department and currently operates a small private investigation agency. You are probably aware that he recently solved the Freddie Gill and Smithbury skeleton cases. He is a good and kind man, and although he worked the other side of the street from the criminal world, all he could see in his fellowman was good. Last night, he lied in the ICU a heartbeat away from death."

Many worshipers winced at her words as an elderly man in front of her nodded his head in sympathy. Jeanette steeled herself from spilling out her emotions while hurriedly looking back on her recent days.

"I have been advised that O'Brennan will survive, but he faces a recovery battle six-months in duration." Jeanette sighed heavily as she made eye contact with each of the worshipers with one long sweep.

"At this point in my life, I'm searching for answers. I don't know if I have a moral integrity to face up to what I have in store for me."

Jeanette sensed her words sounded dream-like and felt her voice take on a troubled sound

Images of a disabled O'Brennan lying in ICU flashed in her mind. She helplessly thrust her hands out in front of her and asked with urgency creeping into her voice, "Am I asking too much to plead for your prayers?" Jeanette bowed her head in a helpless gesture, and then raised her eyes to the congregation. "I hope not." She quickly sat down as tears streamed down her face.

Silence followed Jeanette's words until Reverend Dorsett coughed and took a swallow of water. He then began to softly speak. "Let us bow our heads to God. My friends, before us stands a troubled woman who has

bared her soul to the Almighty and to you, the members of this small gathering. With God's help, we must include her in our desire to become complete masters of our faith

"Our heavenly father, a new colleague has entered our midst, and with a biting honesty asked in this house of worship for recovery for her loved one and a spiritual uplifting for herself. Please make your presence felt in our friend, Jeanette O'Brennan."

Reverend Dorsett lifted his eyes. "The service has concluded. Our troubled friend is in far better hands than we can hope to provide."

People smiled at Jeanette as they passed her on the way to the downstairs dining room. A neatly attired gray-haired lady in her eighties gently touched Jeanette's arm. Short in stature, she possessed a warm happy smile.

"Come, dear, you need a cup of coffee and words of cheer to lift your spirits. My name is Agnes Vreeland, and I'd like to be your friend."

Jeanette returned what resembled a smile.

"After you have a Danish and nice cup of coffee, you'll find how rapidly your feelings improve."

Hand in hand, Agnes led her downstairs to a waiting congregation. When Jeanette saw the smiling faces that greeted her, a warm comforting calm so desperately needed settled over her. She'd been away too long.

Jeanette smiled and struck out to meet her new friends.

After the social hour that followed services, Jeanette made her way up the hill to again sit with a sleeping O'Brennan.

Her stomach knotted up when the doctors Gerald and Macario summoned her into the hallway. Dr. Macario exchanged a quick glance with Jeanette and smiled. It

was the second time since she'd known him that he had displayed a show of emotion.

A sudden rush of excitement caused her face to color.

"I know it's an oft-used cliché, but we have to take a one-day-at-a-time look at Jack's situation. The challenge he faces can't be accomplished alone." He spoke calmly with little excitement in his voice, but with eyes that said something more important.

As if on cue, Jeanette asked, "Will there be permanent damage?"

"It's too early to tell," Dr. Gerald sympathetically replied.

She had several questions to ask, but her mind went blank.

"Jeanette, please excuse me, but there are several patients I need to visit. There is one question I'd like to ask before leaving. During the early stages of the operation, Jack muttered some unintelligible words, and then out of the blue came two crystal-clear words. Does *Black Sunset* have any meaning to you?"

Jeanette's puzzled look gave him his answer.

"I thought not. I'm due in surgery, so I have to leave, but I'll talk to you tomorrow. Jason can explain where we stand."

After Dr. Macario departed, Dr. Jason Gerald turned to Jeanette. "There are few people who pass our way that make a difference. Believe me, Jack O'Brennan is one of them. I know from past experience your husband tops the list.

The sparkle of a teenager returned to Jeanette's eyes as she choked up. "That's very nice of you."

An attendant wheeled a squeaky gurney past them. Gerald didn't appear to notice, but the noise made Jeanette want to jump out of her skin.

Jason shrugged and smiled. "It was something that needed saying. Now you go home and get some rest."

While walking back to her Ford Ashland home, numerous thoughts came cascading down on her mind. She started making a mental list of what to do tomorrow, and topping that list was a visit to Tony Gerald.

From the time Jeanette was a little girl, she never was one for rash decisions. She slept on a dilemma and in the morning arrived at a decision. Once she made her mind up, there was no holding her back. Every conclusion she ever reached was followed by determination and planning. She would never back off from the course she set.

Although never having met the woman, Tony Gerald felt as if he knew Jeanette O'Brennan. Jack had talked constantly about her during their golf outings, and he knew of her formidable reputation as a restaurateur. The urgency in her voice when she asked if she could pay him a visit caught his attention.

Thoughts of O'Brennan flashed in her mind as she plowed to a stop in front of Tony's house. Jeanette felt dirty and unwashed, although she had no reason to feel that way. A decent night's sleep and a cup of hot chocolate had somewhat returned her to her old self, but barely. Disheveled was an apt description for the always well-groomed Jeanette.

She stopped on the sidewalk to look at the known gambler's modest home. Jeanette could feel the heat caused by the sun through the thin soles of her heels. Scattered wisps of mist rising from the concrete wet from an early morning shower gave every indication of turning the day into a sauna. She moved down the walk that led to an outdoor patio at the rear, feeling nervous about meeting the reputed gambling czar of the mid-East Coast. A stocky man of a similar age to O'Brennan rose as she approached the patio area.

He then reached to shake her hand. "Hi, I'm Tony Gerald. You must be Jeanette. You look tired," he said while directing her to a seat with an open hand.

Jeanette nodded her head. "Honestly, I've never felt so exhausted in my life."

"Regardless of how you feel, you looked like poetry in motion when you walked down the walk," Tony said, delight showing on his face.

Jeanette displayed a half-embarrassed smile as she brushed a curl of hair from her forehead. "Those are lovely sentiments coming from a man I don't know."

Tony smiled. "How is my favorite detective doing?"

Jeanette's brief smile turned to a frown. "I know I sound like O'Brennan; but the crunch time has passed, leaving me with nothing but anguish." Her voice took on a troubled sound. "You wouldn't believe how bad he looks."

"Who cares what he looks like," Gerald said expansively. "From what Cal Redout told me last night, he's going to get over this thing, and that's what counts."

"You know Cal?"

"I know all of Jack's friends. Forget that, tell me about his condition."

"Yes, he is going to recover. His surgeon, Dr. Macario, I suppose you know him too?" Tony nodded. "He told me the road back will be slow because of his age. It looks like he'll be out of circulation for the better part of six months. He won't be able to play golf with you for awhile, that's for certain," Jeanette grimly replied.

Tony studied Jeanette like he was eyeing a poker hand.

"Jack told me about you two when you first started dating. I pretty much know about the history of your romance, and dear lady, I know about your past as director of social activities around Harkers back when. So, would you care to tell me your side of the story?"

"You know about me running the escort service?"

Tony nodded.

Jeanette's eyes bore into him with no show of emotion. "Seeing you brought this up, I'll make one thing clear. I was selling my girls' favors, but I never took part in that end of the business, nor would I ever consider it. I know how men are and I didn't want any part of their tawdry nonsense."

"I also know that," Tony confidently replied.

Jeanette concluded by telling Tony how O'Brennan had given her a new focus to her life.

"Forget the past and tell me how Jack was attacked."

So Jeanette followed suit and told him what she knew. It wasn't much, but John Lloyd had pretty well tied up the loose ends that existed

"It's early, have you had breakfast?"

Jeanette shook her head. "Not really.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"No, I don't think so." She seemed to momentarily weigh her options. "But a Bloody Mary might do the trick."

