

Edward Goble

Less Of Me

a novel

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For fellow travelers who, like me, struggle with themselves. Look beyond your weakness or perception of inadequacy and begin to serve, give, love and share. Joy may be found, not just in changing your self, but changing your focus.

Acknowledgments

Less of Me is the product of a 30-day whirlwind call National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, for short (www.nanowrimo.org). I found out about contest through a book by Chris Baty, *'No Plot, No Problem'*, in which he introduced the concept of banging out an entire novel in 30 days. Being somewhat self-competitive, I gave it a whirl. It was really fun and the end product, which you now hold, received enough positive reviews to make to to this point. You'll decide if it's actually good enough to go any further.

— Chapter 1 —

Andy's Weblog, November 1

Invisible

The worst part of being overweight and single is being invisible to the rest of the world. As a kid invisible sounds neat, sneaking into the girls locker room, eavesdropping on parents, real spy stuff. But now that there are a few years separating me from pubescence I've discovered that getting what you pray for can be a real drag. How can people love someone they can't see? I'm a paradox. I take up twice the physical space as most men, impossible to miss, yet somehow, completely invisible.

In the checkout line at the market my eyes never meet those of the checker. I am never given more than a glance, usually partnered with an edge of disdain as her eyes steer back to the belt full of food that, in her mind, is the last thing I need. Fat people shouldn't eat. It's worse at a restaurant. If I ever make the mistake of visiting a buffet-style eatery, any appetite I brought into the place is quickly squelched by the disapproving looks of both employees and patrons. They don't see me, they see my waistline. They don't see a man, they see an eating machine.

I know I'm not alone in this depressing dynamic. It's the same for homely people, old people and even skinny people. Thin people have it rough-- they get knocked around and pushed off the sidewalk and their

clothes hang from spindly limbs. Actually, I wish I had some clothes that draped, mine cling to every bulge like plastic wrap. Skinny girls do okay if they have big eyes and high cheeks, boney legs up to there and a “screw you” facial expression. Look at any magazine cover. They might suck prunes all day, but at least they aren’t invisible. I guess my face says, “Look away, now! Or I’ll eat you.”
I wouldn’t, though. Andy

Andy tilted his head and imagined a band of ravenous fat people foraging through the mall like the zombies from Dawn of the Dead. The beep of his phone ruined the visual.

“Andy,” he answered, as usual.

“My man! How’s it going out there?”

“Oh, you know, doin’ what I do.”

“That’s what I like to hear, got a deadline to meet you know.”

“Yeah. I don’t know, Will... I might need a little more time.”

“Time is something we don’t have, my prolific pal. The publisher wants a manuscript by Thanksgiving. That’s November 24th, you realize. Deadline for the fall catalog. We don’t deliver and they push us back to the following summer - that’s bad karma for us, Big’n.”

“I’m not gonna send up a piece of crap just to make a deadline.”

“Of course you won’t. It’ll be brilliant. Just get it done on time, that’s all.”

“You know, your little pep talks don’t really inspire my creative side.”

“You want a cheerleader call your mother.”

“I need a new agent.”

“And I need a bestseller from my number one author.”

“Yeah.”

“Now, Andy, I’m being serious about this. You’re at the top of your game. We have to keep up the momentum right now, there will be plenty of time to slow down and write your opus. We’ve got to feed the appetite for *Rance Broadback* that you created-- people want to know what happens next, people need it, they have to have it.

“You make it sound so serious. It’s not a polio vaccine for cripes-

sake, it's a friggin' spy novel."

"It's an important work of contemporary adult fiction. How's it coming, by the way?"

"I've got the pages all numbered, now I just have to fill in the rest," he said, which was actually pretty close to the truth. The fact was that Andy had wasted six months and was now staring at a nearly impossible deadline. But his agent probably wouldn't find any humor in that.

"Leave the comedy to Carlin, would ya?"

"It'll be done when it's done, all right?"

"Okay. I trust you... Did you hear that, Big Guy? I trust you."

"Yeah, okay, talk to you later." Andy clicked the phone shut and thought, "That guy really knows how to wind my clock." "*Big Guy*," he mocked, "Grrhh." Sometimes he had to remind himself that William Heard was the only agent in New York that would even look at his first book. The others all had some reason why *The President's Reception* wouldn't work for them. Will took a chance, and it changed Andy Boyd's life.

Pushing back from his computer desk, he stepped through the short hallway of his smallish, two story row house, just north of Fisherman's Wharf in North Beach. The neighborhood had been hit pretty hard by the quake in 1989, but the restoration effort had been miraculous. He bought this place with the royalties from the second Broadback novel, *A Ring and a Prayer*, which was the first time his name appeared on the bestseller lists.

Built in 1942 and updated in 1993 by the previous owners, the only thing he didn't like about the place was humping groceries up the stairs. At least he had a garage, a luxury in San Francisco. He was one of the oddballs that actually owned a car, a 2001 Buick that provided a custom fit for his generous hindquarters. Most people used BART, bikes and feet for transportation around the city, which Andy envied, but could not imagine. Anything that put him in competition for space, like finding a seat on a crowded train or bus, made him nauseous. He once bought a ticket on Southwest Airlines to attend a book signing in Southern California. When he got to the gate and found out the plane was open seating, he cancelled the appearance. He couldn't bring himself to board the airplane.

He entered the neatly kept kitchen space and pulled a clean glass from the strainer by the sink, filling it with crushed ice from the door of the refrigerator, he poured in a can of Chocolate Royale Slim-fast drink.

He looked in the refrigerator, as he always did, as if it might contain something new since the last time he peaked, shut it and walked to the living room bay window, which overlooked Chestnut Street. He loved the city. It wasn't really built for people of girth, but he loved it anyway. There was so much energy, so many unusual people, most of them focused and busy like they had been plugged in all night and had a full charge when they hit the streets the next morning. He could stand at his window and drink his diet shake, sometimes with a donut, for hours on end. The street held his imagination like a child watching presents under a glistening tree on Christmas Eve.

Andy sucked a coating of thick chocolate off an ice cube and splurt it back into his glass as he studied the street. The lunch crowd was beginning the daily walk-race to the local eateries, which was always fun to watch from above the fray, but Andy's eye locked on to a bike messenger wheeling to a stop outside a little deli on the corner, just down and across from his place. The young man seemed extra cautious as he locked his Trek and retrieved a small package and clipboard from his backpack. He scanned the street in each direction before entering the shop. The messenger exited moments later, stowed the clipboard and pedaled away as the owner of the deli, Mr. Martin-- pronounced *Marteen*, followed him to the threshold of the open door holding the small brown paper wrapped box. Looking back and forth down Chestnut himself, Mr. Martin finally moved the doorstep, a gallon can of Romano's Tomato paste, allowing the door to swing shut as he backed into the shop out of sight.

Andy watched for a few more minutes while his imagination tried to convince him that the same dark Lincoln had passed conspicuously in front of the business twice, the glass on the sides and back of the car tinted darker than the charcoal paint job. "If I stand here long enough the next book will write itself," he announced to the empty house as the ring of the phone once again interrupted his train of thought. It was his mother.

"I don't know, Mom, I'm doing fine. I'm just busy."

"Busy. I know. I think you're too busy, if you want to know. I think you work too much."

"Well, I don't. Really. Compared to most of the people in the city,

I'm an absolute sloth," Andy said to his biggest fan.

"Creative work is different, Andy. Don't feel lazy just because you are more introspective. You're like a fine wine, if you want the good stuff, you have to be patient." Janice Boyd was part mother, part Zen philosopher.

"Do you write your own material, Mother? Because that was just silly."

"I just know you. You are brilliant, you are creative, you are thoughtful and caring. You're one in a million, Andy. The world is a better place with you around."

"Now you're making me ill."

"I read your blog this morning."

"*Mother. Why?*"

"If you want your thoughts to be private then you shouldn't post them..."

"But..."

"And - you shouldn't have shown your mother how to subscribe. So it's your fault. I read it with my coffee."

"That's it, I'm going into hiding."

"Don't say that. I love it. I can't wait to read it each morning, but..."

"But?"

"Well, I'm concerned, that's all..."

"Mom, I..."

"Andy, I just wish you wouldn't dwell so much on your weight, you are a handsome, wonderful young man."

"I'm nearly one hundred pounds overweight."

"You are not."

"Mom, I don't have time for this conversation. Really, I've got a deadline."

"Okay. I'm sorry... Are you eating?"

"Mother? Geez. Can we talk about something else?"

"Well, Marg is taking me to San Jose to a religious crusade tomorrow night - that should be interesting."

"That Jimmy Wheat thing? I've heard about that."

"Mmm, I think it's his son."

"Wait. His son? There are two of them?"

“I don’t know. I suppose.”

“Is Marg driving?”

“Mhmm, I get lost down there. Why?”

“I was just going to tell you to leave your wallet at home, that’s all. They can’t take what you don’t have.”

“Andrew Peter!”

“I’m sorry! I’ve just heard about those big religious things. All the emotional hype. The pleas for money. And I guess they really rake it in.”

“Marg says these folks are doing a lot of good things down in Mississippi, Louisiana, building houses and all. They’re even in North Korea, invited in to build hospitals.”

“Somebody’s got to pay for all that.”

“Who *are* you?”

“I’m sorry. I love you, just don’t get crazy on me, okay?”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to read your Bible once in a while, would it?”

“I did. I remember the story about the fat King who was sitting on the commode and a left-handed assassin snuck in and killed him with a knife. Stabbed him right on the pot.”

“You’re making that up, that’s not in the Bible.”

“Look it up... Ask Marg. Ask Jimmy...”

“Well... I *want* to go, I really do. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to know if there is more out there, you know, after this life.”

“And I’m sure you’ll tell me if you find out.”

“Only if you want me to.”

“Mom, I’m just being a smart ass, of course I want you to.”

“Okay then... Listen, about your weight and all. Really...”

“I know. I love you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you, too.”

Andy hung up the phone and looked at the time-stamp in the toolbar of his iBook, 11:48 am. He put both elbows on the desk and rubbed his eyes and forehead. He stared at the blue desktop of the computer, as if it might hold the answers to his weight problem and the more pressing issue of his manuscript deadline. It didn’t. After a quick shower he pulled

on some sweat pants and his Alcatraz Triathlon t-shirt (*Dig/Swim/Run*), grabbed his wallet, keys and a windbreaker, and headed to Martin's for a sandwich. The diet shake had made him hungry.

— Chapter 2 —

The door was still closed at Martin's Deli as he approached, he pulled it open, holding it for two young women who looked right past him as they exited with their purchase. "I *blend*," he thought. "No need to thank me, I do this for a living," he wished he had said. A string of bells tied to the inside handle chattered and bounced against the door as he pulled it closed, entering the nearly empty little eatery. There were six round tables, two against the front window and four running up the sidewall toward the restrooms. Each was fitted with small wooden chairs and red and a white-checked plastic table cloths, "Plastic cloths, *that's* an oxymoron," he quipped to himself. The walls were covered with posters, presumably of Italy, Germany, or at least Europe somewhere - only the Leaning Tower of Pizza and the Coliseum were notable among the landscapes and shorelines. Along with the posters were old advertising slicks for bread, cheese and wine, and a few headshots signed by stars that, presumably, had eaten at Martin's at some point. The deli case itself was at least five feet tall, and the top was stacked with biscotti and baskets of dry salami so high that the slightly built Martin's disappeared behind it. To communicate with customers, the Martin's would crouch and shout and point through the cold glass of the case, "*You vaun the gorgonzola? Von pound?*"

The only sound in the place at the moment was coming from two

ancient ceiling fans that spun so slowly you wondered if they moved any air at all. Their low hum, mixed with the buzz of the fluorescent lights and the ever-present opera that emanated from an old boom box that sat underneath a disheveled stack of paperwork behind the cash register. Behind the deli case were shelves of fresh bread, meat and cheese cutters, a long counter and stove with various pots of soups and sauces brewing away. Beyond the counter was a door that led to the small office, a supply room and a staircase that went up to the Martin's apartment. Andy had never been up there, but imagined what it might be like. Quaint, nicely kept, furniture and art from the sixties. A stack of newspapers by an old Barka-Lounger that Mr. Martin would crank open each evening after dinner, raising tired legs, to watch the Yankees on a console Zenith.

Mr. Martin and his wife Maria had lived in the city since the late 50's when they came to the States from Italy. Maria was Sicilian to the core, while Mr. Martin was a German who fled the motherland just before the craziness of the Third Reich and got a job on a fishing boat in Palermo where the two met and married. Albert Martin never forgot his German roots and each October, the only month when beer was served at Martin's Deli, savory imported draft flowed like water from a fountain. Andy spent more than a few evenings sipping German beer and listening to stories recounted in broken English over the Brauts the Bread and the Beer. Oktoberfest at Martin's Deli defined living in the city for Andy Boyd.

Today, however, November 1st, Martin's was quiet as a hangover. In the wake of a month-long party it would stand to reason that the place would power-up a little slower on the day after. Mr. Martin was nowhere to be seen. Instead, *Mrs.* Martin was sitting on a bar stool behind the counter, trying to return to the crossword puzzle she'd been working on before her previous customers. She had just adjusted her reading glasses and focused on the next clue when Andy stepped to the counter, accidentally startling her.

"Oh la *mia!*" she cried, putting a hand to her chest, "Signori Andy! You give me a heart attack!" She took a deep breath and opened her eyes wide, regaining her composure.

Andy didn't mean to smile at the old woman's distress, but he couldn't help it, she was too cute, "I'm sorry. I came by to see Mr. Martin. Is he taking the day off?"

"No, no. He's-a go up to the house for a phone call. Too much

problems,” she said, waving her hands to help make the point.

“Is everything okay?”

“Si, it’s okay,” she shrugged, brushing off her problems like a good Sicilian. “What you eat today, Andy? Especial, huh?”

“Okay, sure...” Mrs. Martin smiled and turned to start the sandwich. Her Italian Special, a recipe she brought from the Old Country, was food for the gods. Andy had watched her make it a dozen times, but could never replicate it at home. She combined provolone cheese, salami, black olives, red onion, mortadella, cooked pancetta, turkey, dried tomatoes and pepperoncini, pesto and pizza sauce onto a homemade sourdough roll that became a work of art when she shoveled it into the pizza oven for about two minutes. Andy was drooling by the time Mrs. Martin extracted the sandwich with an oven mitt and halved its crunchy, gooey goodness with a clean knife. She brought her creation to the counter with a satisfied grin.

“It’s a good one, yes?”

Andy nodded in hearty agreement and paid what he considered a bargain. He sat by the window and ate quietly, allowing Mrs. Martin to reacquaint with her puzzle. His inquisitive mind wanted to know what Mr. Martin was doing and what was in the brown-paper wrapped package that had been delivered earlier. It was none of his business, of course, but that never stopped a mind from wondering. The sandwich, which, on the other hand, was his business, was amazing. In weaker moments Andy had ordered two of these mammoths-- one to eat here in the deli, and one, ostensibly, for dinner. Of course, by dinnertime, the sandwich, which he tore into like a ravenous caveman the second he caught his breath at the top of the twelfth step back at his place, was long gone. That was his problem, he thought, he never really felt full. He could just eat himself sick, sometimes did.

As he gobbled down the last bite of the second half, sad that the giant sandwich was already gone, Mr. Martin entered the deli through the kitchen door speaking something in German to his wife in a matter-of-fact tone. He pushed through the little saloon door on the far side of the deli case, and, walking crisply through the deli, spoke again in his native tongue and exited the front door, never acknowledging Andy’s presence. His bushy eyebrows were pushed together causing deep furrows in his generous forehead; his chubby chin was set firm. The string of bell’s clattered and bounced against the door, as it slammed shut of its own

accord. Mrs. Martin's eyes followed her husband to the door, her face without expression, she didn't have a chance to respond to what he had said, or, maybe response wasn't an option, Andy didn't know. Her gaze remained fixed on the door for several moments, as if waiting for the old man to storm back in, then returned to the next clue in the puzzle. Andy rose to leave just as a group of suits from a nearby office stepped loudly into the deli for lunch.

Alone on the sidewalk, the red sauce from the big sandwich gurgled into a deep burn. He decided to walk around the block instead of going straight home. Maybe being upright for another five minutes would help his digestion and, more importantly, help him focus on the job that loomed on his professional horizon, finishing his next novel by the publisher's deadline. With a hand pressed against his chest just below his ribcage in an effort to suppress the heat, he started walking toward the Embarcadero. Andy lived a few blocks outside the main tourist areas, so he didn't have to dodge too many explorers, but there always seemed to be plenty of people on the street, enough, anyway, to confirm his theory of invisibility. He would smile and nod but rarely make eye contact. "I'm the invisible man," he muttered. Then a song flashed into his head. He was a 70's music buff, which was a real drag in moments like this because the songs back then could be pretty lame. When you get a song like *Amos Moses* or *Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves*, in your head, it can ruin your whole day. Nothing short of a concussion can remove those gems from your cerebral cortex. Today would prove to be no exception to the grueling song-that-wouldn't-end, as David Cassidy started serenading Andy as he headed down Jones St.

"Oh, doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me? - Where are you? - Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me - Just like me."

"Not the *Partridge* Family, he thought, "anything but this." But it was too late.

"I go downtown and roam all around - But every street I walk I find another dead end - I'm on my own but I'm so all alone - Oh, Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me? - Where are you? - Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me, just like me."

A wave of loneliness struck him like a train. Depression began to flood his mind as his eyes welled with moisture. "*Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me...*" "Uggh." He decided to head for home.

— Chapter 3 —

Tears had dried on his cheeks as he reached Chestnut Street. The indigestion was gone but the song wasn't, and he would gladly trade back, "Heartburn for depression, any day," he thought. He slumped down on the overstuffed couch opposite the big bay window in the living room and sat rubbing his tired eyes. In a few minutes he was asleep.

Dreams came easy, which was one thing of the few things Andy loved about his life. In dreamland he was always laughing, he would solve mysteries, and run, and save children. In his dreams he was fit and trim, he was a man's man. In his dreams he was a lot like *Rance Broadback*. The truth was, several of the Broadback plots were conceived in the fertile world of Andy's mind during a dream. He would wake up, wipe the drool from his face, and write down the scene. Andy figured that these things happened to everybody, and he secretly hoped nobody would catch on to just how easy it was - "*Jig's up, Boyd. You're a phony.*"

Today the dreams came fast and disjointed. First he was Keith Partridge, singing that stupid song to a crowd of adoring girls. Then he rescued a long legged Rockette who was tied to a train track. Then he was a bicycle messenger; next a vice detective that fell in love with an informant; a young, aspiring actress; then a dozen snippets he couldn't quite remember. When he awoke, he wished he wouldn't have remembered

the Keith Partridge bit.

The clock on the microwave glowed 3:00 pm. The house was quiet and dark and the workday, for most people, was winding down. Andy longed for someone to talk to.

His parents divorced when he was five, his mother retained full custody and never remarried. His father moved to the east coast and was never a part of their lives. To Andy's knowledge, his father had never remarried. He died when Andy was thirteen, just as Andy was finishing the 8th grade at public middle school in South San Francisco. The 7th and 8th grades were the low point in his short life. Andy would come home every day to an empty house where he would cry himself to sleep or graze on snacks till his mother got home from work. During those two dark years he was roughed up, laughed at, belittled, kicked and ridiculed by every bully in the school. With no father or brothers at home to stick up for him and a mother that was working too hard to burden, he just absorbed the pain, and sunk further into himself.

He didn't really remember his father, so the news of his death didn't bother Andy too much. But his mother took it hard. He was the only man she'd ever loved, and, while they ultimately, couldn't live together, she always held a place in her heart for the guy. Andy believed his father must have been a real idiot to leave a woman like Janice Boyd. One thing decent the old man did, though, was he carried a pretty nice life insurance policy on himself with Janice as the sole beneficiary. The first thing she did after receiving the proceeds was find the best private school in the Bay Area for Andy. Though they rarely talked about it, she was well aware of the hell he went through in middle school and, now that she could do something about it, she did.

Private school had been great in the sense that he didn't get beat up anymore. The problem was, since the school was located in the East Bay, Andy might as well have been a foreign exchange student. He didn't have one phone number from anyone in his high school class. The only person he had even spoken to since graduation was his English teacher, Mrs. Kyritsis, who inspired him to become a writer. She was a stumpy little Greek woman about the age of Andy's mother who saw Andy's creative ability and spent four years encouraging it. "You write these stories down, Andrew Boyd. You write them down. And here's what I want you to do; you bring me a signed copy of your first book! Okay?" And he did. If fact,

The President's Reception is dedicated to Mrs. Kyritsis. But it had been years since he'd spoken to her. He didn't even know if she was still at the school. She'd be, what, sixty by now? He sang out loud:

"Oh, doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me? - Where are you? - Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me - Just like me. Dmmm, Dmm-Dmm-Dmm Dmmmm!" Arrgghh!" He stood from the couch, shaking his head to try and fling the song out onto the wood floor where he could crush it. *"Anything but Keith Partridge. Please!"* he shouted to the ceiling. He walked the familiar path to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, a habit embedded even deeper than the song-of-the-day. As he scanned the selection, probably just for comfort since he wasn't the least bit hungry, he thought about starting another diet.

He grabbed a can of Diet Coke and mulled the thought of a diet as he walked back toward his office. He used to call it a guest bedroom, but since he had never had a guest, it just became the office. He decided to work his thoughts, and hopefully that god-awful song, out of his mind by writing another blog entry.

Andy's Weblog, November 1

A Weighty Problem

As much as I hate to admit this to the world at large, I have a weight problem. There, I said it. Of course, this isn't news to those who know me or the people who read my books -- that's me on the back cover, not the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Believe it or not, being overweight is something I realize and dislike. I think some people look at guys like me and think, "I wonder if he knows how big he is?" I know, trust me. While some big people are comfortable and happy with their size, I am not. Those folks are either blinded by addiction or have such a strong self-image that they realize that the scale doesn't determine their worth and value in society. I'm not that blind, or that secure. I wish I were, because then I might invite others to dine with me at writing conferences instead of ordering room service so no one can see that I actually eat. My weight is on my mind, like a song that won't go away.

So, since it is established that I am fat, weak and insecure, what can I do about it? That's the question, right? The drill sergeant would say something like, "Well, good. Glad you finally noticed. Now get off that lard butt of yours and do something about it." Of course, he would be right, but

it's not that easy, as many people like me have discovered.

I've tried all the diets. I've done the Grapefruit Diet, South Beach, Atkins, No-Carb, Low-Carb, No-Fat, High-Fat and Low-Fat. I've done Jenny Craig, Nutri-system, Opti-fast, Medi-fast, and Weight Watchers. If it's out there, I've probably been there and got the t-shirt. I've tried everything but surgery (another phobia.) If I lose ten I gain back twelve. I know what the problem is. The core issue is that I have a food addiction that can only be broken by a lifestyle change; everybody knows that even though Dr. Phil and the other pros announce it like it's some kind of revelation. They make it sound so easy. I've got to change the way I look at life in general, no sweat, right?

But if you knew me, you would know what a steep hill that is, because I'm a pretty screwed up guy. Not screwed up in the sense of abused or anything like that, on the contrary, I've had it pretty good, really good, actually. It's just that, after thirty-five years, a person has become someone specific. You are a collection of experiences and events that are uniquely you. It's not like any of us can start over, we just have to start from where we are, and where I am is a mess that was made over the course of half-a-lifetime. You can't change your perspective of that over night or with a bottle of metabolism boosting herbal miracle pills.

I've got to start from here and make some good choices if I ever hope to find the kind of life I think I want.

I'd like to think I could start right now - Andy

He looked up at the screen and read what he had just posted for the world to see. "What does all that even *mean*?" he asked himself out loud, burying his face in his hands with a sigh. It was 5:30 pm and the evening sun had nearly fallen into the ocean somewhere behind Andy's place, and while the view from his office window contained little more than the brick facade of a three story warehouse on the next street over, he could still see enough sky to watch the blue give way to a beautiful purple as the shorter days of fall descended on the city.

He sat back and swung mindlessly from side to side in his big leather desk chair, a house warming present, along with the simple black desk, from his mother. "Start right now," he said with closed eyes. "I'm starting

now...” He pondered the implications of the declaration. He pictured the start of the Men’s 100 meter dash at the Olympics, all the runners stretched out in the blocks; the *Bay to Breakers* road race with thousands of runners poised at the start line, straining to see, waiting for the starters gun to pop; the Indy 500, the green flag and the sound of a thousand thunderstorms as the drivers accelerate into the racing marathon, hundreds of laps, pacing themselves, relying on their team mates, watching the equipment. Thoughts of the starting line gave way to the realization that all those athletes don’t really start there. The race starts there, but the racers start months and years earlier. Any runner that steps to the start of a marathon had better be well prepared before he even gets near the line or he’s in for disaster. Preparation is everything. Training. “I haven’t done crap. Why do I think I can start a race for which I am completely unprepared?” He thought about that one. His mind was spinning, but not sending forward any data that was particularly germane to the issue at hand. But, every racer and runner and boxer has to start somewhere, right?

He got a mental image of Rocky Balboa in his grungy grey sweat suit in the dimly lit one-room apartment, prying his eyes open before daylight, breaking those raw eggs into a glass and chugging the whole mess. He could see Rocky exit the door of his little Philadelphia apartment and start running in the pre-dawn light. For the *first* time. He had to start training well before the start of the big fight against Creed. If he didn’t, he’d be a punching bag. So he started. “Yo Adrian,” Andy whispered.

“So what is my equivalent to a glass of raw eggs and running though the streets of Philadelphia? How do I start?” he said, still swinging from side to side in the chair, rotating back and forth on the balls of his Nike-clad feet. “Choices,” he said, his head resting against the high back of the chair, his eyes closed. “Choices... Rocky chose to get up that first morning, and the next and the next, and prepare himself for battle. That little kid in Kenya *chooses* to run up the side of a mountain years before he ever gets a shot at Olympic gold. They make the choice, daily, to push themselves past their limit for the sake of achieving a higher goal.” Andy was talking freely to the empty room and was becoming kind of excited by the way he was working through this puzzle. At the same time he was beginning to realize that the implications of this line of thinking was probably going to be uncomfortable. Something he usually avoided like a plague.

He clicked open a ballpoint pen and opened the little notepad he kept handy for Broadback notes. He found an empty page and tore it out, in the middle of it he wrote "*Choices.*" He clicked the pen open and shut several times and then wrote under the word; "*Begin by making a good choice. And then make another.*" The paper was mounted by pushpin to the wall just to the left of the desk. As he looked at it for inspiration he thought, "A good choice right now would be to finish the friggin' book."

— Chapter 4 —

He looked at the iBook and took a deep breath. He never really scripted out the Rance Broadback adventures. He would just take an idea he'd seen in the headlines, some glimpse from a dream, or a situation he observed out on the street, and start typing. This time his mind was clouded by the whole “making good choices” thing he'd been thinking about for the past few hours. And now, the good choice was to crawl into that space in his brain where *Rance Broadback* lived and find out what our favorite Super Spy was doing this fine fall day. He opened his word processor and spun around in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a minute. He thought of the mystery package that had been delivered by messenger to Mr. Martin, the concern on the old mans face that was visible from Andy's second floor window. And then there was the sheer intensity that was evident when he left the shop. “What was in that box?” Andy asked out loud.

His mind jumped from there to a *NewsWorld* story he read while waiting for some Chinese take-out the previous week about marijuana eradication in the United States. Specifically, how the out-of-the-way state of Kentucky was second only to California in the sheer volume of *Mary Jane* that was confiscated each year. The article postulated that, as an income crop, the illegal marijuana industry in the Appalachian mountain region of Kentucky was a mega-million dollar business and the eradication

efforts, while significant, hardly made a dent in the alleged profit from distribution. “Hmmm.” An idea began to percolate in Andy’s mind as he spun around and studied the ceiling.

He tapped out a Google search on his keyboard and opened the top article referencing marijuana in Kentucky. The author gave a thorough history of the rise and fall of the largest illegal marijuana cultivation and distribution network in the country, the *Cornbread Mafia*, a loosely knit group of farmers and business people in Central Kentucky who, in the timeless beauty of the Appalachian mountains, quietly commanded a billion dollar enterprise until they were broken up and arrested in a multi-state sting operation. Andy sat and read while his mind concocted a mission scenario for his super-spy alter ego, *Rance Broadback*.

He opened a new document in his word processor and looked for a moment at his ten fingers that had risen from the keyboard and straightened to attention. “Are we up for this, boys?” Andy asked his hands. He rubbed his fingertips together and felt the smooth surface of his nails. “Once we start there’s no turning back, you realize.” The fingers seemed ready. It was his own mental state that held the wild card in the venture. He wasn’t sure his own mind could work through the daily battle of a fifty thousand-word adventure. He grabbed a handful of peanuts and popped them in his mouth, sucking the salt from their surface and holing them up in his cheek like a squirrel. “What the hay, it’s what I do, right?” he mumbled, wiped his hands on his pants and cracked his knuckles.

Appalachian Malady - 1

“Nine - three, service.” Rance glanced back then spanked a low, hard serve from left to right that was picked up at the last second by his lunging opponent who was just able to get his racquet on the little blue ball before its second bounce. Sending it softly back to the front of the court with a grunt, the ball gently struck the front wall and bounced into the lap of the waiting Broadback, who had already positioned himself for the kill shot.

“You gave me that one!” he smiled after placing the shot a fraction of an inch from the floor, causing

the ball to roll back to the helpless defender.

"It's that damn serve to the corner. You lefties are a bane on society, you realize that?"

"It comes right to your forehand. Made to order! You're just getting old!"

"Just serve the damn ball, tough guy, I've got your number." Jim Tate laughed and returned to position as Rance moved to the opposite side of the servers box.

"Here, I'll serve to your backhand."

"Oh, that should help," Tate said with a slight edge.

Rance stood two feet away from the right hand wall and bounced the racquetball twice before catching it and glancing back at his best friend, "Ten serving three." He banged an ace to Tate's backhand that the diving player missed by two feet.

"Okay funny guy," Tate said, waving his racquet right to left. "Scoot over - back to the other side."

"What?" Broadback said, chuckling.

"At least I have a chance if you serve to my forehand, c'mon."

Broadback won both sets but his competitive friend made it interesting after the break, leading the first game till Rance's last serve, and making a strong comeback in the second game, nearly forcing a third set.

"Okay, so, 15-8, 15-4 first set. And 15-11, 15-13 second set?" Jim said as the men surrendered the court to a mixed foursome.

"Another set and you would have had me."

"Another set and I would have needed a saline drip."

The men grabbed their towels and water bottles from the bench outside the court and hit the showers. The cop checked his cell phone for messages before showering. The PI held no such allegiance. Tate was still on the phone when Broadback returned from the showers, mopping his head, wearing gym shorts and flip-flops. He started getting dressed as Jim finished the call.

"All right Ron, Yeah. I'll see you in twenty-five... Thanks." Tate clicked the Razor shut and looked

up at Broadback, "So much for the quiet morning," he said, and grabbed a towel, running to the shower without another word.

Broadback had a couple of to-go coffee's from the lobby Juice Bar ready when Jim emerged from the locker room four minutes later, his dark brown hair combed wet, his tie draped around his open collar. "Thanks, Bud," he said, taking a coffee and a cautious sip, nodding towards the door. Rance walked him to his unmarked, but obvious, Ford 500 as his friend filled in a few blanks.

"It's Senator Hagin. DOA. I guess he was a no-show for staff briefing so an assistant went to his apartment. Found him on the living room floor, .38 to the head. Weapon in his hand."

"Suicide?"

"No sign of forced entry, no sign of a struggle. DIC Kramer thought he'd bring me over just to look at the place before CSI starts picking fuzz."

"Kramer's good people."

"Yeah. Not afraid of fresh eyes."

"What's he thinking?"

"Doesn't know. Hagin's a pretty hot item right now on the Hill. Punching his own ticket doesn't make sense. Kramer is trying to get his head around it."

"So he calls the drug cop?"

"Hagin's that marijuana legalization guy, you know? It's his soapbox. Maybe there's a drug angle."

"Detective Jim Tate to the rescue."

"Yeah, whatever. You gonna be at the condo?"

"Unless I can find another victim," Broadback said, spinning his racquet and raising it with a smile.

"I may stop by later. This one doesn't feel right somehow." Tate pulled out of the lot, window down, crisp fall air nipping at his wet head, holding the cup up near his lips for constant sips, driving with his left hand. He raised the cup slightly in Rance's direction as he accelerated past his friend who had reached his vehicle, a Buell XB12 Ulysses, that he road until the last colorful leaf had fallen from the majestic trees that lined the Georgetown campus.

"Dead Senator. You can have that one, Detective Tate. No thanks." Rance thought to himself as he stowed his racquet and slung on his backpack. He tossed the

empty cup into a garbage can and pulled on his black, full-faced helmet. Straddling the bike, he brought the motor to life as he zipped up his windbreaker and pulled down the smoked face shield. "No thanks," he said out loud, pulling away from the University Club on the controlled fury of the Buell.