Silent moments passed while Jeanette marveled at the lovely setting of Tony's backyard. Flowering dogwoods framing the lawn area were in full bloom. Their greenish-white flowers created a dreamlike setting that caused Jeanette to feel content for the first time since O'Brennan's attack.

Tony okayed her request with a nod and walked to a wet bar at the edge of the patio where he quickly concocted the red drink Jeanette requested..

Tony returned to stand in front of his guest. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Certain. I need more than what caffeine will do for me. Thank you." Jeanette withdrew the stalk of celery standing in a tall glass and took a massive

bite. Waving the stalk at Tony, she laughed. "This is my bacon and eggs. The red stuff is for my strength."

"Hate to see a lady drink alone." Tony returned with a pilsner glass filled with golden beer.

A brief quiet settled over them before he broke the spell of uneasy moments by saying, "I still owe him, you know. What can I do for you?"

"I want to know about Phillip Alden. Everything from top to bottom." Tony nodded and then took a sip of beer.

"Jack told me he had a questionable past concerning the Walther woman, and mentioned he was one of his suspects." Tony had done some research on Alden at O'Brennan's request, but chose not to reveal what he had learned at the moment.

Jeanette replayed O'Brennan's thoughts on the case, detail by detail. "Tony, he was convinced Alden murdered her at the beach."

"That's consistent with what he told me. So, let's say we're on the same line. Tell me, what do you have in mind for this Alden?"

Jeanette gave Tony her hardest face.

Tony smiled and returned a knowing look. "You look offended that I asked."

"That's the last thing I am is offended. I'm just getting the feel of the climate, so to speak."

"So what you're saying is you're putting your intentions on a billboard for me to see."

Jeanette marveled at the coolness of his eyes. "That could well be," she nonchalantly replied.

"The man who did this is a lonely person," Tony observed.

I wonder what he meant by that, Jeanette thought.

"Granted, I'm shopping for some information. Can you tell me what I want to hear?"

Tony looked cagily at Jeanette. "I don't understand."

"What part don't you understand?"

"Let's get to the heart of your problem."

"That I admire in a man." Jeanette smiled as she took another bite of celery. Tony's puzzled look caused her to laugh.

A grinding sound came from the street. Jeanette turned to observe the source. "Just the street sweeper going by," Tony said over her shoulder.

Jeanette turned to again face Tony, casually brushing a wave of hair from her forehead.

"I like the way you laugh and how you say what you think. That's an excellent quality in a person," Tony suggested.

She gave him her best knock over smile. "I'm glad you approve."

Jeanette was taking a drink when Tony spoke.

"We've danced long enough, what do you have in mind?"

She sighed and looked at the blossoms hanging from the trees. Now ready for business, her gaze soon returned to focus on Tony.

"All the good things in life were disrupted when O'Brennan landed in ICU. I quickly learned that without him around, my life would be a wasteland. If I could hide from the ugly incident, believe me, I would. I'd like to stick my ears in sand and have my eyes shielded by blinders, but I can't. Tony, you're a realist and know that isn't the way it's going to be."

"I don't blame you," Tony said, stoically waiting for Jeanette to continue.

"As a result," Jeanette let her sentence trail away.

Tony sat calmly listening and finally said, "I keep asking myself what does she have in mind?"

"Is that important?"

"Just curious that's all."

"I want to level the playing field."

"There's more to it than that, isn't there?" Tony signaled with his fingers for her to continue.

Jeanette gave him a radiant smile.

Tony appeared annoyed at Jeanette's cat and mouse game. "You didn't give me everything, did you?"

"You don't want to know."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out." Her voice cracked with excitement.

Tony's mental rollers caused him to show a mean face. "Let me guess. Are you saying what I'm thinking?"

"Why, Mr. Gerald, how perceptive of you."

In a flash he realized Jeanette understood him and thought much like he did. At that moment, they became strategically aligned.

Tony shifted uneasily in his chair. "Jeanette, say it for me."

"At this point, this is nothing more than a reach, but there's a reason I'm telling you this. Phillip Alden is a lousy person, rotten to the core, and doesn't know he's well on his way to being dead. O'Brennan's account will be paid in full. I'm going to

kill him!" Jeanette said with a voice ripe with emotion, her candor blatantly clear. "That's the way it's going to be!"

Her heated words came in a rush. Tony figured there was little point in debating the matter. Silence settled over the patio as they measured each other

"How do you plan to carry it out?" Tony asked.

Jeanette shrugged nervously. "Down deep in my heart, I feel it's something I have to do and I need your help."

She's iron-willed and debating with her about killing Alden will serve no purpose, Tony told himself.

He dropped his eyes to his lap for a moment, and then returned them again to focus on his visitor. "This is going against the flow and I know I'll live to regret this."

With lips racing into a sneer, Jeanette interrupted him with lips growing into a sneer. "You're either with me or against me."

Tony sighed. "You don't give me much choice."

Jeanette quickly answered, "That's where you're wrong. You do have a choice."

Tony studied the rising bubbles in his beer. "You really want to cancel him. This is an eye for an eye thing with you."

Jeanette laughed. "I love the way you use those Biblical references. I mean it! I can't wait for tomorrow to roll around so I can begin planning his demise."

"What are the chances of putting this crazy thought off?"

An untidy period settled over them until the sound of the street sweeper returned and she again looked for the source of the noise

Jeanette's face suddenly displayed the darkness she felt. "Putting this off is not part of my

vocabulary, make no mistake about it. It doesn't matter to me whether you approve or not. But I'd like to hear you'll help me."

"If you feel that way, who am I to second-guess you? Hey, I'm not Dirty Harry; I deal in finesse."

She shook her head as if not understanding the Dirty Harry bit.

"You know, the tough guy in the movies."

Her question was difficult for him to answer, but he surrendered to it. "Yes, I'll see what I can do. I guess we have a deal. It will take more than your courage to make this happen. There is one more thing you have to consider and that's the legal authorities."

Jeanette rose to leave with a glint in her eye accompanied by a razor-like quality to her words. "The law is one thing, but what I have in mind is called justice."

"I'll come up with something."

"You'll be hearing from me shortly," Jeanette said over her shoulder while she worked her way toward the street.

A spur of the moment thought crossed her mind when she started the Blazer. "Now that you're all worked up from talking to Tony, head downtown and talk to that bastard," she softly murmured.

Jeanette looked at the *Regency Arms* office complex and shuddered. The gentle morning air, threatened by a touch of rain, felt refreshing. Anxious feelings crowded her thoughts as she approached her mission.

The office she visited displayed the pretentiousness that so often comes with success. Cherry wood paneling framed three sides of the massive office with ceiling-to-floor windows overlooking the heart of beautiful downtown Bridgeton

Phillip Alden sat facing away from the breath-taking view of the lagoon behind a large antique desk surrounded by green leather chairs.

They greeted each other from a distance, causing Jeanette to immediately notice his dark piercing eyes. Wearing a dark blue pin-stripe suit, he motioned her to a seat and caught her looking at the panoramic view playing out around the lagoon, its water sparkling from the sun's golden rays.

"You can't turn your head on such a setting like this," he said, filled with arrogance.

She knew the sign of an obviously heavy-handed and self-centered man. With his hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, Alden displayed a pugnacious manner that he made no effort to hide. A glacier-like stare touched by a mark of cruelty topped a slight six-foot body. She noticed the fingers he laced together to form a triangle. Long and slender, she wondered how strong they were, probably very.

This is no time for me to make childish observations. This man is far more dangerous than I realized, Jeanette thought.

She nervously cleared her throat to speak when suddenly rain beating on the windows caused her to involuntarily twitch and momentarily lose her concentration. Quickly regaining her composure, she

looked Alden in the eye and said, "The world is full of bad people, and you're one of them!"

He spoke with a business-like voice devoid of warmth. "Your accusation is rather startling to say the least." From out of the blue he gave her a full-blown smile and asked, "Can you cite one example that would lead you to believe I'm such a bad person?"

"As a matter of fact, I can." Strangely, she felt confident and continued. "A witness has surfaced who incriminated you with suffocating Maggie Andrews, pushing her under the sand of the Great Dune at Sands Beach. That happened the weekend of the *Eclipse Festival*, and she was never seen again. Does that ring a bell?"

Alden hunched his shoulders as if he didn't understand Jeanette's accusation, and answered in a hostile voice. "Does this have something to do with Paul Getty?"

"You know exactly who I'm talking about."

"Well, if this preposterous charge came from Paul, you must consider the source and let your judgment be your guide." He flashed a condescending smile that infuriated Jeanette

"Judging from what Maggie wrote in her report to the FBI, she was about to pull the trigger on you and the evil empire that goes under the heading of the *Black Sunset*." Her words rushed out in a torrent of prevarication. She knew there was no such report to the FBI, but she couldn't help herself by telling such a story.

"That's an assertion hard to forget," he said while rolling his eyes skyward. He soon returned his gaze to focus on Jeanette, with eyes clouded in confusion. The smooth veneer he displayed earlier seemed to crumble in front of his inquisitor

He looked at her with a resentful, sullen glance while absently handling a paperweight. Jeanette noticed a grandfather clock ticking away in the corner during

the brief time that seemed like minutes before Alden spoke.

"You're telling me Maggie worked for the FBI?"

"Absolutely. She was an undercover agent investigating the *Black Sunset* and you were the first of its members ticketed to go down."

A look of false sincerity settled over him. "I had no idea."

"Believe it." Jeanette felt her confidence bubbling as she aggressively pushed ahead. "It will be but a short time before the jail door slams shut on Phillip 'Flip' Alden." What's one more little white lie, she thought with a smile.

"You've got it all wrong. Paul Getty was crazy when we went to college, and I'm certain he's even more so now. It's obvious he reworked the facts to meet his needs," indignation taking over his voice

Jeanette didn't reply for a moment, forcing herself to steady her nerves.

"I was in a quandary when I entered your office and unsure of myself, but that has now changed. I asked myself a question. Am I condemning the sin or the sinner? I'm favoring the latter."

Alden listened with rapt attention before replying. "That's very clever of you." A smile emerged after he regained his composure. "Each and every one of us has windmills to wrestle, and apparently yours is the moment of indecision you now face. But I must add, you truly have a flair for the dramatic."

"I do what I have to."

"There's nothing the matter with that, that's the American way," Alden said with a flashing smile.

"I came to talk to you about your attack on O'Brennan, and the fact you left him for dead, and now we end up talking about Maggie Walther. I want to know here and now why you attacked my husband like you did?"

"It would be best you didn't know." He produced a savage look accompanied by an obnoxious laugh.

An uncomfortable moment passed as Jeanette drifted off in deep thought. His answer surprised her and the ominous thrust of his reply began to register. For the first time in his company, she experienced fear and felt her mouth go dry. This meeting is a precursor to a dark and dangerous conclusion. Granted, he has earned the hate I feel for him, but now I have given him ample warning of my intentions and made a permanent enemy, a lethal one. The quest to visit him at his home grounds was foolhardy or stupid, probably both, she grudgingly admitted to herself.

Jeanette shrugged helplessly as O'Brennan's oft-spoken words returned to haunt her. 'Never confuse what you know with what you think you know'. Jeanette snapped back from her reverie at the sound of Alden's voice.

"Is there a point to your harangue?"

"The facts speak for themselves," Jeanette felt her nerves unraveling at her weak answer.

"I think your mind is involved in a vortex." Jeanette's puzzled look caused Alden to say with a razor-like voice, "Something resembling a whirlpool."

The sun suddenly filtered through the dark sky, placing a luster on the wet park around the lagoon that evaded the gloomy atmosphere of the office.

Alden's insolent remark forced an awkward silence until Jeanette plunged ahead. "I'm telling you this for a reason. I am putting you on notice that a line has been drawn in the sand." You should go on but don't belabor the point, Jeanette counseled herself.

It was one of those moments when war was declared.

She looked at Alden's arrogant smile and felt the need to scream in frustration. "You don't really get it, do you?"

"No, I guess I don't, but it will be fun to hear your explanation."

"I have dedicated my life to getting even for what you did to O'Brennan."

Her harsh words caused his face to turn red in anger. "That's very laudable of you, but you must understand one loses her objectivity when getting too close." Instantly a smile replaced his gloomy appearance as he asked, "You've heard the old adage about people in glass houses, haven't you?" He looked pleased with his verbal assault.

Aware the end of the conversation was near; Jeanette needed to finish in a rush, but the words she wanted died on her lips.

Finally recovering, she said, "Don't you have a shred of moral integrity in your body?"

Alden opened his hands to her in a gesture of "Why would you ask such an irrelevant question?"

Silence quickly settled over the room except for the ticking clock, sounding like the steady beat on a snare drum.

At the same moment, two minds heading in opposite directions arrived at the same conclusion. Jeanette reminded herself she was going to help Alden to an early grave; while in turn he looked at his visitor and thought, you don't know it, lady, but your days are numbered. His expression didn't change, but the jaundiced eyes he cast in her direction spoke volumes. He finished with, "What falls, falls; that you can depend on. Let's do it again sometime." Alden made a slight gesture with his hand. Jeanette O'Brennan had been summarily dismissed

After their sharp exchange of words, Jeanette left the office shaking with fear, a rare emotion for her. She was having trouble sorting out her thoughts as she walked out the front door into the fresh air. The sun was shining but not in her mind.

Jeanette had incorrectly reasoned she could power her way through Alden with intimidation and force him into an error of judgment. But that didn't happen. The fact finally sunk in that he had turned the tables and toyed with her like she was a child. She came up with no answer when she asked herself if she had overplayed her hand.

Mentally reviewing a checklist of what had to be done in the immediate future, a visit to Duke Frontier, the tattoo artist topped Jeanette's list. Nagging thoughts of a smiling Phillip Alden wouldn't go away while driving to the tattoo parlor on Niagara Street.

Phillip Alden understood his capricious makeup, and guarded against displaying it in public. For him, striking a balancing between his professional career as a lawyer and that of a killer-for-hire, while keeping it secret, had been difficult, but rewarding.

His angry thoughts raced back to Jeanette O'Brennan's visit not five minutes earlier when she had served notice on him. Her "line in the sand" admonition that she intended to get even for what he did to O'Brennan further infuriated him.

She is trouble on the way, he thought, but nothing more than a grain of sand in the eye. He had to admit, however, he did admire her gritty display of bravado. An old hand at the art of murder, thoughts of how seriously he should take her threat nudged his logic. The conclusion he reached was typical of a man inclined toward mayhem. He would need time to formulate plans for eliminating her.

Duke's Tattoo Parlor was much the way O'Brennan described it. Colored designs covered two walls with the back wall devoted to memorabilia from Harkers, a rundown neighborhood district on the waterfront that exclusively existed for the sailors of the Atlantic Destroyer Division. The playground for men of the sea finally succumbed to the wrecking ball under the guise of a federally funded program labeled *urban renewal*.

Jeanette called, "Yoo-hoo, anyone home?"

From the back room came a muffled, "Don't get nervous out there, I'll be right along."
"

It seemed to Jeanette she waited a half hour before the curtain parted and a bald-headed, wrinkled man well past mandatory retirement age entered, raising his hand in greeting. He looked in his eighties but one would never know.

"It is Mr. Forrester, am I right?"

"Who's askin'?" Forester's voice creaked like it needed oil.

"Jeanette O'Brennan."