The place Rance Broadback called home was an old warehouse in the Adams Morgan district of Washington D.C., a few blocks from the main campus of Georgetown University. He hadn't planned on living inside the Beltway, but since work kept bringing him back to the area it didn't make sense to live anywhere else. He was something of a loner, had a few good friends, most of them work associates like Jim Tate. 100% of his business came through trusted friends, mostly well placed government types of the highest order. Men like Rance Broadback remained valuable to the extent that they remained anonymous; at least that was the perspective of those among his equally anonymous employers. Rance parked the XB12 in the garage of the modern, 8-unit townhouse that he built across the road from the dilapidated warehouse where he actually lived. The town homes served as both an investment and an extra layer of cover for his insulated life.

After a few very lucrative jobs in the 90's, Rance bought the warehouse and the property on all four sides. Three remained undeveloped and bordered by old chain link fence, but the fourth, across 8th Avenue on the east side of the warehouse, was developed into the town home project by an architect that Rance knew, curiously, from his first D.C. investigation, the inaugural reception for the former president, just after his election for a second term. Rance noted the rough hands of John Sanchez when they were introduced and, after finding out he was an architect that had done some remodeling work for the Clinton's both in Arkansas and again here in D.C., knew that Sanchez was a hands-on builder. Broadback liked that, and the two hit it off. Both suspect of government, both freelancers, Rance brought John out to the lot one afternoon to hear about the plan. At least part of it.

Sanchez proved a trusted friend and so when Rance introduced Phase Two, John just smiled and nodded. He

designed and built the project almost completely by himself. Rance's own unit was built directly over the top of an abandoned tunnel that had been erected in the 1940's as a pathway of evacuation for congress in the event of emergency. The tunnels closer to the capital building itself had been filled in and re-purposed years ago, but this far out there were still a few short sections that remained, mostly in undeveloped or discarded areas like this one. There was almost no one still alive that remembered the tunnels and the top-secret paper trail was equally sparse. Rance wandered into the information quite innocently while researching another case, actually thought of working the tunnel system into one of his mission plans, but then discovered that there were only a few small segments left in tact.

His idea was pretty simple. Connect the warehouse and the townhouse via the tunnel segment by cutting discreet vertical shafts at each end. In a project that would take six months, the tunnel extensions on either side of the project were sealed off, the shafts were dug, stairs and lights were installed along with a state of the art security system that would automatically lock down if breached.

Ultimately, the town homes went on sale, Rance bought the first one and the others sold out within the week, mostly to Georgetown staff and faculty who liked the idea of a short commute. In fact, the only non-collegiate in the building, besides Broadback, was John Sanchez who received a heavily upgraded unit as his compensation for the project. Sanchez wasn't completely sure what his reclusive friend did for a living, but he knew it was dangerous and playing a small role helped his life make sense. Sanchez was tough, smart and construction hardened and Rance pulled him in to help whenever a mission needed an extra set of quality hands.

Broadback pulled the XB into the garage and parked next to his rarely used F-150. He shut the overhead door and walked up the inside steps to the living area. He briefly walked through, changed the timer on a few lights, the television and stereo, roughed up the bed linens a bit and then locked up and headed back down

to the garage where he opened the false wall under the stairs, closed it after himself, disarmed the security system, and descended into the shaft via the circular, iron staircase that was fabricated in place by Sanchez. In three minutes he ascended an identical staircase, which led to a locked hatch that made it feel like he was disembarking a submarine. Opening the hatch, Rance climbed in to an empty closet, and, sliding aside a 12'x12' bookcase unit filled with half empty paint cans, he entered the cavernous, first floor of the warehouse. Sliding the false wall shut, he walked across to the stairwell, which led to his living quarters and office loft.

His address was the townhouse. Friends and appointments came to the townhouse. Top-secret callers who needed his unique services came to the townhouse. No one knew about the warehouse quarters except Sanchez and Tate who held the secret close to the breast. Both Sanchez and Tate had had his life saved, on more than one occasion, by their highly trained friend and had learned, independent of one another, that it was much safer to be on the same side as Rance Broadback.

At the top of the open staircase, Rance enjoyed a modest living area that was set up in one large room with an adjoining restroom. The living space was nicely equipped with a kitchen, bedroom suite, open sitting area overlooking the reflective glass of the security windows, and a small office area with an internet signal that randomly sourced from different wireless signals in the D.C. area, as did his cell phone. The place wasn't completely Invisible, but it was about as close as you could get and still find a good cup of coffee. He called it 'hiding in plain sight.' He fired up his iBook and retrieved email. There was one message.

Thursday, 0800:

Ran. Need you. Let's meet tonight. Spin

He took a moment to enjoy the visual, "How come she gets a code name?" he smiled to himself.

— Chapter 5 —

Andy stretched his fingers and balled his hands into fists, in and out, working the blood and muscles around. The sun was down and he felt pretty good about the opening volley in the new book. A spy drama set, eventually, in the hills of Appalachia. Nice.

Without a television, Andy Boyd tended to spend quiet evenings surfing the Internet and eating, though not necessarily in that order. The refrigerator and freezer held the promise of another calorie-filled night alone as he peered inside, the glow of the 15-watt bulb the only light currently burning in the little kitchen. He shut the door. This was too hard. Not five hours ago he made a conscious decision to begin a disciplined lifestyle of good choices, and already, he felt compelled to reward himself for such a blazing start to the new Rance Broadback adventure with a pint of Cherry Garcia and a box of Oreos. “That would not be a *good* choice, my portly friend,” he murmured to himself.

He took a seat on his sofa looking out at the lights of the city; grey clouds had rolled in to shroud the buildings in a foggy mist. His chubby fingers tapped the back of the couch. His, generally fertile mind, stalled, refusing to budge until he gave in and followed the normal evening pattern. “Two can play this game,” he said out loud, stubbornly holding his ground against the strength of desire. Five minutes gave way to ten as

the silent battle raged in his mind. Slowly, voices of compromise began to mediate, offering alternatives to the food / no-food skirmish.

“I *guess* if I just have a bite, not the whole pint, it would be okay... One bite of ice cream, and *maybe* one cookie.” He considered the compromise. It sounded reasonable. After all, he had to eat something, and if he could moderate the amount, then, he could eat almost anything. One bite, *two* at the most.

The epiphany caused him to nearly leap from the couch, as if leaping were possible for his gravity-stricken legs. He hiked up runaway sweatpants and made a beeline for the utensil drawer. He needed a spoon. A big one. The first bite of ice cream tasted like what he imagined sex would be like. Sensual. Lighting up his lustful taste buds and soothing a conflicted mind. “Ice cream is our friend,” he whispered, smiling, his eyes closed as he licked the stainless steel of the tablespoon. The dilemma of returning the little tub of ice cream to its spot by the others in the freezer became a rather moot point, as the second heaping bite was followed so quickly by others that Andy stood holding an empty container in a matter of moments. Without ice cream, he was forced to wash down the dry Oreos with a quart of low-fat milk. Then, a bag of unsuspecting Doritos was needed to offset the unwelcome, lingering sweetness in his throat.

He sang and danced around the living room singing the Keith Partridge song at the top of his lungs while courting the chips. He caught himself as he drank the last of the Nacho Cheese crumbs from the empty, cavernous bag. He let out a sigh that was an even mix of defeat and satisfaction. The house was quiet again, leaving just Andy, a belly full of junk and a head filled with the song that wouldn't end.

He clicked on Z-103 “Yesterday's Hit's from the 70's 80's and today,” a tag line that he made up, and loved. Don Maclean and Janis Joplin evicted Keith Partridge from his mind. “Something that should have been done hours ago,” Andy thought.

Andy sat down heavily in his favorite chair. It matched the expensive sofa, with generous, over stuffed arms at just the right height, and a soft headrest that allowed Andy to slouch into the perfect position. On a full stomach, breathing came easier when sitting, as opposed to lying down, and his chair provided the perfect angle. He sat with arms sticking out like wings, resting on the sides of the chair, with his fingers draped over the front edge like a NASA test pilot, strapped in and ready for countdown.

He stared through the big window and let his head fall gently back against the soft cushion of the seat back. He closed his eyes and began to cry. It was a silent cry, but the tears were as real as rain, pooling up above his quivering cheeks like little mountain lakes. He splashed the water out of both of them with the heel of a hand and looked again outside. "I can't do this," he said to the empty room. "I can't become something I'm not. I can't just decide to change, and then - *bingo*. I'm a loser. A reclusive, lonely, lard-ass, loser with no friends and no life."

As he sometimes did, Andy began to recount the things in his life that kept him from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. The *Why Not List* always began the same way;

"Number one, I probably couldn't get my fat butt over the guard rail." A fact that always gave him a paradoxical smile. "Too fat to kill myself." The older he got, the shorter the list became. A few years ago, after a brief relationship with the girl that did his mothers hair, the list was longer than it was now.

Her name was Thui. She was a slightly built woman, several years younger than Andy. She had emigrated from South Vietnam with her mother when she was five years old. They were hustled aboard a plane by her father, an officer in the army who saw the writing on the wall for his hometown of Saigon and wanted a better life for his family. He promised to join them in America, but never made it. It was no easy life for an immigrant from South East Asia, especially in the 70's. Thui compensated by being compliant and sweet. She grew up in the salon where her mother worked, and, after graduating beauty school, started cutting and styling hair in the booth previously occupied by her own mom. It was the only job she'd ever had. Mrs. Boyd loved Thui. Andy's mom always rooted for the underdog and when she heard the story of Thui's family, while having her hair done one day by her regular stylist, her heart went out. Like a dog lover who can't pass up a stray, Mrs. Boyd couldn't pass up the chance to love a survivor. She told her stylist that she was going to start seeing Thui, "Just to help her get started. You know me." And with that, Mrs. Boyd started taking her appointments across the room with little Thui Guyen, pronounced, Twee Gween, which, to Andy, sounded like Tweety bird and Sylvester-- "I t'ought I t'aw a puddy tat!"

Andy was early for lunch one Thursday and arranged by cell phone to meet his mother at the salon from which they could walk to their

favorite little Thai cafe, (Pad Thai, three star, double portion. Oh baby!) which was probably why her son was early. Mrs. Boyd had told her son Thui's story, giving Andy's fertile mind a picture of a raggedy little girl in a refugee camp. She was anything but that. She was five feet tall, maybe 100 pounds. Long black hair and eyes that were as close to black as brown can be. She had an easy smile that seemed playful and shy, a little flat nose and beautiful creamy brown skin, "Like JIF peanut butter," he thought, hating himself for comparing everything to food. Andy was pretty sure there were no Geisha girls in Viet Nam, but knew that this is what they must look like. She was an angel. Andy's mom made his first appointment for a cut; she said he needed to clean up his act a little. Her son's eyes had betrayed his thoughts. He didn't mind that she noticed.

On the occasion of his third haircut, Andy was planning to ask Thui out to a movie, the type of date that, in his mind, was a lot safer than a meal. He would be much less self-conscious in a dark room where he and his date could avoid eye contact. He had it all planned out; he would be a perfect gentleman during his cut, go to the counter and pay, then bring a generous tip back to the booth and ask her if she wanted to catch a movie sometime. It was a perfect plan. He sat nervously in the chair as she tended his hair. His brow was heavy with perspiration. He hated that, but couldn't stop it. He would occasionally wriggle an arm out from underneath the barber's apron that she'd draped over him and wipe his forehead.

"Andy, you sick? You sweat," she said.

"No, I'm okay. I'm sorry."

"How your mom? She sweet."

"Thanks. She's good. She's great."

She finished her work and spun him around in the chair, stepping to the side, smiling and looking into the large mirror along with him. He didn't care what his hair looked like; he was looking at her. He wanted to ask her right then, he knew there were others customers waiting, someone might be in the chair already when he returned with the tip. That would be too intimidating. He needed to improvise.

"Thui?"

"Uh huh?"

"Would you, uh, could we..." He took a deep breath, "Would you like to go to a movie with me sometime?" He said it. He did it. He asked a girl out on a date, a real date. The words were out there, floating

somewhere in space. Sound travels fast, it must have hit her ears quickly, there was no reeling them back, they were cast forever in space and time like the stones in the Great Pyramids. Their relationship would never be the same because he had now betrayed his feelings and things would be different-- either good different, or weird different. He looked for clues in her sweet little face. The first one was promising, an excited smile.

“Movie? Oh!” She seemed agreeable and quickly turned towards the waiting area and said something in her native tongue. She was smiling, so it must be good, although he couldn’t tell from the inflections in her voice. “I’ll have to learn the language,” he thought, “or at least try.” One of the customers, a young man about her age, responded to what she had said, only in a tone more like a policeman ordering a bank robber to stop or he’d shoot. Andy glanced over at the guy who kind of looked like he might shoot. Thui looked back into the mirror and cocked her head.

“You mean *date*?”

Andy hadn’t anticipated this complication. “Uh, yeah.”

“Oh, Andy,” she said, smiling, her head ajar slightly. She turned and said something else to the guy, who stood and came to the booth with serious eyes that never left the reflection of the man in the chair.

“This, Tom. He my, uh,” she stopped, searching for the right word.

“Fiancé,” Tom injected in perfect English, his eyes still locked on Andy’s in the mirror.

“Yes,” she said, reaching to the counter in front of Andy and retrieving a small gold band with a shiny speck in the center that Andy assumed was a diamond. “We marry. Next year,” she said, smiling up at her Tom.

“I’m sorry,” Andy said to both of them, mostly Tom. “I didn’t know. Uh, congratulations.”

After that disaster it was back to Super-cuts for Andy Boyd. But his almost-relationship with Thui Guyen actually helped him, eventually. After a double Pad Thai and order of Cashew Chicken, Andy drove straight to his house, stopping only briefly to pick up two pints of Ben and Jerry’s and a bag of Chip’s Ahoy. He didn’t leave his place for two days; afraid someone would see him and recognize him as the loser who tried to get a date with his nearly married hair stylist. It was one of the first times he’d considered what the world might be like without Andy Boyd around,

taking up space, and he wrote out, with actual pen and paper, his first Why Not list.

Why Not?

1. I need to outlive my mother. It would kill her if I did something like that.

2. I love my mother. I like being with her. I would miss that. (Would I actually miss anything? - theological/philosophical question)

3. I like writing. I enjoy discovering stories and bringing them to life.

4. I love the city. The sites, the sounds, the food.

5. I like my house. Not that living quarters would be an issue any longer.

6. I like people, I really do. I just wish I knew more of them.

After a few days he slowly decided to focus on the things he enjoyed about life and begin to change the things he didn't like, the things having to do with himself.

Tonight the list was short. Shorter than ever. "It would kill my mother. I could never do that to her," he thought.

— Chapter 6 —

A heavy blanket of bleakness kept him in bed till almost noon the following day. He finally drug himself through the shower, pulled on trusted sweat pants and a clean t-shirt and stared in the bathroom mirror, hands resting on either side of the sink. “Buddy, you’re a mess,” he said. He brushed a nights worth of scrum out of his mouth and swirled around some Scope before leaving the room. He opened the front blinds and looked out at the street, the rest of the world had been up and operating for hours. In most of the offices and shops that lined the streets, people were halfway through their workday, a fact that opened depressions ugly door, slightly, in front of him. He chose not to walk through it. A good choice he didn’t notice. Instead, he looked down the block towards Martin’s wondering what had transpired in that little mystery since yesterday.

“Some detective you are,” he said out loud. “Sleep till noon when your friends might be in trouble.”

He decided to catch up on his morning blog and head over to the deli to talk to Mr. Martin. He unconsciously detoured through the kitchen where he looked into the refrigerator and freezer for a few moments before going into his office. Routine is a cloistered mistress. The iBook was in sleep mode and came dutifully to life when he tapped at a few keys. He scratched at his scalp and studied the blinking cursor.

Andy's Weblog, November 2

Bad Choices

I hate to admit this, but almost as soon as I decided to begin making good choices, specifically in regards to my health and weight, I went out and blew it big-time. It was like I was rewarding myself for deciding to make good choices, by making some really bad choices. I'm a living, breathing, oxy-Moron. Anyway, I decided that I can't do it. I don't have the will power, the stamina, the moxy, or whatever it is that people have that enables them to lose 100 pounds, develop six-pack abs, run marathons, or whatever. My self-discipline extends to my work, and that's about it. Even then, it's probably more about the guilt of missing a deadline and letting people down, than actual self-discipline. I'm a product of what others think. Or, at least, my perception of what others think.

But, as I have confided before, I am committed to being honest here. And, while I hope that no one actually reads any of this, I'm writing as if they do. Because it helps me believe that there might be people counting on me, or hoping for me, thinking good thoughts, trying to help me get past this monster that has me pinned like a schoolyard bully.

I get another day, now, to make good choices. I should be thankful, I guess, for the opportunity. But to be honest, I don't look forward to it. In truth, I'm afraid that I'm going to blow it again and be forced to grovel before you again tomorrow. I'm expecting defeat. I would be surprised by victory. How's that for confidence going in to battle. What General, with that attitude, would be worth beans leading troops? You wouldn't want that guy leading a parade. So here I go, I've got my baton and my whistle and I'm ready to march...

What a dope - Andy

Andy posted the blog and opened his email, just one message, from Will Heard.

Andy -

How's it coming? I'm going to stay off your radar screen for a while so you can concentrate, don't want to be a pain in the ____! So I wanted to write you a note first to say thank you for what you do. I appreciate it and I know there are a lot of people that really look forward

to your work. You are an amazing guy!

Sincerely,

Will

William Heard

Literary Agent

Bigby, Sachs & Heard

New York, NY

888-555-4646

Reply -

Hey Will,

Thanks. Don't worry, I may be a mess sometimes, but I understand how the process works. I'll have this thing wrapped up and in your hands right around Thanksgiving. And, by the way, it might be pretty good, too.

Andy.

Send-

Andy smiled; he never realized how badly his fragile ego needed stroked. Will was good at it, too. Maybe that's why he worked so hard to please the guy. He opened the new Broadback document and scanned the first few pages. He wanted the story to percolate in his mind while he was at the Martin's.

Dense fog had given way to a light rain sometime during the morning and the streets were wet with little puddles gathered in divots and potholes. Car tires hissed down the wet road like a million snakes telling you to keep your distance. This was San Francisco at its most familiar and Andy loved it. Weather that required people to put on a loose overcoat was the heavenly equalizer. In Phoenix or Huntington Beach only the perverts wore overcoats, while people like Andy wore big heavy jeans and sweaty t-shirts, and the skinny people wore next to nothing. No fair. But on a brisk San Francisco afternoon, frumpy and dry was the order of the day, which suited Andy. There weren't many people on the streets this afternoon, though, as most would avoid the outdoors, eating in or going without so they could try to beat the rush across the bridges, which always seemed

to clog up early on rainy days, for that exact reason. “Get a clue, people, you are *causing* what you are trying to avoid!” Andy would mutter as he watched the exodus some afternoons at two or three o’clock.

Andy removed his Giants cap as he stepped under the green and white striped canvas awning of Martin’s Deli. There were a few customers inside that gave a cursory glance his way as the bells bounced on the glass door, proclaiming his arrival, “Thank you. Thank you very much,” he thought with an Elvis twang. The Martin’s niece was working the counter while her uncle paced back and forth between the far end of the deli case and the little office, holding a wireless phone to his ear, with a stern, “Don’t make me take off this apron,” kind of look.

He stuck the index finger of his other hand in the general direction of the handset and said something, then pulled the phone away from his head, looking through his bi-focals at the key pad, impatiently searching for the “Off” button so he could disconnect the call. Old-school wall phones worked much better for hang-ups. They were forged of steel and some kind of unbreakable material that was made, specifically, to withstand hang-ups from hot-tempered German’s twice the size of Mr. Martin. You could slam the phone down with the fury of a wild stallion if so inclined. Very therapeutic. Those old phones never broke; they were just replaced by younger, faster, cheaper versions. The best hang-up you could achieve with these new phones required you to find the right button, which is no small task as the print on them is miniscule, then, tap it as hard as you can without breaking the plastic. Really hanging up with gusto on one of the little wireless phones required hurling them into the street or against a brick wall. And that gets expensive. Even then, on the other end of the line, all that was ever heard would be a little click, unless you accidentally hit one of the numbers, in which case it would just treat the target of your wrath to a pleasant little tone in the ear. No drama.

The scowl on the immigrants face turned to a forced smile when he saw his portly neighbor.

“Hey, hey! Velcome, come in, come in.” Mr. Martin developed the habit of repeating himself as a young man in the deli when each customer would ask him to, for clarification. His English career didn’t start off with much promise. Now, after a couple of decades, the English was much better and the repetition quirk had become a local trademark. He raised a hand to Andy to cut off his reply temporarily while he turned to a sink to

wash his hands, drying them on a towel and finishing them on the skirt of his apron as he came to the counter. His niece stepped out of the narrow register area and began busing a few tables.

“So, a little rain today, huh?” Mr. Martin asked his neighbor.

“Nice, huh? Like the Old Country, I bet.”

“Ja, ja. Yes.” Mr. Martin liked Andy. He was not only a regular, one who appreciated good food (obviously.) He was also sincere and friendly, with an inquisitive, genuineness that made him easy to talk to.

“Maria, my wife Maria, she say you stop by yesterday? I’m sorry, I had to run out. I must to go.”

“It’s okay. Yeah, I came in.” Andy looked around; no one seemed to be paying any attention to them. “Mr. Martin, is everything okay? I mean, with you. Is everything alright here?”

Mr. Martin nodded, smiling and waving a hand across the room, “Yes, is good. Many people come to eat.” Andy forced a grin, nodding in agreement. Mr. Martin cocked his head slightly, “Why do you ask, Andy? What is it that you ask?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just saw you leave yesterday and it seemed like you were upset.”

“Oh.” Martin said as if understanding what triggered his neighbors concern, “Thank you, Andy,” he laughed. “It’s okay. Sometimes I am, you know, geisteskrank. Crazy,” he pointed an index finger at the side of his head and made circles.

“You know, Mr. Martin, if there is ever anything I can do to help you and Mrs. Martin, I mean, you have done so much for me...”

Mr. Martin’s eyes fell shut briefly and he nodded sincerely, “I know, I know. My friend.”

The bells clattered against the door as two guests left the deli and three more came in. Mr. Martin looked past Andy and then back, “So, what can I get you today? Rainy day.”

“Mmm, I think I’ll just have an Antipasto salad.” Andy said, hardly believing his own words.

Mr. Martin looked surprised, his thick brown eyebrows stretching upwards, crinkling up his forehead, “Okay, okay. I make you Antipasto, wundervoll!”

The deli slowly cleared out as Andy nursed his salad. It was much better than he expected. Andy could taste the tangy red wine vinegar and fresh basil, garlic and olive oil. And there was pasta, which surprised him, hard salami, turkey, Asiago cheese and roasted red peppers, artichoke hearts and a host of other yummy ingredients. Andy was still admiring his choice when Mr. Martin appeared in front of his table, wiping his hands on his apron, his bushy mustache covering pursed lips.

“Andy, I sit?” he said, reaching for the back of the chair opposite Andy’s.

“Oh, yes, sure,” Andy said, not expecting a guest.

“The Antipasto is good? You like it?”

“Excellent... Hey, let me ask you, why is it called “anti-pasta” if it is filled with pasta?”

Mr. Martin laughed, “Crazy Italiano’s! ‘Anti’ is *before*, okay? ‘Before’ ‘pasta,’ uh-huh? Pasto is meal, uh, eat. Anti-pasto, before-eat, before-meal, ja? Like, uh, in French, H’ors deurves? Ja?”

“Ah, okay. Hey, I bet I’m not the only person who wondered about that.”

“I know, I know,” he smiled. Mr. Martin sat back in the chair and looked out the window briefly, then, refocused on Andy’s nearly empty salad and leaned forward, clasping his stubby hands in front of him on the table.

“Andy, I have a little trouble,” he said in an understated tone.

“Whatever I can do...”

“It is my family. My brother’s son. He lives here in the city. The boy is no good, geisteskrank, you know?”

Andy just looked at Mr. Martin, not sure if it was his turn to speak.

“Uh, can you come up? Come to my house?” Mr. Martin asked.

“Okay, sure.”

Mr. Martin was already up and unstrapping his apron, he led Andy through the saloon door, which Andy turned sideways to address, and told his niece that he would be gone for a few minutes. They passed through the little office, which was nothing more than a pass-through with a small wooden desk holding up piles of receipts and invoices, a two-year old calendar was pinned to a wall by a small mirror. The stock room was

larger, with a tall ceiling and metal racks filled with gallon cans of sauces and kraut, crates of vegetables and racks of flour and spices. There was a metal door leading to the back alley, which was held fast by a large steel bar, and a set of stairs leading up and back towards the main dining area of the deli. Mr. Martin climbed the stairs, inviting Andy to follow, and entered the apartment through the unlocked door at the top, announcing his presence loudly so he wouldn't shock his unsuspecting wife.

“Maria! I have Andy! Andy is with me here!” he said.

Mrs. Martin stepped out of a little hallway wiping her hands on a small towel. “They are always doing that,” Andy noted. She was warmly dressed for a crisp fall day and wearing dainty house shoes over bare feet.

“Andy! I am surprise. Welcome to mia casa.”

“Thank you, it is very nice,” Andy said, not knowing quite what to say.

“Maria, you please go to help Katherine, ja?” Mr. Martin directed in the form of a question.

“Si,” she smiled, slipping past the men to change shoes. “So nice to see you again, Andy.” Mrs. Martin said and disappeared down the steps.

“Okay, you sit. Please,” Mr. Martin said, motioning to the living room. He disappeared into the hallway and Andy took a seat on the couch, noticing that he had pretty closely envisioned what the living quarters of the Martin's would be like, right down to the brown suede Laz-y-boy with a stack of newspapers sitting in a magazine rack on the side. He had to laugh. Everything was simple and proper, “very Dick Van Dyke,” Andy thought, recalling a sitcom he and his mother used to watch when he was a kid.

Mr. Martin emerged from the hallway carrying a white plastic grocery bag. He sat on the sofa next to Andy and sat the bag on the small coffee table in front of them, which also held a few coasters, a candle and a family picture.

The deli owner took a deep breath and rubbed his face, he wasn't sure exactly where to start. “My brothers son, my nephew, he is Albert, like me.”

“I don't understand,” Andy said, honestly trying to keep up.

“My name is Albert. Same, my nephew. Albert Martin.”

“Oh. Okay. I'm with you now.”

“My brother say, ‘I want my son to be a strong man, a good business man like my brother,’ and so he gave him my name. I am honored.”

“That’s great.”

“But now my nephew, he lives in the city, he is problem. His father and mother are in Arizona, and he lives here. He came here for college, St. Mary’s, but he drops out. And now, he is no good.” Mr. Martin shook his head. “Sometimes he comes to the deli, so hungry. He is skinny, white, like he is sick. No big German like his family, ja?” he said, doubling a fist and pursing his lips.

“But now...” his voice trailed off as he thought absently about the young man. He felt responsible; yet, he felt anger for the way the boy was representing the proud family name. Mr. Martin reached for the grocery bag and extracted a small brown package that may have been the same one Andy saw delivered the previous day by bicycle messenger. Mr. Martin held the package and shook it up and down slightly, with an edge of disdain. “...This comes to me. Yesterday.” He handed the package to Andy who accepted it without choice. The addressee was one Albert Martin, 842 Chestnut, San Francisco, CA 94113.

“This is not mine. Not me. This is my nephew, ja?”

“Okay.” Andy got the mistaken identity thing. He’d heard of several people, mostly fathers and sons that had mixed up pensions and car insurance rates and all sorts of problems arising from having the same name.

“I open. But now I close it.” Mr. Martin said raising his bushy eyebrows, pointing to the fresh tape on the side of the box. “I think I should call the police, but I don’t know, so I ask you.”

Andy was understandably curious, given his nature, and handed the box back to Mr. Martin. “What is in it?”

The old man just looked at Andy for a moment, wondering if he should go further. Finally, he lifted the package and said, “Here. I show you.” Mr. Martin carefully removed the fresh tape and slid the box out of the brown paper wrapper.

It was a box of Ritz Crackers. “*Everything is better when it sits on a Ritz,*” Andy thought to himself. Mr. Martin looked at Andy again, moving the box up and down as if emphasizing his outrage. He slid a pocketknife under the rubber cement sealed box top, which opened easily.

“Yesterday, a carrier delivers this package for Albert Martin. I

open carefully, like this, because, it might be for me, but I don't expect anything. So I think, no, it must be for my nephew by mistake. And yes, it is for him." With that he turned the box on a slightly downward angle and shook its contents out onto his waiting hand. The contents were wrapped in two double-lock Zip Lock quart bags and pressed into the shape of a brick the approximate size of the interior of the cracker box. Through the clear plastic the substance appeared to be marijuana, at least that was the assumption, given the packaging.

"Is that what I think it is?" Andy asked.

"You ask *me*?" Mr. Martin said. "I ask you."

"Did you open it?"

"Ja, yes."

"And."

"And it is not oregano."

Andy just nodded his head. He'd never tried marijuana, though he'd seen marijuana cigarettes before, even seen little baggies of the stuff and smelled the pungent scent sneak out of cars and alleys as he walked through the city. "I've never seen that much before," he admitted.

"I think this is for to sell. For a dealer, Ja?"

"Your nephew?"

Mr. Martin shook his head slowly. "What should I do, Andy? Do I fix the box and give it to the boy? Do I call the police? What? What would you do?" Tears of despair welled up in the corners of Mr. Martin's old grey eyes.

Andy had more class than to say what he was thinking, which was, "Or, we could close the shop and *'party like it's 1999'*." Sometimes quick wit was a handicap.

"He's going to figure out that it's here, Mr. Martin. He probably had it sent here. This has got to be; I don't know, a couple thousand dollars worth, wholesale... Does Albert have that kind of money?"

"No. Nein. Albert wait's tables over by Cal State, he never has any money."

"Do you think? No. I don't know."

"What? What, Andy?"

"Do you think he may have stolen this?"

"I don't know."

"Because, if that were the case, he could be in trouble, I mean, not

just with the police.”

“My God,” Mr. Martin looked down at the marijuana brick and shook his head. “What the hell is that boy thinking?”

“Has he tried to contact you?”

“*Ja*, today. He called and was real nice, you know, ‘How are you doing uncle, I miss you uncle, I come to your house.’ I was mean to him, I tell you the truth. I hang up the phone.”

“Did you tell him about this?”

“Nein.”

“Is he coming over? Coming to the Deli?”

“Nein. I tell him we work here. We are too busy today.”

“Well, if he thinks the package is here he’ll probably come anyway, you know. Does Mrs. Martin...”

“Nein.” Mr. Martin cut him off. “I don’t tell her about the box. I don’t tell her about the call.”

The room fell silent as the two men weighed the options.

“You know, yesterday, after I receive the package, I went to my friend, he has a fish market down at the Wharf. I don’t give him names but I tell him what I found... You know what he says to me?”

Andy looked at Mr. Martin. “He says to me, ‘Hey, Martin, you can sell some of this to me.’ he says *this* to me -- *My God*, Andy.”

“You could always just destroy it, dump it in the bay, or flush it,” Andy said.

Mr. Martin nodded. “Then the boy blames me and learns nothing.”

“True. But at least the police aren’t involved.”

“Is that what you would do, Andy? Flush it?”

“Well, I just know that if they catch him dealing drugs he’s in some deep, uh, trouble. That’s serious time. It’s not like being caught holding a little. The dealers are the ones they really go after.”

“But this is small potatoes, Andy, isn’t it?”

“I think so. But, how do we know, Mr. Martin? Drugs are trouble, that’s all I know.”

“I think I’ll put it away, think about it a little more... Andy, please, don’t...”

It was Andy, this time, who put up a hand of objection, “I know, I won’t. I won’t tell a soul. But, Mr. Martin, really. You can’t keep that

hidden for very long. This is dangerous.”

Mr. Martin nodded. He repackaged the pot and took it back into another room in the small residence. When he emerged the big German smile had reappeared and he clapped his hands together, “So, how do you like our house? Nice, ja?”

“Very nice. Thank you for inviting me up.”

“We talk tomorrow?”

“I might come by for another one of those salads.”

“Antipasto - ausgezeichnet! Excellente!”

“Whatever you say,” Andy took to the stairs first and stepped aside at the bottom so Mr. Martin could lead the way back into the Deli.

Andy’s mind was running on all cylinders as he walked back to his house. He wished that he could have given Mr. Martin some solid advice, but he really didn’t know what the man should do. “I’d probably flush it,” he would think one minute, and then, while making a mental list of reasons why that was the best solution, he would change his mind. “No, just give it to the kid. It’s his life. Stay out of it, yeah that’s it.” But a few steps down that path would lead to, “What do you mean, give it to him? He’s a dealer for cripes-sake. Give it to the police, let them deal with him and whoever else it might lead to.” There was no easy answer.

With a fresh bottle of Evian out of the pantry, Andy retired to his office to work on the new story.

— Chapter 7 —

Appalachian Malady - Chapter 2

Curious Georgetown was a coffee bar meets blues club where, during the day, people hung out, reading the paper, checking email, sipping specialty coffee drinks and taking meetings. While during the evening, The Cure as it was abbreviated, offered live blues, great chowder, 28 kinds of imported beers, raw oysters and a host of fried vegetables and shellfish the portions of which were the stuff of local legend. It was crowded and loud-- almost no chance of having a conversation taped, let alone overheard. If he had it mostly to himself, it would have been Rance's favorite spot in town, as it was it reminded him of Yogi Berra's famous quote about a great restaurant in New York, "Nobody goes there anymore, it's always too crowded." But, it was a great place to meet, and, it was close to home, which was always nice.