Duke Forester appeared cold and remote with a touch of crankiness thrown in for good measure.

This guy is definitely a sketch with a sour attitude, Jeanette thought.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Jeanette O'Brennan, Jack's wife."

"Ya' sure are an eye-catcher." The wisp of a man measured Jeanette from head to toe through little slits that revealed blue eyes. "How'd ya' like a tattoo?"

"Thank you for your compliment, and no thank you about the tattoo."

"I didn't expect somebody like you. The big man said you was pretty, but you're better than that. What kinda' wheels ya' got?"

Jeanette laughed. "You're pretty frisky for an old guy, aren't you?"

"

Duke didn't laugh but offered the hint of a smile. "It goes with my business."

"

"If it's that important." Jeanette raised her skirt a couple of inches above her knees, revealing shapely legs. "How's that?" She couldn't hide the satisfaction in her voice.

Forester looked at Jeanette with a blank face. "I guess the big man weren't lyin'."

What does that mean? Jeanette thought. He's a crafty one even if he is on the lecherous side.

"How is Bridgeton's favorite son?"

"You heard what happened?" Forester nodded in what Jeanette thought a concerned effort. She had seen his serious and horny side, and they looked much alike, but when would his happy face surface?

"Is he gettin' better?"

"Come see, come saw." She tilted her hand back and forth.

"What does that mean?"

"It means just that. He'll make it, but it will not be easy." Jeanette appeared to choke and Duke noticed her misted eyes.

"It will be jake, just wait and see. Let's sit down and you can tell old Duke what happened. The moment the old tattoo artist took Jeanette by the elbow to lead her to a rickety chair, an unspoken alliance formed between the two. During that fleeting space in time, Duke Forester, with an old man's touch, became

Jeanette's father confessor. "Sit down, girl, an tell me 'bout it. Start from the beginning."

Jeanette did. "I'm certain he'll back off this Sands Beach skeleton incident once he recovers. If you want to know the truth, I believe he'll be gun-shy when it comes to detective work."

"Put that thought outta' your head. Old Jack's tougher than a dollar steak. Why, I remember the day he first come in here. We've been friends since then, you know."

He carried on about O'Brennan for thirty minutes without a break. He goes on and on and never says a thing, Jeanette thought.

"It was me that thought up putting that plastic tube through your hair with the mace, remember?"

"Yes, I do. I'd like to tell you about O'Brennan's incident and why I came to visit you."

"Go 'head, child, Duke's all ears."

The retelling of Jack's assault and his brush with death caused difficult moments for Jeanette, but she pushed through the gruesome tale.

"That's a bad thing happened to the big man. Do you know who done it?"

"

"Pretty certain.

"

"Who was it?"

"Phillip Alden.

"

"The hot-shot lawyer in town?"

"The very same," Jeanette said in a business-like voice.

"Whatcha' gonna' do?"

Her voice harsh with meaning, she blurted out, "Kill him!"

"Not pleasant news I'm hearin'." He paused to scratch his head. "Revenge is not for a winner like you."

Jeanette slowly nodded. "Mr. Forrester, hear me out. I need your help."

"Where do I fit in?"

Duke rose and shuffled to the front window. Withdrawing a blue pock-a-dot handkerchief from a hip pocket, he wiped his mouth. Shuffling as he returned to his chair opposite Jeanette, he said, "Anything you ask."

"I want you to figure out how I should do it.

"

"I gonna' say this once, and then we'll forgit it, okay?"

Jeanette stared at him without answering.

"You made a buncha' mistakes before you started. First off, ya' shouldn't have told me. Thoughts like them are better kept in that pretty head of yours. Have you told somebody else?"

"Just O'Brennan's friends.

"

"My second thought is, wonder if ya' can you handle it."

"Where there's a will there's a way. I didn't get where I am by being a lady. Mr. Forrester, all I can think of is the memory of O'Brennan lying unconscious in the ICU unit."

Duke interrupted Jeanette. "We all live with memories. Some good, some not so good."

"That may well be, but this is a bad one. Before I knew he'd survive, I spent two of the most dreadful days of my life in the recovery unit at Bridgeton

General. I made a decision then and there that regardless of what happened to O'Brennan, Phillip Alden is well on his way to being a dead man."

"Does that last sentence mean what I think it does?"

"Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"Suppose he didn't do it, what then?"

Jeanette set her chin firmly. "Let's stop supposing. Do you understand what I just said?"

Duke's withered face displayed a question was on the way.

"Go ahead, ask it," Jeanette said.

"My wife used to know what I was thinkin'." Duke seemed to momentarily drift back in time. "Well, that was then, and this is now."

Jeanette motioned him to ask his question.

"Can I give you that tattoo?"

She laughed. "You're impossible. You still haven't told me what I want to hear."

"I'll help any way I can."

"Let's talk about this Alden. From what I know, he's wealthy and extremely arrogant. The fact of the matter is, nothing fits. I don't know how to take him out."

"Killing that guy will be like tryin' to catch a chicken in a barnyard."

Jeanette laughed, but could not think of a suitable answer.

He took his own good time, but in the end provided Jeanette with an answer.

"I just thought of something. Run this Alden feller into a tunnel, then throw a safety blitz at 'im"

His veiled answer passed over Jeanette. "An interesting thought but I don't understand."

"You don't listen so very good, do ya'?"

"I'm listening, but I still don't get it."

"Greed. Everybody has it, some more than others. It's that simple," Duke snapped back. "Find out what his greed's about; you find his soft spot. Has a nice ring to it, don't it?" Duke sagely nodded.

"How do I get him in this tunnel you talk about?"

For the first time since she'd been in his company Duke smiled, then laughed. "Can't put a word to it. I don't know, Missy. I just don't know."

"I thought you could help." Jeanette fought back tears.

"Now don't start cryin', Missy. Old Duke will come up with something. My mind's sharp as a tack, but it ain't that way now. Ya' better come back in a couple of days and I'll tell ya' how to do it."

Jeanette stood to leave with a stern look. "If I come back you better call me Jeanette instead of that stupid Missy, do you understand?"

Duke laughed. "The big man told me you was hard as the middle of da' street, and now I believe 'im. When you come back, you better call me Duke instead of that stupid Mr. Forrester, do you understand?"

She smiled and thought what a nice person this little man is. She could understand why O'Brennan befriended him.

"Jeanette, do ya' know you're the fly in the ointment?"

"I know that." She smiled. "Duke, you are a precious man." She crossed the waiting room to look at a wall of multi-colored designs.

"Did you do all these drawings?" Jeanette said with a sweep of the hand.

He gave her a no-account shrug. "It's what I do." Jeanette continued to take in the various tattoos

"Ya' thinking about it, ain't ya'?"

Duke pushed out of his chair and left the room, soon returning with a three by five card

"Persuade me," she impatiently directed.

"How's this?" Duke handed her the card. "That's the pickure the big man showed me the first time he came in here. Had somethin' to do with that Freddie Gill thing."

Jeanette looked at the filing card showing a hand-drawn half-dollar sized three-leafed shamrock with a bent stem.

She smiled. "That's the shamrock design O'Brennan talked about. Each person had one petal tattooed on his or her shoulder. If you put on this design," she held the card up to Duke, "would it hurt?"

"Not 'specially. Take my word fer it."

"Could you make it the size of a quarter?"

"You bet your sweet patootie. Any size you want."
"

"In green?"

"All shamrocks are green, ya' know."

"All right, Duke." Jeanette gave him her best smile. "I want it on my left shoulder."

"Care to tell me why you changed yer mind?"

"I guess it was a matter of heart." Jeanette sighed. "Besides, it will be something to hold on to."

The old-timer stood with difficulty. "Come into my workroom."

She followed him through the curtains.

"I won't get AIDS, will I?"

For the first time, Duke seriously laughed. His laugh was creaky and sounded like he was out of practice at being happy. After seating her next to an instrument stand, he tottered to a glass-front cabinet and withdrew a package of needles.

"These needles are sterile, so don't mind 'bout AIDS."

"That's comforting. You have a nice laugh, it's too bad you don't use it more."

"There ain't much to laugh at lately." Duke nervously cleared his throat. "Jeanette, ya' 'ave ta' take yar' blouse off for me to print ya'."

"Duke intently watched her remove her blouse. His shaking finger directed her to sit, all the time surveying her ample chest. With an unsteady hand he rubbed her shoulder with alcohol.

"Don't worry, it won't bite ya'. What ya' gonna feel is a buncha' pin pricks."

A strange sensation seized her and soon Jeanette felt swept up by the humming of the hand-held needle. Stopping of the humming caused her to look at Duke.

His wandering eyes seemed to focus on the sensational cleavage caused by her low-cut bra. He couldn't look away from the erotic scene even though he knew she was watching.

"Duke, I haven't all day."

"I want ta' get this right."

The humming started again only to stop after too brief a time for Jeanette. She looked up again to see his shining eyes riveted on her front.

"Duke Forrester, you are nothing more than a Peeping Tom." Duke didn't reply, but his face showed his embarrassment.

"I can see you'll not finish this tattoo until I take care of business. There's nothing more to see, you dirty old man, so quit dreaming and get on with your work."

The humming again started without a further word from Duke. Thirty minutes later he rose from his stool and puffed out his cheeks. Producing a mirror to display his effort, he proudly proclaimed, "Whoah, the end of a perfect day."

Jeanette looked at the reflection of a perfectly shaped green shamrock with a twisted stem

"Duke, it's wonderful."

"I do what I can."

"Could you add something else?"

"Whatever ya' say."

"Would you letter a HARKERS under the shamrock?"

"This is for the big man, ain't it?"

"Yes," she murmured

Fifteen minutes later, Jeanette stood at the front door ready to leave. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothin,' dear girl, nothin'. I was glad ta' do it."

While slipping two one hundred-dollar bills into his shirt pocket she bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'll be back in a day or so."

Looking over her shoulder, she waved goodbye and smiled. "Duke, you're a piece of work."

Several days later, Jeanette kept her word and returned to Duke's work place

"Well, now." The small man's face that looked like a concrete slab with cracks waved in salute. "It's good to see ya' again." She smiled at his flinty voice as he led her to a seat in the front waiting room.

Duke started her visit with a rush. "Ya' wanna' hear my thoughts on this Alden thing ya' were talkin' about?" Duke firmly asked.

"That's why I'm here."

"B'twixt you and me, hate takes no holiday when you involve yourself with the likes of that Alden guy, and he is his own person."

Jeanette caught his nervous tone as he anxiously rubbed his mouth.

"There are two sides of this, and I'll match his every turn of the screw."

"Yar' off to a very bad start, and life has a way of getting' even."

His gem of wisdom made sense, but she wasn't buying it.

"The last time we talked, you mentioned: 'Run him into a tunnel, and then throw a safety blitz at him'. Since knowing O'Brennan, we've watched football on weekends, and I know a little about the game. What I don't understand is how you know such a thing as a safety blitz."

"I have a TV and watch games like everybody else, but back when I played it might have been called a stunt, but I ain't sure."

"You played football?" Jeanette excitedly asked.

"Yar' surprised that I played, ain't ya'?"

"A little," she sheepishly answered.

"Did I play football, you ask. Listen Missy. . . Jeanette, when I carried the ole' pigskin, nobody could catch me this end of the state. Made all-city the three years I played," Duke admitted proudly. He led her across the room to a battery of mementoes on the far wall. There, in front of her, hung a picture, brown with age of fifteen teenagers decked out in tattered jerseys wearing crude leather helmets much like the head gear gladiators wore dating back to the glory days of the Roman Empire. Jefferson High School, 1921 City Champs was written on the bottom.

"That's me." Duke pointed to a smiling youth wearing a jersey with perpendicular stripes. "Back then, they didn't have numbers on the jerseys like they do now." He made a happy sigh. "That was seventy some years ago, and now history."

"My word!" Jeanette exclaimed. At that moment, she acquired an enduring respect for her new friend. "Duke, I think that's wonderful, but can we talk about what I came for?"

"That I can." He led her through his yesterday starting with his ride to the shore with Al Simons, the owner of the *Eagle*. "As I stood looking at the water, it came to me. Sands Beach holds the answer."

His thought made Jeanette smile. The beach had proven to be a springboard for such happy events as marrying O'Brennan, living at the cottage during hot weather, and then the bittersweet memory of Edna's rampage, resulting in unveiling the Great Dune skeleton.

"That's the place for ya' ta' do this thing to Alden. I'm not sayin' it's goin' ta' be easy, far from it, cause it ain't." Jeanette found his intense look discomfiting.

"Appears you're right."

"Ya' don't look worried."

"My answer may surprise you, but I'm not," she said with a glint in her eye.

Duke tap-danced around the subject while Jeanette waited for the question that would eventually come and finally did.

"How do ya' plan on killing this bastard?"

"With a gun!" She repeated herself. "I plan on killing him with a gun." She anticipated a response, but instead Duke frowned and scratched his head, choosing not to respond, but rather disappear in himself for moments on end before at last he spoke

"Do ya' know how to shoot?"

She offered a "no" through pursed lips.

"Jeanette, what ya' want, and what ya' get ain't always the same. Your, 'I can do it attitude' won't work if ya' can't shoot. What ya' got planned is little more than business as usual, but that ain't the way it is."

She sighed while looking away. "I should feel offended, but I'm not. Duke, you're entirely right, now what do you suggest?"

"I just thought of something! Do ya' know that guy, Sean Donegan?"

"Certainly. He and his wife own the *Kinsale* restaurant out on the beach. When O'Brennan and I stay at the cottage, we frequently go up there to eat. We're good friends."

"He's the man." Jeanette's puzzled look prompted Duke to explain

"Ya' don't know how to shoot; he does. Sean was once a shooter.

"

"That can't be. He was a carpenter when he lived in Boston."

"Do ya' know what he did before he went to Boston?" He searched her face for a sign of understanding. "I thought not," Duke said when Jeanette didn't answer. "He was an assassin for the IRA in Northern Ireland before he came to the States."

"Well, he's still a nice man." Jeanette rationalized defensively. She looked away signaling their talk had ended. Leaving the shop, the caricature of a vengeful woman called over her shoulder, "We'll talk again."

"She's special, that one, but I'm scared fer' her. Her hate is leading her to becoming undone," Duke whispered through shriveled lips.

Day after day Alden thought of setting aside his irritation with the O'Brennan woman, but each day his annoyance over not reaching a foolproof plan to kill her continued to grow.

His task was taking on a dramatically different texture than the one he originally planned. Alden wanted to kill Jeanette earlier in the week, but got sidetracked when killing a high-ranking admiral in Norfolk became a high priority. A sixth sense told him to reserve judgment about when to strike. It was in his best interest to take time to sort this problem out. Favorable opportunities have a way of coming around, and when the time comes, he had the requisite skills to make it happen. Alden lived with the belief that success comes to those who wait.

Jeanette appeared clear-eyed and composed as she greeted John Lloyd in her restaurant.

"John, let's sit out on the deck and watch the boat traffic pass through the channel."

After small talk about her husband's condition, Jeanette's eyes indicated she was about to ask a question, and this simple gesture alerted him trouble was on the way.

"If you were in my shoes, how would you approach this Alden character?" Knowing her so well, John understood there was a greater meaning to the question than it sounded. "Are you talking about what you told me in ICU? 'That he'll feel death around the next time you meet'."