Tami Beatty was an up and coming reporter at the Post. She had the looks and brains that would have taken her to the Anchor position in most television newsrooms, but she was more interested in finding and writing the news than reading it from a tele-prompter. And, unlike many of her peers, she was content to

write semi-anonymously while others sought bylines and photo insets. Tami was a diamond whom Rance had met at a social gathering for the former President's Chief of Staff. She had been on the arm of a network vice-president, only agreeing to be his date because of the venue. She distanced herself from him each chance she got, meeting people easily on her own.

Rance found himself watching her style from his self-appointed post at the bar, nursing a Cuba Libre, which he ordered just to be able to say the name to anyone who asked. "Free Cuba" was bound to be a good conversation starter among the Beltway elite. He used the line on two oblivious congressmen who licked their lips and told the bartender that they'd try the same thing. He introduced himself to the reporter as she made her way to the bar, getting her own drink to spite her preoccupied date. When he told her what he was drinking, in response to her question, she looked right through his eyes and said, "Interesting." The little tingle he felt up his spine made him feel weak and easy. That was seven years ago. That night aside, their relationship had been strictly professional. Rance never ordered another Cuba Libre.

Tami made her way back to the table Rance had secured 30 minutes earlier. It was 10:00 pm and the Georgetown faithful were still playing hard. He stood and smiled, welcoming her with a kiss on the cheek. She tossed her purse into the booth across the table from Rance and slid in. She was all business in a sleek black suit and skirt, grey silk top and a silver chain with a single pearl.

"You look lovely this evening, Ms. Beatty," Rance smiled.

"Why, thank you," she said with a Louisville drawl she couldn't quite hide.

"I took the liberty," Rance said as a server approached with two glasses of wine and a basket of fresh bread.

"Oh, thank you. Perfect." Tami took a bite of bread and savored it like a rare truffle. "Mmm, first thing I've eaten today." She finished one piece and took another with a sip of wine. "Oh, Mm," she padded her lips with a cloth napkin. "Look at my manners."

"That's okay, eat up. You want a menu?"

"No. Really, this is fine. It's just been, uuugh, one of those weeks today, you know."

"Oh, I know, trust me."

She had a third piece of bread and finished her glass of wine. The server came back and offered another, which she declined, switching to ice water with lemon. "So, you heard about Senator Hagin."

"I did."

"Did you know him? I mean, know who he was?"

"No. Friend said he was a drug legalization guy. That was his soap box."

"Right. From the Good Ol' Boy State of Kentucky."

"Kentucky? Isn't that Bible belt?"

"Yep. There are more Baptists in Kentucky than there are people, yet somehow we elect this guy to represent the State.

"We?"

"Does my accent belie my humble birthplace?" Tami drawled in her best, and sexiest, southern voice.

"I do declare, Miss Scarlet," Rance attempted in return, but, being a Southern California kid, it wasn't too convincing. "So. What's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know. But I have a feeling about this, Ran. I felt a little weird when I heard it on CNN this morning, you know. And then, around 10:30, a little before I emailed you, I get this call from Louisville. It's this guy I went to UK with that works for the Lexington Herald now. He wonders if I have anything on the story, says he's been working on something down there. Thinks it might be related." She paused to squeeze the lemon into her water and proceeded to open the slice and rub it around the rim of the glass gently before discarding it on a napkin and licking her fingers.

"I think, you know, he's just chumming the water and then he mentions the fish he's working on that end... James Rafferty... Ring a bell?"

Rance had to refocus a bit after watching her nurse her drink, "Uh, I've seen the name on Sports Center or something. Horse guy?"

She sipped from the lucky glass, "Big time.

Kentucky Derby, Triple Crown... I mean, this guy is to horses what Arnold Palmer is to golf. He's the top dog, Ran."

"So, what's the connection?"

"I don't know. But my guy says the two were in bed at some level, and they weren't alone either."

"Thanks for the visual."

She smiled, "You're cute. Listen, I'm flying out there to meet with my guy at the Herald. You keep your ears open on this end?"

"Sure."

"And you're not working this, right?"

"Not yet."

"Okay. Listen, I hate to run but I've got to book a flight yet."

"Go, you go. I'm going to sit here a while and see if I get lucky."

"Bum," she said, smiling and kneeling down to kiss him on the cheek.

"Be careful," he said as she walked away, his eyes following her flowing brown hair through the crowded dance floor and out the door. She hailed a taxi at the curb.

"*'Sit here and see if I get lucky,'* now that's what I'm talking about!" Andy clicked Apple-S and looked at the computer clock, 6:15 pm. Mr. Martin's "before-eat" salad was wearing pretty thin. Andy twirled around in his chair studying the ceiling. Then he let his eyes fall shut, "What are you thinking about, Broadback? What kind of mess are they going to draw you in to this time? The pretty girl is chasing a story. The drug cop is looking into the murder of a Soapbox Senator. Connected? Not likely. But then again, the night is young, who knows what could happen."

Andy's eye's opened and he looked at the flashing cursor in front of him, daring him to continue the story. And there was nothing stopping him, except the growing hunger pangs from a stomach that was used to being fed every six hours or so, time that passed without complaint as long as he was asleep or there were regular snacks in between. He left the office

on the well-beaten path to the refrigerator. Grabbing a cold Slimfast drink and a tube of Pringles, he stood at the living room window, alternately raising each to his mouth, drinking and crunching mindlessly as he thought about what he might have for dinner.

“Dinner? And what do you call the multi-calorie treats you are holding in either hand?” his conscious put forth. Andy paused mid-chew and realized what he was doing. He shook his head and let out an audible sigh. He set the half-eaten can of chips down on an end table and chugged the rest of drink. From out of the blue he started to sing something he remembered from *Sesame Street*.

“*One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn’t belong...*” he couldn’t remember the rest of the song but it’s message was clear. He ad-libbed the finish. “*Can you guess which thing is not like the other, before I finish this song.*” And then, in a voice somewhere between Big Bird and Mr. Rogers a silent conversation began.

“Andy, why are you eating a salty snack with a diet drink? Do these things *belong* together?”

“Well, Big Bird, if you must know, they taste good together, so I thought they *did* belong together.”

“But Andy, *that’s* why you’re a lumbering Ox,” Big Bird said, cueing a laugh track. Andy’s daydream panned to a dozen or so Sesame Street children pointing and giggling. The sketch ended with Andy making the difficult choice to return the uneaten portion of Pringles to the pantry. A little victory, “*Brought to you by the letter ‘O’!*” he said out loud, congratulating himself for getting the last word.

Andy picked up the phone and ordered a medium combo pizza from a Chicago-style joint that delivered them fast and hot. “It’s a pretty good choice if I drink water instead of Heineken, I think,” he assured himself. He didn’t really like beer anyway, and didn’t have any. But it’s the thought that counts.

Andy wrote a new blog while he waited, to keep himself from foraging any more before dinner arrived.

Andy’s Weblog - November 2nd

What is Hope?

I'm wondering what hope is. Is hope the kind of thing I'm doing right now when I'm waiting for the pizza delivery guy? Hoping that the pie will be really good? Is that hope? Do I hope that the Giant's finally trade a certain player and fill their roster with hungry athletes that will play like a team? Is that hope?

If that is what hope is, then I think it's pretty cheap. I mean, that kind of hope sounds a lot like want, and 'want', to me, is usually cheap and selfish. I think of the little girl in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Veruca Salt. What a brat. She would get this snotty look on her spoiled little face and sing, "I want it now!" You just wanted to push her into a vat of boiling grease. Do kids in Ethiopia want rice the same way Veruca wanted a Goose that laid golden eggs? I don't think so. I get the feeling that there is a difference, although I'm not sure what, between want and hope. It seems like hope needs to be based on some kind of over-arching good, or legitimate need, while 'want' stems from a baser, sensory impulse - lust, if you will. I want chocolate.

If you are desperate for something, does that make wanting it, hope? Like the kid hoping for rice to make it through the day. Does desperation lead to hope? This is where it all falls apart for me because I want to think that there is a difference between want and hope, but if it just boils down to condition, then 'hope' is just 'want' to the tenth power, or super-want. And that seems cheap. I need to think that hope is more noble than want, and that hope is not crass, it is honest and right. Whatever it is, it's more Charlie Bucket wanting a Golden Ticket than Veruca Salt screaming for the damned goose.

Trust me, I'm no philosopher, I'm not selflessly considering the common good of the world here. These ramblings are strictly selfish. I'm honestly trying to figure out if my quest for losing weight is want or hope. Because if it's just something I want, like the doorbell to ring announcing the arrival of my dinner, it doesn't seem that important in the Grand Scheme. But if there is some "higher good" that I am connecting to in this desire, maybe it transcends the crass and temporal, and reaches some higher plain. Some kind of Zen, Feng-Shui-thing.

I guess I don't know much, I just know I would rather be Charlie than Veruca.

Dinnertime - Andy

Andy ate his pizza in the living room. It was a drizzly night and the breeze off the bay pushed the falling mist in and against his front window where it gathered and dripped, distorting the lights and buildings of the neighborhood. He sipped an Evian between slices, a small victory, he felt, as his pizza was usually chased down with a two-liter Pepsi, about 2000 extra calories, he once calculated. He rang his mother, it was nearly 10:00 pm now and she should be getting home from the crusade. It rang through to voice mail and Andy stayed on the line.

“Hi mom, just calling to make sure you got home safe in this weather. And to make sure you didn’t give away all my inheritance in the offering. Ha! Just kidding. Call when you get in, I’ll be up. Anyway, I love you...” Andy disconnected the call and tossed the phone on the couch pleased with his little attempt at humor, it would make his mother a little crazy, which he enjoyed. “That’s what son’s are for,” he said to a gooey slice of pizza.

Chapter 8

He fell asleep at his desk at 1:45 am, while pushing the Broadback story forward. His mother hadn't called back, which was predictable. Didn't want to call late and wake him when he had to get up in the morning for work. She couldn't understand that he couldn't rest without knowing that she was all right. Roles change as children get older. He remembered feeling the same casual, maybe - maybe not, attitude when he was out late as a teenager. She would sit up and wait for him and it made him feel like such a baby. Now the shoe was on the other foot and Andy didn't like the fit. He knew she wouldn't call at this hour so he went to bed. He tossed and turned for thirty minutes; several times thinking he was hearing the phone ringing, before drifting off to sleep.

It rang for real at 9:30 am. Andy groped for the phone by braille and tried to sound awake.

"Hey, I worried about you."

"Oh, we got home too late to call. We went over to Denny's after the service and talked till eleven. Didn't get home till almost midnight."

"I was up. You should have called."

"Well," she said. Which was Andy's mothers way of saying she was sorry he was worried, but that she would do it the same way again because she didn't call after 10:00 pm. It was a personal rule and if he

didn't like it, then, "Well..."

"So, how was it?"

"It was amazing."

"Really? I'm surprised."

"I'm serious. It was like Reverend Wheat had a card with all my questions and he graciously answered every one. Like I was the only person in the building."

"And that didn't strike you as a little weird?"

"What?"

"What do you mean, 'what,' Mom? The man's a pro; he's the best of the best. Don't you think he knows how to work a crowd and push peoples buttons?"

"It wasn't like that."

"How do you know?"

"Well, what if its not pushing buttons? What if the questions and concerns are legitimate issues that people are really wondering about? I mean, what he said was very helpful."

"And then he asked for all your money."

"I don't know why you are so antagonistic towards him. He never asked for a dime, if you want to know."

"I don't believe it."

"Well he didn't... Now, there was an offering taken, but there was no pressure, it was very low-key, during a beautiful solo."

"Hmm."

"There was no underlying agenda, Mr. Private Investigator. It was just really good. I'm glad I went. And I wish you weren't so negative."

"I've just seen things, you know? I've heard..."

"That's the problem with people, they make judgments about things they really don't know about. We judge people before we know them," she said. That point hit Andy between the eyes. It was exactly what he felt people had always done to him, and now he was dishing it out on someone else, in double-measure.

"That's a good point, mom. I'm sorry... I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I'm going back tonight."

"Really?"

"Mmm, Marg said each night is going to be different. I might go all three nights."

“How does Marg know everything?”

“Her niece is working the crusade. She’s an usher or a counselor or something. We didn’t get to see her last night, but she’s maybe going to coffee afterwards with us tonight. You should come.”

“Yeah, Better not. I’m taking every extra minute to write. I was at it till one-thirty in the morning.”

“No time for a break?”

“No, not right now... But listen, I’m sorry I was a jerk about it, I’m glad you are enjoying it and, who knows, if Jimmy answers all your questions maybe you can let me in on the secret, I’ve got some questions of my own.”

“It’s Jefferson, and I know you’ve got questions, I read your last blog.”

“Yeah. When I write them at night they tend to be more philosophical, less witty and snide.”

“I enjoyed it. I liked the part about being like Charlie Bucket.”

“Well, I read them later and just about barf. Leave the blogging to the morning when the day is fresh and my sarcasm is rested and ready to pass judgment on the world.”

“I think people like to know you have an actual heart, too.”

“In the mornings I’m like the Tin Man and at night I’m the Cowardly Lion.”

“Just don’t be Dorothy, okay?”

“Ooh, a little humor from the old gal. Nice.”

“We are in San Francisco, you know.”

“Funny... Listen, you guys leave plenty early tonight, this rain is going to cause a real mess on the roads.”

“Yes, Dear. We will. You have a good day. I love you.”

“Okay, I love you, too. Bye.”

Andy hung up the phone. He had relocated to the edge of the bed during the call. Now he went straight to the refrigerator door, which he shut immediately upon realizing that his bladder was about to explode. “First things first,” he muttered as he jog-walked to the restroom.

After a shower, he put on a pot of coffee, deciding to forego his usual pattern of walking over to Starbucks for a calorie-ridden flavored coffee and a few donuts. Instead, he chugged a cold Chocolate Royale and took the half-empty can of Pringles and a cup of Folgers back to the office.

November 3rd seemed like a day with promise.

As the iBook spun to life, Andy took 1/2-inch stack of Pringles and fitted them in his mouth, crunching them and running the salty sides of the chips across the thankful taste buds on his tongue. He sipped the hot coffee and opened a new entry in his blog:

Andy's Weblog - November 3rd

Feelings

Why is it that if you wake up on the right side of the bed, as they say, that you feel good and see the day ahead as if it were full of possibility and promise. But then again, if you wake up on the other side, the wrong side, you just want to crawl into a hole till the sun goes down? What is the difference? It seems to me like it is simply a matter of feelings. I feel good, or I feel bad. I feel like working, or I feel like jumping off a building. The day is the same, there doesn't appear to be anything forcing the feelings, one way or the other, it's just a fluke of nature, a roll of the dice. I'm going to wake up chipper and hopeful (there's that word, hmm,) or shitty and rotten. It's like I don't have a choice in the matter.

Take today, for instance. Man, when I woke up today I felt like lunging into work with a vengeance. Like I could pound out an entire book in one day. It was as if my fingers and mind were so connected that words flowed mystically to the computer screen. But what makes today different from yesterday when I wanted to cover my head and make the world go away? What makes yesterday different from tomorrow? The only thing I can figure is that my feelings are a product of something, either physical or chemical. I had pizza last night, so in theory, maybe each night I have pizza, really good pizza I might add, then the next morning I'll feel great. Isn't that the kind of logic I'm talking about? My good feelings, then, are a product of some kind of chemical reaction in my body that happens as a result of eating good pizza. That could be it. Or, maybe it's something else, maybe my outlook on the day is simply a choice I make in the first few waking moments of the day. Or, even in the last few subconscious sleeping moments as my body prepares to stir awake. I decide, somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain, whether or not I am going to feel positive or negative.

It's weird to think that I might have that much control over my outlook. Either way, man I feel like a million today. I don't know why, and, while I'd like to know, at some level I don't care, I just like it and wish I had more days like this. Whether it was a good choice, or just a good pizza, I think I'd like to try a little more of both. Yum.

Happy day - Andy

He posted the blog and opened the Broadback book to review what he'd written the night before. Sometimes his late night prose was thick and rambling and he had to delete the whole mess before continuing with the story during his usual working hours.

Appalalacian Malady

Jim Tate was reading a magazine from his perch in one of the rich leather chairs that decorated the living room of Broadback's town home. His presence wasn't a surprise as he carried a key and was one of three people who knew the code to the alarm. He often made himself at home while waiting for his stealthy confidant. The unassuming day had begun quietly enough, but now, as he checked his watch and realized that he had been on the job for a little over fifteen hours, he thought about finding work at the post office. "Eight to Five, Jimmy, that's what you need," he muttered. He just finished a loud yawn when Broadback entered the room through the garage stairwell.