Jeanette sighed as she watched a passing fishing boat heading for the river. "What I'm talking about has nothing to do with Pollyanna dreams of right and wrong," Jeanette said with a bite to her words.

"There's something you're not connecting with. You have options don't you know? You're stubborn and

single-minded and, granted, those are qualities a killer needs, but what you're thinking places you in the same category. I hate being heavy-handed, but this is no job for a woman. That's the way I see it."

His comments made her at first feel uneasy, but then her strong will took over as she pugnaciously pushed her jaw toward Lloyd. "I'm tired of hearing 'this is a man's world'. I'm not walking away from this!" The shadow of death loomed in her fiery eyes. "When the time is right, I'll meet Alden in a one-on-one situation, and I'll do him in with a vengeance."

"Thoughts of killing Alden and living a happy life this day and everyday after will not be an end to itself. The way I see it, you're on some kind of campaign to get yourself killed."

She silenced him with a wave of the hand, causing a slight shrug in reply from Lloyd.

"Jeanette, for the last time, this is no trivial warning. You'll be a fool if you continue to think about killing Alden and walking into the face of a life-threatening stand-off you have no way of knowing about."

She intimidatingly glared at him. "You have no right to speak to me that way!"

"I have every right, and our long friendship makes it so," Lloyd said in a strident voice.

Jeanette threw her hand out in a, "What do you mean by that?" gesture.

Lloyd carried on before she could speak. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, and don't give me any of that 'I don't understand bit!' I'm a firm believer in destiny, and how it touches each and every person." Jeanette simply shrugged, knowing full well he was right.

Time passed as Lloyd eyed the gentle flowing channel water. At the moment, a low slung fishing boat loaded with nets and white buckets eased under the low

bridge on its way to the cove and its home dock. Twenty-feet long, the boat looked like a rust bucket with patches of red lead painted here and there to battle the never-ending ravages that salt water brings to all seagoing vessels. Although looking old, it appeared seaworthy and properly maintained

A lone fisherman wearing a black baseball cap with a red B steered from the rear. Attired in a yellow rain jacket and matching bib overalls tucked into Wellington boots, he waved a greeting.

Lloyd returned the gesture, and thought of how this man was returning from the bay after finishing a quest for an honorable living, while Jeanette's intent, unlike this simple man's goal, was bent on destruction.

Drifting back to the present, Lloyd pointed out, "Jeanette, you're like a female Don Quixote fighting a windmill on the wrong side of the street. This hate of yours isn't working."

"If what you're saying is true, then I'm guilty like Cain," Jeanette said contemptuously.

"Climbing into the Bible is something I can also do. Alden will plan to cast the last stone."

Lloyd stormed off the deck without speaking another word, leaving a flabbergasted Jeanette in his wake.

Heading toward Bridgeton and his lunch with Cal Redout at the *Eagle*, he felt complete frustration and for the first time in his life understood the word defeat.

Thirty minutes after leaving Jeanette's restaurant, John Lloyd settled in with Cal Redout over coffee at the *Eagle*, a glimpse of concern on his face.

"We've got trouble with Jeanette. I just left her and she closed her mind to everything I told her." A look of failure settled on his eyes. "Cal, there's a storm brewing in her mind, and I'm at a loss to change its direction."

His friend nodded in understanding. "For what she's been through with Jack, your news comes as no surprise. It's hard to put a finger on it, but I believe thoughts of killing Alden are making her a little crazy."

Al Simons, the friendly owner of the *Eagle* silently refilled their cups. This wasn't the time to interrupt and ask questions, but before long, he'd be fully informed about Jeanette's future plans.

"She's a pretty bright lady for such irrational thoughts," Cal suggested. "Give her several days to think about what you told her and she'll come around to her senses, and she has plenty of those. Finally she'll realize she's overmatched with Alden."

"That reasoning doesn't explain why her obsession is taking on a texture of its own. Even though you think she'll get over her wild thoughts, I don't see her forgetting them. Contrary to what you believe, I see her continuing to build on this compulsion until the pot begins to boil. And believe me, my friend, it's going to happen."

Cal nodded in agreement while pushing his coffee in a circle on the bar. "I hate to agree with you, but I believe you're right." The doctor turned medical examiner exhaled heavily. "She will stop at nothing. This 'trial by fire' stage of life she's going through is evidence of a woman tormented by crisis. John, like you, I feel a bit frightened knowing Jeanette could find herself dead."

"Cal, try this on for size. Time is passing since Jeanette revealed her intentions to Alden. If he were the stone killer we give him credit for being, wouldn't it be reasonable to assume he'll strike before she does?"

"Strangely, that's one scenario I hadn't considered. John, you better mention it to Jeanette so she'll be prepared for him."

"I did, but she blew me off. Jeanette needs help in pulling this off. Now whom would she go to for such help? Certainly not us," Lloyd speculated.

Simons stood in front of them with eyes surveying the patrons and ears taking in the conversation. "I don't know if this is worth mentioning, but I drove Duke Forester out to Sands Beach yesterday."

"Why did you do that?" Lloyd asked.

"He told me it was important that he study the beach."

"Did he mention why?"

"No, John, he didn't. In fact, he didn't say a word, just looked up and down the sand."

"What do you think of it?"

"I'm stumped, but Duke is such a crafty old codger, you never know what's running through his mind."

Time passed while Al busied himself serving his mid-morning drinkers. Finally, drifting back to Cal and John, he offered a new thought to their conversation.

"What would you say if that old bird is somehow involved with Jeanette?"

"Al, it's the same old story, I have no idea. I guess what she does at the moment depends on her frame of mind, and we know what that is. Who can provide the information she needs? Jeanette needs expert advise to pull this off, and don't tell me Duke can help her," Cal said.

"I can think of one person who can send Jeanette on her way. If she talks to Sean Donegan, well, you know his background, need I say more?"

"John, you've said enough," Cal replied while slipping off his stool. "I'm going back to my office to try and forget this ugly experience."

"I'm with you; got to check matters out at the Aud," John said.

While Cal Redout and John Lloyd headed away from the relative quiet of the *Eagle*, Jeanette was seated in her restaurant penciling in preliminary plans to eliminate Alden.

At heart, Jeanette was a hard line realist who knew where to learn how to shoot.

Sean Donegan was seated behind the bar watching TV when she entered the *Kinsale*. Greeting her with a nod, he advised her she was looking fit.

"And so are you," she said while stepping up on a stool.

"As ever was." His unpretentious manner comforted her.

"I'd like to tell you about my day, so trust me when I say this is not a social call."

Donegan searched her face with a puzzled look. "Does this 'ave somethin' to do with Jack, good man that he is?"

"It does. I need some of your time."

"Come away," he said, leading her to a corner table. "Th's nice and quiet here. Now that we've settled, tell me about yar' day and all."

Jeanette obliged him by revealing what was said from earlier talks with Duke Forester and Phillip Alden. "Can you deliver what I need to know?"

"Sweet lady, what would that be about?"

"Revenge is the reason I'm telling you this. I want to kill Alden with a gun, and I need you to teach me." A hint of impatience lodged in her words. "I know nothing about guns."

"Ya' havin' me on, are ya'?"

"Hardly!" Indignation frosted her hard-edged voice.

"And you're telling me ya' want to learn about shootin'."

"I am. And it's something when learned, I must do by myself."

"Whoa!" Donegan said. His surprised look displayed doubt.

"You don't approve?" Jeanette asked with a nervous energy.

"Donegan momentarily appeared lost in thought until he finally spoke. "Mores the pity ya' feel this way. Back up a little and cool down."

A catch caught in her throat as she spoke. "This is an eye for an eye thing."

Donegan raised an eyebrow but didn't speak while quiet reigned for several minutes. "I just don't understand," he softly responded.

"Sean, you don't have to understand to help me."

"Don't I now?"