"My man," Rance said. "Hope I'm not keeping you up." he smiled as he walked past his friend into the kitchen. He returned in seconds with two bottles of mineral water.

"Big day, Ran," Tate started, tossing the magazine back onto the end table where he found it. "Thanks," he said as he received the Perrier, twisting the lid off, he took a much-needed swig. "I've been on that Hagin thing all day."

"What's the deal?"

"It's too clean, you know. I mean there is nothing to go on. CSI's combed the place, zilch. We tore the guy's apartment apart, went through the records in his office, the whole nine. They're still at it. FBI's in there, us, everybody."

"Hey, maybe it just is what it is, you know? Maybe the guy took himself out. People do it all the time."

"That's what Kramer's boss said," Tate said, sitting back as Rance took a seat on the sofa.

"Williams? That skinny weasel is proof they'll let anyone be A.D."

"How do you really feel about him?" Tate smiled.

"Sorry, I just ran into him on the hill once in another role. Wasn't impressed."

"Well, anyway, he's pushing the suicide angle on Kramer. But Kramer smells something. I do too, just don't know what."

"Forced entry?"

"None. He either knew the person or it was the pizza deliver guy."

"Or, if it was a pro, he was already inside, waiting."

Tate nodded and took another sip of water. He closed his eyes and arched his back against the big chair.

"You find anything else out about the guy?" Broadback said. He had taken a seat on the couch and was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees studying the green glass of the bottle and trying to think like a hit man, something that, unfortunately, came pretty natural to him.

"Just his soapbox thing. He was on a sub-committee studying the potential impact of legalizing marijuana for medicinal use. You know, they have that set up out in San Francisco, although they are always fighting with the state about it. So these guys are talking about making it a federal issue, take it out of the states hands."

"Sounds good to me. Legalize drugs and make a new federal bureaucracy, all in one decision."

"Right."

"It does sound like something these crackpots

would do, though."

"Unfortunately."

"So, how about you, Jim? Theory?"

"Well, I had an idea. But it's from way out in left field."

"Try me."

"Have you ever heard of the 'Marijuana Belt'?"

"Is that something a hippie uses to hold up his pants?"

They both smiled at the visual. "I wish. No, it's a big swath of continental geography. Appalachian mountains, Kentucky, West Virginia, out there. Hundreds and thousands of square miles of forest. Some of that land is completely unsettled, just like it was in the days of Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett. Forest wilderness."

"So if you know where it is..."

"Oh, we work it, trust me. We eradicate more MaryJane in the state of Kentucky than any other state in the country outside of California."

"That's hard to believe... So, if you burn it all, why is it an ongoing problem?"

"Well, number one, the people are tenacious. They are smart and creative and know the hills like you know the racquetball court. And number two-- the terrain is wicked. Our version of Southeast Asia."

"I had no idea. So, what's the connection?" Rance said, interested, but not convinced.

"I don't know, Ran. But that's where the guy is from, you know. It's his turf."

"Seems like he might have been fighting for something that would be good for his states economy. If Florida can grow the oranges then Kentucky can grow the weed, even steven. Build some state-of-the-art farms, improve the roads, give everybody a good high," Rance had some fun with the idea, though his friend was in no mood for levity.

"I told you it was a stretch."

"Hey, your hunches are usually pretty close. Personally, I would tend to think he was porking around with the wrong woman, or, you know, the usual stuff, gambling debt, drugs. These guys are never quite as noble as they would lead us to believe. He either got

caught and ended it all himself, or somebody who's pretty good made it look that way. One or the other."

"You're probably right. Hey, thanks for the tailgate."

"My covert residence is your covert residence," Rance said as both men stood. Jim left out the front door.

Rance locked up and reset the alarm before heading back down the garage stairwell, disappearing down the shaft behind the false wall, into the tunnel and across the street.

"Two of my best friends think this thing has roots in Kentucky. Interesting." He thought, which led him to think about Tami Beatty. "Interesting," he tried to imagine her saying again.

"Interesting," Andy said out loud to the quiet little office. "Interesting." He tried to make it sound sexy, like Tami Beatty might have said it. "Hmm." Andy pounded away at the novel for the next three hours. The story was still in the early phases, but the scenes were so vividly played out before him, the characters so much a part of his real/imaginary world, that almost the moment his eyes locked on to the page and his hands touched the keyboard, the movie began to play. He just wrote down what was happening before his very eyes. Sometimes it felt like the world of Rance Broadback, even though completely fiction and based in a town Andy had never visited, was more real than the one outside his door; where his mother got her hair done by a little Vietnamese girl and his friend at the neighborhood deli had problems with a punk-ass nephew.

Andy sometimes wished that Rance Broadback were around to help him navigate the deeper waters of his life. Mr. Martin could use a little of the Super Spy's horse sense right now. *What Would Rance Do?* He would waltz in, real laid back and casual, and ask a lot of questions, asking you things that didn't seem like they applied to anything, yet were important to him. And then, when he thought he had enough he would tell you he'd do what he could and he would disappear and completely drop out of sight. The next time you'd see him would be days or weeks after the problem had mysteriously been fixed. He had done something to trigger

a chain of events that culminated in the issue being resolved and the bad guy getting burned and the right people showing up at the right time to be awarded credit for something they really had little to do with.

That's how he worked. Never receiving the praise, never shaking hands with the President. Broadback was a shadow, a guy people had heard about but never met, one they talked about but didn't know. He was N-Sec's top off-the-books agent. He was also a civilian with the highest clearance and the highest day-rate. He'd been stalked by hit men, staked out by foreign agencies and all anyone ever saw was a regular guy who played racquetball, lived in a modest town home, and rode around eight or nine months a year on a pretty nice motorcycle. Those he actually allowed to make it home after tracking him would confidently report that he wasn't the spy type. He was more of an anti-spy. He was nice and approachable and never wandered far from the straight and narrow. He was a faithful member of Georgetown Presbyterian and anyone looking at his life would think, quite accurately, that he was just a regular Joe.

For a few minutes, sitting in the little 2nd floor apartment talking to Mr. Martin, Andy felt like his alter ego, taking it all in, gathering information, preparing to disappear into the night to fight the bad guys and fix the problem. But he realized, luckily, that he was just a chubby guy from up the street who asked if he could help. His help involved lending an ear, that's all. He was no super-spy; he just wrote about the one who lived in his mind.

He stood to stretch and walked the familiar path to the refrigerator without the slightest conscious consent and peered inside. He opened each of the food cupboards in his pantry, one at a time, looking in and expecting something to catch his eye. There were peanuts and Doritos, cookies and Ho Ho's. From the looks of one shelf you would have thought he robbed a Little Debbie truck. He finally grabbed a cream-filled oatmeal cookie that was wrapped in its own little clear, plastic wrapper. He held it in his chubby paw and looked at it, as if trying to get a taste in his mouth for it, something he rarely took time to do, and then he tossed it back in the cupboard and shut the door. "Nothing sounds good... I wonder if that's a good sign." Andy walked over to the window and squinted through the wet glass to try and get a look at the entrance to Martin's Deli, all was quiet on the street; the rain had driven everyone inside. He was feeling antsy and he knew he couldn't concentrate on writing when he was like

this, so he put some clothes on, grabbed his coat, hat and umbrella, and set out for Martin's. He thought about driving, but since the deli couldn't have been more than 100 feet from his front door he figured that his garage was probably about as close a parking space as he could get to the shop, anyway. He scolded himself for using brain space to ponder such stupid things.

— Chapter 9 —

It was a beautiful, dreary, drizzly, San Francisco Saturday and Andy still felt curiously alive as he walked up the sidewalk on his side of the street. It felt good outside. Cool and wet. He felt like an old grizzly waking from months of hibernation, enjoying the brisk jolt of the elements. As he approached the corner light that would lead him across to Martin's Corner Deli, he pushed the dripping button and stood back from the curb to avoid being splashed by smart guys in their rice-burners taking the corner too fast, thinking only of themselves. "Guy's like me," Andy admitted to himself.

As he waited for the light, the door to Martin's swung open sending the string of bells airborne before they slammed hard against the glass. A thin young man, probably in his twenties, in a red warm-up jacket and jeans stormed out of the deli, one hand shoved in a jacket pocket and the other zipping the jacket up high on his neck. He had wet, scraggily hair and old black Converse All-stars that looked soaked. He stepped quickly to the curb, looked both ways and then turned and started running back north, down the side street. The light changed and a little white stick figure appeared in the Walk/Don't Walk box across the street along with a serenade by some kind of repeating goose honk for the benefit of seeing impaired walkers. Andy walked on the right side line of the crosswalk in

order to have an unobstructed view down the street where the young man had fled, but the kid was long gone.

The deli was quiet save the hum of the fans and the muffled voices at the occupied tables. The opera music was playing softly and Mrs. Martin was sitting at the register working a puzzle in the Chronicle. Andy hung up his coat on the little rack that was provided for that purpose and turned toward the register. Mrs. Martin looked up and returned a forced smile. Andy could tell she was anxious. "Maybe that was the nephew," he thought. "Maybe he came and made some trouble... Stupid kid."

"Andy, buon giorno. What can I fix for you today? Something special, yes?"

"Buon giorno Mrs. Martin. I think I'll have an Antipasto salad. Mr. Martin made one yesterday that was excellent."

"Si, yes, okay," she said. "I make for you." She leaned in slightly and looked to her side as if making sure they were alone, and said, "I make it better than Albert." She smiled and shrugged her shoulders causing Andy to smile with her. The best available table, one in which he wouldn't feel claustrophobic, was located across from the far end of the deli case, near the saloon door and the restrooms. He sat with his back against the wall and looked across to where others now sat, at his customary tables by the window. This seat offered him a different perspective of the little deli. The roar of the deli case motor was more evident here, as were all the mechanical noises of the little shop. The light wasn't as good here, either. The light from the windows lost some of its strength and all of its heat by the time it got to this table, leaving the duty up to the fluorescent tubes suspended from the high ceiling. But Andy kind of liked the seat. He pictured that this is where the Godfather would have sat if he were a Martin's regular. He could see big Marlon Brando, a guy probably about Andy's size, coming in, his men taking his hat and coat, hanging them on the little rack and then pulling out the table allowing the Godfather to sit here, against the wall, in this exact seat. "*Da da da-da da da da-da da da do duh.*" Andy enjoyed the moment and then thought, "That kid wouldn't have made it across the street if he came in and made trouble when the Godfather was here."

He pictured himself, not as the Godfather, but as Rance Broadback, stepping in between Mr. Martin and his nephew, the kid looks sick with glassy eyes and dry lips, his breath is foul. He's on the run and he wants

his stuff. He takes a swing at Andy, but Andy dodges it, grabbing the skinny wrist and twisting it behind the punks back. He slams the nephews face against the glass of the deli case. "You don't storm in here showing disrespect to your aunt and uncle, my young friend." And with that Andy tosses him out to the sidewalk. Mrs. Martin standing in front of him with an Antipasto salad big enough for a family of four interrupted his dream.

"Andy? Andy, you ready for thees?"

"Oh, uh, sure." He felt stupid and hoped she hadn't seen into his dream.

She smiled as she presented her work of art, a salad in an entirely different league that the pittance he'd eaten the day before. If this was supposed to be served before a meal, then Andy was born in the wrong country. He had enjoyed a multi-course Italian meal before, after a book reception with his publisher and agent. He remembered thinking at the time that he wished he'd been born Italian and that he could eat like that every day. Of course he probably did eat that much every day, just not that well. As he was admiring the salad and adding just the right amount of salt and pepper, Mr. Martin pushed through the saloon door, wiping his hands on his apron, as usual. He greeted Andy with a nod and sat down at his table, oblivious to the food.

"He knows," Mr. Martin began with equal amounts of concern and anger.

"What? Who knows?" Andy said, not wanting to jump to any conclusions.

"My nephew. He knows about the delivery. You were right. He sent it here. So it would be safe."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Ja. Yes."

"Did you tell him that you have it? You do still have it, don't you?"

"Ja. No, I didn't tell him anything... He comes in here very kind and nice and hugs his aunty and says, 'Uncle, how are you? You look good. Oh, hey, did you get a package for me? It is very important.' And I think, how can you think I am so *stupid*?"

"Did you tell him that?"

"No. I told him I didn't know what he was talking about."

"And?"

“He gets very mad. Scared. Like he is in trouble, you know? He gets very shaky and nervous and looks at me very hard, then he turns and runs from the store.”

“He believed you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Are you going to turn it in to the police, or, get rid of it?”

“I don’t know... Andy, I don’t want to have it here, you know? Too dangerous for my wife. I don’t like it.”

“I understand, I understand.” Andy picked at a few pieces of sausage and cheese, but his appetite had gone into hiding for the time being. Any thought of eating snuck deeper into the back of his mind as the door to the deli opened again and two more customers entered. Only these two men didn’t look like customers. In Andy’s wild imagination they looked like gangsters, strong-arms, guys who collect money or break legs. One was wearing a brown topcoat, scarf and hat, very old school. The other, larger man was in a black bomber jacket and black jeans. He removed a hand the size of a boxing glove out of a jacket pocket to remove his hat, which he hung on the rack near Andy’s. Then helped the other man out of his topcoat, hanging his gear, carefully, on the rack. They were very deliberate as they found the table they wanted, between Andy and the door, the older man, forty-five, maybe fifty, sat with his back against the wall, just like Andy, as the other man went to the counter to order.

The guy in the suit scanned the room, looking first at the customers by the windows, then at the register area and Mrs. Martin. His eyes made it around the deli case, saloon door and back over to Andy and Mr. Martin. “Why’s this guy wearing a full suit on a Saturday,” Andy thought. Andy noticed him scanning the room but couldn’t pull his eyes away from the man quick enough to avoid making eye contact. When their eyes met, the man smiled and nodded, snapping his gum in violent little chews against his front teeth.

“What’s good?” he said across an empty table in Andy’s direction. Andy momentarily froze. Then he realized that he was probably just inventing this mobster scenario and he snapped out of it.

“Everything is great. The Italian Special is the best sandwich in the City,” he managed.

The big guy at the register had been eyeing the handwritten menu on the wall above Mrs. Martin’s head and was having a hard time

deciding. He looked over at Andy and Mr. Martin as his partner asked the question and listened to Andy's response. He glanced at the Suit who nodded slightly and then smiled back in Andy's direction, "We'll try it. See if it's as good as you say. Grazie."

Andy couldn't tell if the guy was Italian or just a wanna-be, but so far, the scene was right out of the Soprano's. Andy watched an episode with amazement from a hotel room in New York one time when he was visiting the publisher. It affected him so much that he had a hard time walking the streets the following day. He remembered thinking that if all television was like that, then he didn't need one. It was too real. He couldn't understand why people would create a show like that, or, more importantly, why people would watch it. It scared the be-jeebers out of Andy Boyd. No thanks. Then, today, he walks in to the real thing, or at least it felt like it. Mr. Martin didn't seem to be on the same page.

"I go back and help my wife," he said and stepped back through the saloon door to assist Maria.

After Bomber Jacket ordered he lumbered slowly back, past Andy, to the restroom. He seemed like a very observant guy, looking everywhere, scanning everything. He studied Andy's salad as he passed the table, his black eyes looked right through Andy as Andy glanced up at him on his way by. He had a weathered, unhappy face with a low dense hairline. He looked thick and heavy, like an offensive lineman, giant shoulders and no neck. He disappeared into the restroom. Andy tried to concentrate on his salad. The other man had opened a newspaper and had it folded in half and in half again so he could hold it in one hand as he held an unlit cigarette in the other. He looked older now, having donned reading glasses, which he occasionally looked over, as if monitoring the activity behind the deli case.

Andy decided to eat as slowly as possible. He didn't want to leave the unsuspecting Martins alone with these thugs, if that's what they were. It turned out that they ate just as slowly. The deli emptied out and Mrs. Martin bussed all the tables except the two that were still occupied. She went back to her crossword and Mr. Martin busied himself with cleaning dishes and taking inventory.

"My friend, you were 100% right," Gucci-suit finally said in Andy's direction. "That was the best Italian sandwich I've had in years. Johnny?" The big guy nodded, glancing over at Andy without turning his

head.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” Andy said, not really knowing what to say. The guy in the suit nodded with a toothless grin, his mouth just a slit with the edges curled up. He pushed the table slightly forward, crowding the big guy a little, as he excused himself and stood, dusting his suit of any bread crumbs and straightening his jacket and tie. He walked to the counter and leaned in, the noise of the deli case from this distance prohibited Andy from hearing what he was saying, but Mrs. Martin was nodding in appreciation, as the man smiled and kissed at his fingers as if to say the meal was great. He leaned further in and motioned for Mr. Martin to come closer, when the deli owner did, Suit man appeared to be asking a question, very gentlemanly, smiling and engaging Mr. Martin.

Martin pursed his lips up under his big mustache and shook his head. Suit man raised his eyebrows and shrugged with a gesture that looked to Andy like, “Okay, just thought I’d ask.” The man straightened his tie again, using the mirror on the wall behind the cash register, then picked up a toothpick and started for the door. Johnny stood quickly and arrived there in time to help the sharply dressed man into his coat. Gucci-suit stepped outside while no-neck pulled two bills from a money clip and tossed them on the counter. He left to a clanging of the bells. Waiting an eternal three or four seconds, Andy hurried over to the door. He arrived in time to see them pull away in a charcoal colored Lincoln.

Andy sat back down. He wasn’t leaving until Mr. Martin filled him in. In a few minutes Mr. Martin pushed through the saloon door and smiled at his neighbor. “Good salad today, ja?”

“Excellent,” Andy said, inviting Mr. Martin to take a seat.

“Have those guys been in before?” Andy asked.

“Nein.”

“What did the man say to you, if I may ask.”

“Him? Oh, he just said Thank you for the wonderful meal. He said the name is very unique, the pronunciation, you know. And, do I have any relatives in the City... I said no, my brothers and sisters are in Germany and my wife’s family, they are in Sicily.”

“Do you think he was asking about your nephew?”

Mr. Martin shrugged and looked at the table. “I am scared. Maybe they are looking for him. My *God*, Andy...”

“Mr. Martin, the longer you hang on to that package, the more

dangerous it will become. Drugs lead to violence.”

“My God, Andy. My God. I will call the police. Ja.”

Andy nodded and stood. He paid for his meal and walked back to his house, though he didn't remember the short trip as his mind was caught up in Mr. Martin's dilemma. He found himself staring back at the deli from his front window, expecting something dramatic to happen. After thirty minutes he gathered his senses, splashed some water on his face, and returned to the story.

Appalachian Malady - 3

Rance stood in the dark room and looked through the tinted glass at the lights of his neighborhood. In the distance he could see the lights of D.C. and he could sense the tension that the federal security agencies must feel, racing around, deploying teams, chasing leads. “Anyone stupid enough to murder a Senator right in the capitol city has got to be pretty easy to find,” he thought. He ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed sleepy eyes. “Somebody else's problem,” he reminded himself. He had just pulled back the cover on his bed when his cell phone rang. He recognized the number.

“Broadback,” he answered.

“Secure line?” came the response. Rance pulled away from the phone without a word and looked at the row of light emitting diodes burning red across the portable receiver confirming the secure connection.

“Affirmative,” Rance said.

“Hey, Rance, you up?” General George Madden, Rance's former C.O., didn't actually care if Broadback were up or not; he called when he needed to, night or day. A call from the General was never social, though he always tried to ease into his point.

“No sir, been asleep for hours.”

“Good. Good to hear,” the General said, not adapt at small talk. “Listen, Ran, we've got a situation.”

“Ready to go active, sir. Say the word.” Rance didn't know what the situation was, the General never said. In fact, this would be the only conversation they

would have concerning whatever operation the General was calling him in to. The arrangement was simple. When the General called, it told Rance two things: One, the Operation had Red Status, which meant it was a matter of National Security; and Two, that the Operation was off the books, it didn't exist. Rance was on his own, an agency of one. Similar to the FBI, the CIA, or the Department of Homeland Security, with the basic difference being that he wasn't an employee, he was a contractor, which was good and bad. Good, in the sense that he was paid handsomely and worked independently, and bad in that he didn't have the resources or back up that the other agencies enjoyed. Broadback insisted that operations be triggered this way since Madden was the only person in government that he trusted. If the old man ever stopped running contractors, retired or died, Rance would think long and hard about agreeing to another government job. General George Madden was America to Rance Broadback -- an honor to serve and impossible to replace.

"Consider yourself active," the General said, and disconnected the call.

Rance clicked the phone shut and sat it on the bedside table. He knew better than to allow his mind to build scenarios of possible situations, because while headlines sometimes provided clues, some jobs involved situations that were totally outside the sphere of the public conscience. He set his alarm for 3:00 am, his calm nerves allowing a peaceful nap. He didn't know when he would get a chance to sleep again.

He lit out of his townhouse garage at 3:27 am, the Buell was quiet and fast and at this time of the morning a tail was impossible. He took a maze of surface streets to the Falls Road Golf Course, just north of the Beltway. He parked the bike and traded his helmet for a pair of night-vision goggles, scanned the area, then made his way to the third tee, there was a rocky stream running beside the tee. Rance walked into the stream bed and crouched beneath the small cart-path bridge. There was an envelope taped to the concrete underside of the bridge. He extracted it and stowed it in a zipper pocket of his jacket. He carefully returned to the motorcycle aware of every footfall. Comfortable

that he had been completely alone, he returned to the warehouse.

It was 4:35 am when he sat down at his desk and opened the unmarked envelope. Its contents included a series of 8x10 photographs with laser printed white 1x4 labels stuck to the bottom corner of each, naming the persons in the image. The first two were of former Senator Hagin at some political event, yucking it up with some supporters. Rance only recognized one of the names, that from the second photo, one, James Rafferty. Mr. Rafferty, in the shot, was standing behind and to the side of the Senator, nearly off camera, and not the subject of the image. The third photo was another fundraiser-type event and another Senator, this one from Indiana, Phyllis Lecter. She was from the other side of the aisle as Mr. Hagin, although the two had at least two common supporters, a William Prate and the aforementioned James Rafferty. "Okay, the horse guy is supporting both sides, nothing against the law there," Rance said to himself as he studied the photo and then turned to the next one. This image was of a small, mountain town, which could have been right off the set of *The Walton's*, although not as well kept. The town was identified as Rose Park, KY, which meant nothing to Broadback. The next image was a campaign photo for Sheriff William "Buddy" McCoy, "Serving Alta Loma County for 16 years." And the last photo was of Sheriff "Buddy" at Churchill downs, smoking a cigar in a private box with a bunch of other people, including James Rafferty.

The only other thing in the package was a single sheet of copy paper that included a brief paragraph of known, or theorized background and, most importantly, the operational goal.

Dear Friend,

We believe our esteemed colleague, Mr. Hagin, had acquired information about the revival of a criminal cell once referred to as the Cornbread Mafia. This cartel, the largest marijuana ring in U.S. history, was broken up by federal sting over two decades ago. While the region is responsible for a large percentage of the nations illegal marijuana production, eradication efforts are ongoing and extremely effective. He pointed to Mr. James

Rafferty, a noted equestrian, as a possible kingpin in the revived organization. Surveillance has unveiled a relationship between Mr. Rafferty and Sheriff William McCoy of Alta Loma County.

Efforts to infiltrate the cartel have proven unfruitful supporting the belief that there may be well placed operatives inside the Beltway that are involved with the organization at the highest levels. Your operational goal is to identify and infiltrate the organization, expose the principle players, and prepare evidence for federal indictments. The operation term cannot exceed fourteen days.

Compensation shall be according to normal terms.
Thank you.

Rance read the brief through two more times before secure-shredding the entire package contents. Two weeks isn't a lot of time to work your way in to an underground crime organization and root out its senior members. He opened his safe and extracted one of several complete sets of false I.D. and enough cash for two weeks of cover. For the operation he decided to become Michael Pena, a Spanish/American business owner who ran a small logistics company specializing in intermodal freight. It was a bulletproof cover. Michael was the son of Spanish shipping mogul Enrique Pena and his American beauty queen wife, Eva. Pena International, the parent company, was based in Spain and primarily traveled shipping lanes between the United States and Europe. Son Michael had received a permanent visa and grew up with an aunt in California, completing high school and college before beginning his company with one Freightliner two-axle tractor and a little help from his father. Rance and Michael played football together in High School. Logistics seemed like a perfect cover for a trafficking operation. Rance logged on to the Churchill Downs website to check the following day's races and found that James Rafferty had horses in the 2nd and fifth race.

Broadback had an airport shuttle pick him up in front of Curious Georgetown at 5:30 am and take him

to Dulles where he paid cash for a one-way flight to Lexington. He rented an SUV and headed east toward Louisville. He walked through the gates at 10:35 am. Since it was a weekday, he was able to rent an open suite in the Jockey Club for the day. Meant to entertain large groups, Club suites were not normally rented out to a single man who was, admittedly, just there to watch a few races. Rance allowed the servers to attend to his every need, playing the reclusive, rich young businessman part. He tipped big and counted on them spreading the word about his presence around the executive levels of the track, but just in case they didn't, he placed a few bets that would be sure to get some attention.

At 11:45 am, the maitre di informed him that Mr. Rafferty would like to invite him to his suite for lunch. Mr. Pena graciously declined. He thought playing hard to get might present the gambler with a little challenge. His hunch proved correct. At 12:45 pm, just after the posting of the fourth race, Mr. Rafferty personally knocked on the door of Suite 16. One of the servers answered the door, "Mr. Rafferty. May I help you?"

"Yes, thank you. Could you tell Mr. Pena that I am here to meet him?"

The server disappeared and came back to the closed door moments later. "Come right in, Sir." Rafferty sized up Pena as they shook hands.

"So, Mr. Pena, I'm sorry you couldn't make it over for lunch." Rafferty said in a most gentlemanly southern drawl.

"Yes, thank you for the invitation, though." Pena said without offering an excuse.

"And what brings you to the Downs this fine day?"

"Well, Sir. I am interested in horses. I suppose it is in my genes. As you know, Spain has a proud equestrian heritage."

"And you are from Spain?"

"Originally. But I grew up in the States. My business is here, but I long for my homeland."

"I have a few Spanish/Arabians, myself," Rafferty offered.

"You are an owner, Sir?"

Rafferty laughed. How could anyone come into Churchill Downs and not know James Rafferty. But he was too curious to be offended, "Yes, I have a few. In fact, I have a horse running in the next race, a little two-year old colt that we are pretty excited about named Here Comes Trouble."

"I see," said Pena. "Very Exciting." He made a point to look at his race card, "I have to admit, Mr. Rafferty, that I picked another horse in that race."

"Oh, that's okay, that's why it's called a gamble, after all," Rafferty smiled. "Shall we watch the race together?"

"By all means, please, come in and have a drink."

Rafferty ordered a Cuba Libre, which Mr. Pena acknowledged as a good choice, and the men went to the window to sit and watch the race. As the horses entered the gate Pena sat forward in his chair, genuinely excited about the race. Rafferty watched with amusement. He couldn't figure out what this guy was doing. Was he really just a Spaniard with more money than sense?

"May I ask if you visit the race track very often," Rafferty said.

"This is my first time. Does it show?"

"Well, let's just say it is refreshing to see such a pure excitement for the sport."

Neither mans horse garnered a top three finish, with Pena's horse really falling off the pace down the last stretch. "I might not have a knack for this," he laughed. "Like everything, I usually just go with the biggest long-shot. Win big, lose big."

"Nothing wrong with that strategy, my friend..."

"Please, call me Michael."

"... Michael, then. Nothing wrong with that style of betting. I'm the kind that tends to hedge my bets a little, but each style has its place."

"Hedge?"

"Well, in this race, for instance. My horse had 10/1 odds-- that can be nice if you win. So I put some money on him in the event that he won I would see a good payday. But, then again, at ten to one, it would have taken a pretty good kick in the ass for him to win," Rafferty smiled. "But the top three horses, were

going at 2/1, 4/1, and 7/1, so I put money on all three of them as well, at different levels. The four to one horse was the winner, so, adjusting for what I placed on the other horses, I still came out ahead. Hedging my bet," Rafferty explained and swiveled around in his chair, facing Michael Pena.

"So, Michael, what kind of work do you do, anyway?" Rafferty said, confirming the cursory background check that he had already received on the visitor.

"I am in logistics."

"I don't see you as a truck driver."

"No, although I have driven. Very honorable profession. No, my family in Spain has a small shipping company and, when we decided to expand, I formed a logistics company specializing in Intermodal Freight. It's a small operation."

"So you own a trucking company like Swift or Schneider, one of those?"

"Kind of, yes. Only our niche is containers. We specialize in bringing the containers from the shipyard out to the rail lines, and from the rail lines out to individual terminals. We are kind of the middle-men of the process," Pena described.

"Interesting," Rafferty said, honestly. "And where is your company located?"

"Like many Intermodals, where ever there are shipping lanes and rail lanes, we would like to have an terminal. Our home is Oakland, California," Pena said. "But here I am, talking about truck driving when I am in the presence of a race horse owner. I must hear what it is like to raise these beautiful animals."

"I'll tell you what," Rafferty began, his greedy mind moving well out in front of his common sense. "I'm having a little get-together out at the farm with a few friends tomorrow evening. If you are still in town, how about coming out to the house?"

Pena thought for a moment, mentally realigning his schedule. "I can do it," he finally said. "It would be an honor for me."

"Great," Rafferty said, standing and reaching to shake the younger mans hand. "Where are you staying, I'll have a car come for you."

"21c," Pena said.

"Very nice. How does 6:00 pm sound?"

"I will be ready," Pena assured. "And Mr. Rafferty, thank you for your hospitality today. I am very honored."

"Hey, it's the South, that's what we do," he said with a wave. Rafferty placed a twenty in the palm of the server as he stepped out the door and disappeared.

Rance sat back in his chair and watched the race, his mind running ahead to the next move.

"Oooh, the plot thickens," Andy said to his computer as he saved his work and stood. He stopped by the refrigerator for regular inspection and then by the front window to look down the street at the Martin's. All seemed quiet in this world, so he retired to the other.

James Rafferty was nobody's fool. Before he ever considered inviting the high rolling stranger to lunch in his suite he called the private cell number of a contact at the FBI and asked for a quick background check. When the initial report came back clean, he made the invitation. When his generosity was rebuffed, his curiosity was peaked. Now back in his palatial suite having met and become intrigued by the young entrepreneur, Rafferty used every grey connection he had around the country checking the background of Michael Pena and the Pena shipping empire in Spain and the United States. His last call was to Phyllis Lecter, a Senator from the bordering state of Indiana who sat on the Federal Transportation Committee. She was the ranking member of the committee and a regular beneficiary of James Rafferty's hospitality and generosity.

"Phyllis, Jim here."

"Well, James, to what do I owe this surprise?" she said.

"Two things. One, I would love to have you over tomorrow evening, just a few guests, drinks, I'd like you to meet someone."

"Jim, it is rather tense around here at the present time, what with Senator Hagin's unfortunate death."

"Yes, I heard about that, I am so sorry. I have sent my condolences to Mrs. Hagin and the family."

Terrible tragedy... But, on the other hand, it would be completely understandable for you to take an evening off and spend it with your family, don't you think?"

"What was the second thing?"

"A favor. Are you familiar with Michael Pena? Some kind of intermodal shipping company, based out of Oakland?"

"No, why?"

"He showed up at the track today, pleasant young man."

"I can look in to him a little."

"He'll be at my place tomorrow night. I'd like to introduce you."

"Listen, don't count on me, but I'll try to make it. How's that?"

"Very Senatorial."

"It's what we do, right? Everything is a definite maybe."

"Hope to see you tomorrow, then."

"Bye Jim."

Rance spent the evening at a coffee house that provided free wireless connection. This was a better option than the free internet connection provided by the upscale hotel the government didn't know they were paying for as it was harder to trace and even if someone was able to get the IP address, individual users were coming in and out of here all the time. His primary interest was to grab an afternoon call log from the cell number he'd received from his new friend. He hacked in to the provider, downloaded the day's activity report and began tracing each call made after 10:30 am. "James Rafferty is a careful business man," Rance thought. "Hedging his bets." Rafferty's phone had dialed two law firms, three police agencies, someone at the FBI, and two government officials, one of which was the office of a certain Phyllis Lecter, Senator from the great state of Indiana. "Checking up on the Spaniard, good thinking, I would do the same thing," Rance said to himself.

He remembered Senator Lecter from the photos in the mission packet. He dug into her a little and found

out that she had deep ties in Kentucky, with nearly thirty percent of her campaign's war chest coming from organizations whose funding could be traced to the Bluegrass state. Helen Greenley, the Senators mother, now deceased, grew up in the community of Moorehead, KY, a little college town in the foothills of the Daniel Boone National Forest. Rance ran a computer search on the Greenley name and found forty or more scattered across the region with one, Charlotte, who appeared to be a first cousin to Senator Lecter, currently living in Alta Loma County and married to the honorable William "Buddy" McCoy, county Sheriff. "Small world," Rance thought.