"No, you don't. It won't be an round about way, but up front where he can see me do it."

At that moment Donegan recognized where the conversation was headed but didn't reply.

Jeanette gave the Irishman a half embarrassed smile. "Shoot him on sight, that's what it's called."

"Ya' do go on, don't ya', Jeanette O'Brennan? It's a hard woman, you are."

Boisterous laughter filled the dining room as a group of golfers found places at the bar, momentarily breaking the scheming duo's level of concentration.

Jeanette presented Sean with her most engaging smile. "I plan at being good a good shooter."

Donegan fixed her with a curious gaze while trying to shape his thoughts. He laced his fingers into a triangle while shaking his head in a befuddled manner. "I lack yar' confidence, and besides, it isn't that easy. There's a price tag for everything we do, and life can be nasty while yar' doing it. Thar's no safe side to this. You should walk away and give it up."

"Don't take what I say lightly because my mind is made up. If you won't help, I'll find someone on the pecking order who will."

Not willing to help her but knowing he must, Sean helplessly cried out, "Katie, bar the door. There's an ol' expression that says it best. It's a wicked old world, and all and all."

He could see the question settling on her eyes, so he answered before she could ask. "Do I have to draw you a picture? Of course I'll help ya'."

"

Her sparkling eyes flickered in an understanding way.

"In that case it would appear we need an understanding."

"Mum's the word," Donegan said with a smile.

Time passed as they sat in silence until Donegan spoke up. "Let's be having a look around." He took Jeanette's arm with a come my way hold. "What say we go to the basement?"

"Let's go," Jeanette said decidedly. Be a careful listener, she counseled herself while carefully navigating the stairs. Her eyes adjusted to the bright light while taking in Donegan's firing range. The room painted white ran the length of the restaurant, roughly a hundred feet by twenty-four according to Jeanette's estimate.

"The one thing I'm good at happens here, and that's what I'm goin' do for ya'." With eyes gleaming, Sean led his student to a table with four revolvers placed side by side. Jeanette's stomach turned over when she spotted the guns.

"From now on, ya' must remember everything I say like I was a voice in yar' head. I'm goin' give ya' all sorts of bits and pieces of what ta' do, but I'm remindin' ya' they're goin' every which way."

Jeanette's lips formed a straight line as Donegan picked up a revolver. Passing the gray weapon from one hand to the other, he started his discourse on killing. "Keep yar' eyes open at all times, an' forget what you think is right and wrong. Just remember thar' are no ground rules with what ya're about to learn, and never play patty-cake."

Jeanette laughed at Donegan's patty-cake comment and immediately realized her mistake. Donegan returned the gray instrument of death to the table with a crash. "If ya' think this is a joke, then think twice or you'll end up in the hospital like Jack!"

"That was cruel and unnecessary," Jeanette sputtered.

"I don't give a snuff what ya' think is cruel and unnecessary, but I'm thinkin' ya' don't have enough iron in your blood. Now watch this!" He snatched up the revolver he had slammed on the table, inserted a clip, and fired six shots nonstop into the heart of the human silhouette.

Jeanette stared in awe at Donegan. "Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

He answered her question with a shrug while allowing his memory to drift back to his youth, and then he modestly smiled. Donegan explained matter-of-factly how his father had gone out to buy cigarettes and unknowingly wandered into a firefight between IRA members and a British Army patrol. After a stray Brit bullet killed his father, Donegan became a disciple of the Irish Resistance when he was sixteen. From that time on, he served in capacities scaling up from lookout to hit man. With the killing to both the good and bad going on, he decided it would never end. That's when he made a clean break from all the violence and headed for Boston at the ripe old age of twenty-five.

"Those are the facts, an' that was the way of life in Belfast, don't ya' know."

Although saddened by Donegan's dreadful experience in Northern Ireland, Jeanette found her rising euphoria real.

"If ya' want a job done right, ya' got ta' learn how ta' do it." Moving with a graceful fluid motion, he settled into a firing position without a weapon. "Now you follow my example."

Jeanette followed his lead but felt clumsy and this annoyed her. "I feel so awkward in this position," she told him.

"That's the hard part. Just block it from your mind. This is not a beauty contest ya're goin' ta'," Donegan replied when she told him her feelings. "Ya' can't go off half-cocked no more than ya' can rush good beer. Jeanette, ya' have to start with a good base and go from there. Don't worry, everything will fall in place."

"I want to start shooting!" She coldly replied.

"Ya're a little too impatient far me, and need more patience than ya're showin'."

"I want to get good in a hurry."

"It isn't as easy as they make it out on TV. Being good will help ya', but don't forget luck."

"I'll follow your instructions to the letter."

From the look on his face, she realized he meant business. When all was ready, Donegan's nod triggered her to reach for a revolver.

Approaching the task with apprehension, she followed his lead. Jeanette felt like she was walking on a balance beam while picking up the revolver. The feel of it was not as expected and forced her into a face. "It seems so heavy."

"Aye, that it is." Donegan removed the weapon from her shaking hand and smoothly inserted a clip with a loud click. "Ya' got the spotlight, so show me what ya' can do."

Jeanette felt her heartbeat race as she prepared to shoot. After firing her first shot, a sudden exhilaration overtook her, picking up her spirits. Flushed with excitement, she felt a subtle calm settle in, making her feel good all over. Her bright eyes triumphantly flashed success.

"Oh, my, can you believe it?" The elation in her voice bubbled out on Donegan. "I never experienced anything like this in my life," she giggled.

"Why are you so happy? Ya' haven't hit the target yet."

"That doesn't matter! Now I feel confident about handling this gun."

"I remember a sayin' from the ol' country that goes like this: Confidence is something you have before ya' understand the situation."

Disregarding Donegan's mild rebuke, Jeanette forged ahead. "I just know I can do this, and do it well."

"Ya' have every right ta' feel grand, but this is just the start. I want ya' to empty the clip at the target, and we'll go from there."

After firing five shots, the last hitting the target's edge, a different sensation seized Jeanette, causing a feeling of being in control.

"That's a start, and not a bad one either. Tonight's lesson is finished, but I expect you tomorrow night at the same time. I'm goin' ta' give you a check list to run through yar' mind. Never panic and don't let yar' concentration escape ya'. When yar' plannin' this thing with Alden, come up with a trouble plan that gives ya' an alternative if he don't act like ya' expect him to. Also have a thought about getting away

without being marked if things go bad. Remember that tension colors yar' judgement, and there's a cabuttle of things waitin' ta' go wrong, so keep yar' eyes open at all times. That's the way of life, don't ya' know. Those are the facts, so I plan on seein' ya' tomorrow."

And return she did for the next day and the thirteen that followed. Between times at Donegan's firing range, she spent her waking hours reaching for two goals. The first and most important was overseeing O'Brennan's road to recovery. With his gradual but steady improvement, Jeanette was free to spend more time at her restaurant. She pursued her second goal with a vengeance, constantly reviewing in her mind Donegan's checklist for killing.

The last evening of Jeanette's two-week session with Donegan was spent in a review similar to that of a college student cramming for a final exam.

"Let's take a look at how this will go down. Alden already knows yar' comin' far' him; ya' already told him that."

"Sean, I know. You don't have to remind me."

"Well, I am. He knows the only way ya' can kill him is with a gun. That being the case, he'll wear a vest. Ta' get what ya' want, ya' gotta' shoot him in the head, an don't turn into a pillar of salt while yar' doin' it. "

His admonition caused Jeanette to shudder. "How close should I get to him?"

"I'd say the ideal distance is four feet, which will position him outside his attack range. Any closer and he can knife ya'; farther away and ya' can miss 'em. Just remember ya' got but six shots. Practice pulling the gun out of yar' jacket until it becomes automatic."

As Jeanette left the *Kinsale*, she sensed that she and the little man from Northern Ireland had become kindred spirits.

This was his sixth day home since being discharged from the hospital. Well on his way to overcoming his severe injury, Jack O'Brennan looked rested and fit. He appeared lost in thought as Jeanette entered the living room, her greeting nudging him out of his reverie.

"How was your day, O'Brennan?"

He greeted her with a nod. "Just fine. I have some great news."

Jeanette raised an eyebrow but made no comment.

"I'm golfing with Tony Gerald next week," he said with a smile.

His wife sighed deeply. "I'd say that was a little early, wouldn't you?"

"Now don't get upset on me. Doctors Gerald and Macario are going to play, and I'm riding with Tony, that's all. I promise I won't even swing a club."

Relieved, Jeanette kissed him. "Are you in the market for an interesting read?"

"Tell me what you found."

She presented him with a knowing look. "I picked up a late edition of the *Citizen-Tribune*," making a go-ahead gesture to O'Brennan. "Danny has written an interesting article about Alden's death."

Death on Sands Beach
 Danny Tremonte
 Investigative Reporter

Superlatives aren't needed to describe the compelling sight of Sands Beach in the morning. Just experiencing it is enough. I stood in a confused state while surveying the lay of the land where three newsworthy incidents took place within the month. By an unexplained accident of nature, Hurricane Edna moved the Great Dune twelve hundred feet into Chesapeake Bay, serving as a reminder of the awesome natural powers

around us. This sudden quirk of Mother Nature unearthed a skeleton, later identified as Maggie Walther. And then on Monday, Phillip Alden's body was discovered at the same site with a razor sharp stiletto protruding from his abdomen.

Mortally wounded and awash in pain during his last chilling moments of life, Alden bled to death face down in the white sand of Sands Beach. His death served as an anomaly in that it occurred not miles away, but at the tranquil spot where he spent so much time as a college student.

Flamboyant in style with flare for the unexpected, high-profile lawyer Phillip Alden acquitted himself with dignity in the courtroom. Nevertheless, honest to a fault as a defense attorney, he was occasionally accused by some of twisting the facts to meet his needs, a charge constantly leveled at other members of his profession as well. Few rivaled his expertise in the courtroom.

Events have proven the beach to be a perfect venue for what happened. Two days after the discovery of Alden's remains, a second sweep of the surrounding area, site investigators found a human arm, a humerus bone to be specific. Jimmy Childs, Lexington County Sheriff, ordered a DNA test.

A new twist to the story was added when I talked to Childs. Cool and unflappable with a lanky build and weathered face, he freely talked about his investigation and mentioned how cottage residents along the beach had been canvassed without favorable results.

When asked the hard question if he thought the deaths of Walther and Alden were somehow related, Childs carefully measured his words before replying. "Our efforts have been fruitless, and you must understand I can't invent evidence that isn't there. Be advised that we'll do what's necessary to uncover whatever evidence is out there."

Childs made a courtly shrug and spoke with a smile. "I'm not a starry-eyed police officer and I seriously doubt we'll ever find anything conclusive." I

asked him if he had personal thoughts about the unfortunate incident and he complied with a lengthy reply, at least for Childs. "That I do. There are a number of possibilities as to what happened. The first is what passed as a casual meeting with a stranger, and by some insane happenstance, Alden ended up dead. But that doesn't wash with me. That man carried the shadow of death with him. The odd progression of events leading up to his demise suggests he brought danger with him to the beach." I followed with the obvious question.

"Because he was wearing a bulletproof vest and pants. Now why would someone wear such protection if they didn't expect to be shot?

Maybe an oversimplification you may ask, but a practical one.

His was a question I couldn't answer, nor did I try. Instead, I asked why a DNA sample had been taken on Maggie Walther's (Sands Beach skeleton) remains. "I guess the instincts that come with being on the job for forty years took over and it seemed like the right thing to do. One pebble makes many waves but I doubt that will be true in this case."

Finally, I asked if the wilted rose found next to Alden's body was seen as a calling card from the assailant. Childs made a noncommittal shrug that indicated he had no explanation to offer.

I next talked to Dr. Cal Redout, currently serving as Chief of Forensic Medicine at Bridgeton Medical School and former head city pathologist. When asked if taking a sample from the recently uncovered skeleton and the more recently discovered arm bone were related, Redout merely shrugged an answer.

"It was at Sheriff Child's request that I undertook both procedures. At the time his request didn't make much sense, at least to me, but he insisted. I guess the instincts developed over a long career took over and his mind was on a different wavelength than mine."

A further search revealed that Maggie Walther, the Great Dune skeleton, lived at the same Fostertown Hotel that Phillip Alden did during their university days at Bridgeton and were inextricably involved with each other. Ironically, they both died near the same spot. Walther thirty-five years ago, Alden just recently.

Thoughts of the life and times of one of Bridgeton's foremost law enforcement personalities, Jack O'Brennan crossed my mind in preparing for this article. He is now recovering from a near fatal attack that occurred one night two weeks ago in a dark alley off Niagara Street.

As a sidebar, I have included an article on O'Brennan that I filed last year

O'Brennan Receives Coveted Award

No stranger to the Bridgeton crime scene, Jack O'Brennan received the annual "Good Fellow of the Year" award last night from the organization of the same name at the posh *Ritz Plaza Hotel* in downtown Bridgeton.

Now retired, O'Brennan, over the last decade, has carried the label, "Tracer of Old Killers". He gained this notoriety by solving the Freddie Gill case. If this name escapes your memory, this should cause it to return. O'Brennan uncovered the esteemed senior senator of this state as the brains behind a drug ring that controlled illicit narcotics distribution ranging from Florida to the nation's capital.

Not to be outdone by this achievement, O'Brennan tracked down the serial killer who over a period of thirty years claimed eleven victims. This case, the Smithbury Skeleton, earned him a national reputation for investigative work.

After considerable backtracking, I ended up talking to John Lloyd, current Director of Security at the Aud and confidant of O'Brennan's. He spoke freely about the attack. It seems O'Brennan had agreed to investigate the mysterious discovery of the Sands Beach skeleton. As he drew closer to a conclusion, O'Brennan pointed a finger at Alden as the killer. When asked if he believed Alden was responsible for the assault on

his friend, Lloyd responded acidly. "Absolutely! Alden knifed Jack, there's no doubt in my mind. Danny, you may ask how I know these facts. The bottom line between fact and supposition is whatever one chooses to make out of it, and my position is based on the latter."

Jeanette sat impassively watching O'Brennan read while noting the certain hard-to-define qualities of his had now returned, having disappeared in the wake of his attack. O'Brennan was well on his way to being up-to-speed.

O'Brennan paused in his reading to move into a more comfortable position in his chair, before continuing to read. The article forced him to replay his traumatic experience in the alley, causing him to shift his thoughts around before speaking. "What do you think of Danny's article?" O'Brennan asked as he hunched his shoulders as if to say it was beyond him.

Jeanette crinkled her nose with a mark of pleasure around her mouth. "It's like I've heard you say more than once, 'Bad companions bring bad luck'."

"And look what it got him," O'Brennan laughed shallowly.

A series of flashbacks crowded her mind featuring the thought of Alden lying facedown in the sand. Her conscience moved her to divulge the truth, but quickly thought better of it.

Jack O'Brennan shook his head uneasily. "It appears whoever was with him walked away free and clear."

The fact finally sunk in that O'Brennan was clueless to the facts surrounding Alden's death; they had passed over him.

"O'Brennan, you would be better off if you didn't know the details."

"What are you driving at? A puzzled O'Brennan asked.

She shrugged and smiled.

O'Brennan gave his wife an impish smile. "I can picture how it happened."

Jeanette momentarily considered how to frame her words, the start of a smile settling on her freckled face. "I know the feeling."