Rance closed his eyes and considered the information he had thus far. Pretty much nothing more than contained in the brief. Things were slowing down in the coffee shop and outside, "Must be about closing time," he thought, and looked at his watch, 9:30 pm. "Wow, I'm not in DC anymore," he chuckled to himself. An old John Denver song about rolling up the sidewalks precisely at ten popped in to his mind briefly and he decided to take a little road trip.

He shut down his computer and returned to his rented Forerunner. He picked up an Atlas from a 24-hour Wal-Mart a few miles east of town and located Alta Loma County and the town of Rose Park. It looked to be a two-hour drive southeast which would put him in the area a little before midnight. He imagined that little mountain town would be closed for business at that hour, which he was counting on in order to protect his cover. Rance opened a Powerbar he picked up in the store and settled in for the drive.

Andy was able to get his altar ego settled in for a drive, but he himself was unable to settle back in to the story. The door to that room in his mind where Rance Broadback lived had closed and Andy couldn't find the right key. He needed a break. The sun had retreated beneath the Pacific, leaving the layer of foggy clouds to be illuminated by the city lights. It was a dreary, foggy, beautiful San Francisco Saturday night.

Chapter 10

Albert Martin, the slightly built nephew of the man his father prayed that he would grow to be like, leaned against the building across from the entrance to Martin's Deli. It was raining and he was anxious and miserable, his clothes damp and smelly from a day and a half on the street. He watched the door of the deli from the shadows, waiting for all the customers to leave and for his uncle to close the store and lock up for the night. His plan was simple, reason with the old man. The package had come, it had been signed for, and it was his - his property, easy as that. "Hand it over, it's not rocket science," he muttered in the direction of the restaurant.

In his mind, it had been the perfect plan, he would borrow the money to buy the weed, repackage it and resell it at retail markup. There were plenty of people he knew that wanted to buy. Then, pay back the loan and pocket the profit. Easy money. He stood to make four grand. It all had to be turned around in three days, which should have been cake. He didn't anticipate spending the first day and a half talking his uncle out of the package. "What an *idiot!*" Albert was growing angrier with his uncle by the minute. This first brick was a test to see if he could deliver sales. His connection said they always started a new guy this way, "Get the money for a key, use the profit to buy two more, turn those into four more, and so

on. Before you know it, you're driving a Hummer." The hard part was the first one. Albert didn't have two thousand bucks and didn't know where to get it. When he told the friend that he needed to come up with some fast money, the guy told him about a company that made short terms loans, and that they had helped guys like Albert get started in his own business. Albert called Allied Finance and talked to a man named Johnny.

"Hey, uh, a friend said you do short term loans."

"Sometimes," Johnny said. "What kind of loan we talking about?"

"Business. A business loan."

"We've done some business loans."

"Uh, I need two grand, as soon as possible. It's for some, uh..."

Johnny cut him off, "Hey Bud-- We don't do business over the phone, see? Why don't you come by the office? We're over the bakery at Sixth and Market."

"Yeah, uh, I'm on my way." Albert hopped a bus downtown and found the bakery. There was a stairway entrance to the right of the bakery that led to a dingy hallway of closed doors. Most of the doors were unmarked, heavy brown wood doors with old white glass and grungy brass knobs. Room 201 had a piece of copy paper taped to the door sideways that said "Allied Finance," and Albert opened the door without thinking much else about it. He stepped in to a room that was empty except for a desk, a coat rack, and three chairs. There were large dirty windows that faced the red brick of the multi-story building next door making the light that fell into room 201 dull and lifeless. The only art on the four smokey white walls was an old garage-sale landscape that could have been hanging in the same spot for forty years. The high ceiling boasted three working florescent tubes and an old fan that circulated the thick second hand smoke. The desk held an ashtray and a big calculator, the kind that prints out numbers on a wide roll of tape. A sharply dressed older man in a suit was sitting behind the desk carefully shaping the ash of his cigarette in the tray while the other man sat in one of the other chairs with one of his bulky arms draped over another. They didn't stand or greet Albert when he entered.

"Uh, Johnny?" Albert said as he closed the door behind himself, "I, uh, called about the loan? The business loan?"

The large man stood and started toward Albert. When he got

uncomfortably close he bent his neck slightly, his beady black eyes twelve inches from Albert's face and asked, "You a cop?"

"What?" Albert said. He didn't expect that. "No. Me?" he started to laugh to break the tension when big Johnny spun him around like a top and pushed him against the wall by the door.

"Mind if I pat you down?" Johnny said, not really as a question, as his boxing glove sized hands deftly moved down Albert's body, head to toe. He ended by giving Albert a little shove in the back and left the kid facing the wall as he turned to retake his seat. "He's clean," Johnny said to the other man while he extracted a small bottle of hand sanitizer from his bomber jacket. He squirted some into a palm and rubbed his hands together furiously. "Can't we hire somebody else to do that?" he said to the man in the brown suit who smiled and squinted through his own smoke in the direction of their guest.

"So, my young friend," the man in the suit finally said. "Welcome to Allied Finance. How can we help you today?"

Albert briefly considered running, but it was a finance company, for cripesake, it had to be on the level, right? So he turned back toward the desk and said, "Well, I," he glanced at Johnny, feeling somewhat violated, took a deep breath, "I need a loan, just a short term loan, just a small one."

"Well I am not so sure we can help you, my friend, but we will try, right Johnny?" Johnny didn't even shrug. "Now, sit down and tell me how I can help."

The man in the suit cut Albert off again when he tried to say what he wanted the money for. "We are not in the business of telling people how to spend their money or what to spend their money on, son. It's your life. We just need to know how much you need and when you expect to pay it back," he said, still smiling.

"Okay, well, I need two thousand, uh, today, if possible. And I can pay it back on Monday."

"That *is* a short term loan. We like those kind." The man in the suit mashed the butt of his smoke in the ashtray and retrieved a one-sheet contract from the top drawer of the desk. "If you could take a minute and fill this out for us," Suit-guy asked, pushing the paper and a pen across the desk.

Albert quickly filled out the form and pushed it back across the

desk. Suit-man sat motionless as Johnny reached across and pulled the paper back to himself and scanned it. He took out his cell phone and started dialing the numbers Albert had written down. He called information for the apartment complex, confirming his residence and made a call to the Deli owners Albert gave as a “relative living in the area.” Johnny didn’t ask about Albert, he just hung up when a lady answered, “Marteen’s deli.”

“She said Marteen,” Johnny said, looking at Albert.

“Marteen, right. That’s how it’s pronounced. But you spell it Martin.”

“You go by Martin?”

“Yeah, just because I got tired of correcting everyone, you know?”

The man in the suit leaned forward and interlocked his fingers on the table in front of him and said, “Well, Mr. Martin, or Marteen, I think we can do business.”

Albert smiled and said, “Thanks, great, I...”

The man cut him off again. “Wouldn’t you like to know the terms of the agreement?”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Albert said, straightening up and trying to look more business like.

“We loan you two thousand dollars today, Thursday. And you pay back twenty five hundred on Monday. That’s one hundred in interest per day. Does that seem reasonable?”

“That seems outrageous, actually,” Albert couldn’t keep himself from saying.

“And you are certainly able to walk out that door and obtain other financing, that is your option. You are in control of this part of the process,” the man said kindly, trying to help Albert understand that he didn’t have to do this.

“No. Uh, I guess five hundred in interest would be cool. Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Now then,” the man said without changing his expression of graciousness, “if for some reason the loan cannot be repaid by this time Monday, the amount increases by \$500 per day, interest. So, at noon Tuesday, your amount due becomes \$3000. At noon Wednesday, the amount due becomes \$3500, and so on. Are we clear on that?”

“Wait a minute...” Albert began.

“Now, my friend, these are your terms. You said you could repay by Monday. Is that not true? Were you not planning to pay the loan back on time?”

“No, of course, I am. It’s just that...”

“Well if you are planning to pay us back, \$2500 on Monday, then we have no problem, no problem at all,” the man in the brown suit smiled, larger this time and sat back in the old swivel chair.

Albert did some quick math. He already had ten people willing to pay retail for the pot. All he had to do was buy it, have it delivered, re-pack it, deliver it out, and have this dough back by Monday. He’d still make thirty-five hundred. Over 3 G’s in one weekend. He was blinded by the profit potential. “Yeah, okay, I can make it.”

The man tapped some numbers on his calculator and finally pressed the biggest button on the lower row causing the tape to chatter and roll. He tore off the paper and showed Albert that there were two copies. “Duplicate tape. Nice, huh?” He was visibly pleased with the technology. He slid the calculator tape in front of Albert and, with a ballpoint pen, leaned over the desk and pointed out the numbers, upside down, for Albert to review.

\$2000

\$2100

\$2200

\$2300

\$2400

\$2500

\$3000

\$3500

Signature _____

“Here is the two thousand, right. Then \$2100--interest begins when you leave this room, see. So, say you want to pay back this evening, fine. Bring \$2100 and we’re golden. Clear?” He waited for Albert to respond, but the boy’s eyes were glued to the adding machine tape. Here is Monday, \$2500. Easy. Now, Tuesday, see, the total is \$3000 and Wednesday is \$3500, and so on.” Suit-man straightened up and waited for Albert to look up from the tape.

“I need to know that you completely understand the terms of this agreement, Mr. Martin.”

Albert nodded, “Yeah, I’m good. I get it.” He signed the bottom of the tape and passed it across the desk. Suit-man retrieved both copies and handed Albert back the yellow copy.

“Now, see,” he explained, “we both have a copy. This is the contract. We all know the terms. Everyone’s happy? Yes?”

Albert nodded again. The man in the suit reached in to a drawer and retrieved a small green cash box. He handed it across to Johnny who opened it and counted out twenty crisp one hundred dollar bills. Johnny handed the stack to Albert who thumbed through it quickly, not wanting to offend the big guy by recounting, and shoved it into his jeans.

“Mr. Martin, Allied is a business built on trust, yes? We have given you this money, with no collateral other than this little slip of paper. It was your decision to take out this loan, and now it is your responsibility to pay it back. I think we have been very clear on this point, do you agree?”

“Yeah, I’ll be back Monday with \$2500, you can count on it,” he stood and extended his hand. Johnny stood as well and shook Albert’s hand and walked him to the door. He had his sanitizer out before the boy reached the staircase.

“Kids these days,” he said as his boss smiled and lit up another smoke.

Albert left the room and grabbed a bus cross-town to his contact. One of the safeguards of the distribution network was that there was never a direct exchange of cash for product. The distributor would meet with the buyer, make a call and have the product delivered to an address given, and then, when the product was signed for, the cash would change hands. It was a process that had effectively helped this distributor fly under police radar for over a decade of business in the city. On Friday morning, as Albert sat with the distributor, the phone rang.

“Bueno. Gracias,” the distributor said, clicking the cell phone shut. “The package has been signed for at Martin’s Deli, as you instructed.”

Albert handed over the cash and ran to a pay phone to call his uncle. The line was busy, and then there was no answer. He finally got through to Uncle Albert Friday afternoon. The old man either didn’t know what he had, or he did know and, for some reason, didn’t want Albert to

have it.

“*Jesus!*” Albert said out loud as he kicked against the building and watched inside the deli, trying to will everyone to leave so his uncle would close the store. He looked at his watch every two minutes, realizing that he would have to work all night to get the stuff ready to deliver, then deliver all day Sunday and Monday and get the money paid back by Monday afternoon. It would have been easy if he had gotten the product on Thursday like he should have. “Dammit!” The younger Martin was getting more nervous as the seconds clicked past. He should have had the package delivered somewhere else, or warned his uncle ahead of time about a private delivery. He’d been too anxious and it cost him a day and a half. So far.

Finally the last couple exited the deli, the bell’s catching Albert’s attention from his perch in the shadows across the street. A minute later Uncle Albert pushed through the saloon doors and, wiping his hands on his apron, began his closing routine of flipping the sign, locking the door and bussing any remaining tables. He would then flip the chairs up onto the tables and dust mop the floor. Twice a week he would wet-mop.

This evening as he flipped the sign and thumbed through his key ring, looking through his bifocals for the door key, the door swung open and in rushed his nephew Albert who had made it on a dead run across the street the moment the sign was turned.

“Albert, what in the...”

Albert pulled to door shut behind him and faced his uncle, his eyes red from a lack of sleep, his hands nervous and shaky. He grabbed the keys from the older man and rummaged through them till he found one that would fit the door and locked it. His uncle had stepped backwards in to the deli with a frustrated and disappointed look on his face. He wanted to talk to his nephew about the package. He hoped to talk some sense in to the boy.

“Uncle Albert, where is it?”

“Sit down Albert, let’s talk.”

“I don’t have time to talk Uncle Albert, where is it!” he demanded, tears forming in his eyes. He didn’t want to be firm with his uncle, but he was growing desperate and the old man didn’t seem to understand.

“Albert, I’m not going to lie to you, I opened the box.”

“*Why?!*”

“It was addressed to me! For God’s sake, Albert! What did you think I would do?”

Albert knew he screwed up. He rubbed nervous fingers against his eyes and forehead in an attempt to refocus and think. “I tried to call. You knew it was mine...”

“Why us, Albert? Why bring your aunt and I in to your troubles? My God... If your father...”

“You weren’t supposed to open it, see? Just give it to me and I’ll go, okay? Just give me the damn box!”

“I can’t do that, Albert. You made me an accomplice in this by sending it here. I signed for the delivery for crissake.”

“You aren’t a part of anything! You’re just an old fool who opened someone else’s mail! You don’t understand what’s going on, Uncle. I have to have that box! It’s not an option, this is no game!”

Mr. Martin pulled out a chair and sat down, crossing his arms. He would talk reason to the younger man-- he loved him too much. “Albert, let me help you. Do you need money? Is that what this is all about?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Albert said. How could an old man understand the money that could be made by selling a few bricks of weed every month? It was nearly harmless, only illegal by some technicalities and a few votes. It was just a short-term thing, just something he needed to do to get on his feet, get going in the world. “Damn it!” he finally said and started running toward the saloon doors. He slammed through them and ran up the back stairs to the apartment. He burst in, surprising his aunt who was setting the table for a late dinner with her husband. The old man lagged ten steps behind.

Mrs. Martin was frozen at the table, holding a knife and fork in her hand, too startled to speak.

“Where is it, Auntie? Where is my box?” Albert demanded. By the time the old man made it up the stairs Albert was in the kitchen, opening cupboards, he was growing desperate, he tossed boxes of crackers and pasta onto the floor, he rummaged through drawers.

“Albert, stop!” his uncle ordered him.

Albert ran down the hall and entered the bedroom; he tossed the covers and shoved the mattress. He dove on to the floor and looked under the bed. His uncle grabbed at his hand as he reached for his aunts chest of drawers. Albert swung wildly, avoiding being grabbed and shoved his

uncle against the door. “Where is it!” he demanded again. He slung open the accordion doors of the closet and began pulling boxes off the shelf, shoes and hats spilled out on to the floor.

“It’s not here! Albert, listen to me! It’s not here!” Mr. Martin shouted. Albert pushed passed him and tore apart the hallway closet, rooting around towels and blankets. He was enraged and could hardly hear his aunt and uncle pleading with him to stop and talk to them. Maria was standing near the front door and Uncle Albert was still trying to harness the stronger young man by grabbing his arms and hands. Albert would flail and hit his uncle wildly, forcing him back, demanding the location of his package.

Suddenly, Albert thought of the storeroom and ran for the door. Uncle Albert, reading his mind, shouted after him, “It’s not down there, it’s not here!”

Albert pushed passed his aunt, still standing like a statue in the doorway, unable to understand what was happening before her eyes. She fell back as he shoved past her and wasn’t strong enough to catch herself on the doorframe. She tumbled down the steps behind her nephew. As he turned the corner to begin the first floor search, he saw his aunt slam in to the brick exterior wall at the bottom of the stairs. Albert glanced back at her, and then looked at the top of the stairs where his uncle stood, momentarily frozen in time.

“*Maria!*” the old man shouted, running down the steps to aid his wife who lie motionless on the concrete floor. “*Why? Why Albert!*” he cried as he descended the steps.

Albert started to run back to aid his Aunt, his mind was whirling, he needed the dope, he had to find it. But his Aunt... He ran from the back room and twisted the ring of keys that hung in the locked front door. He ran out on to the sidewalk and stopped to look back. He turned to run, then he started back in to help his Aunt, then turned again. He grabbed his head with both hands and screamed, “*Aaarrrghh!*” How could things get so screwed up! He turned and ran wildly down the side street and in to the foggy night.

The sound of the ambulance broke the stream of consciousness in

which Andy was floating as he watched Rance Broadback drive through the cool Kentucky night, looking for clues in the little town of Rose Park. He looked up from the iBook and consciously clicked Apple-S to save his work. The light from the emergency vehicle reflected through his dark house. He rolled his desk chair back and went to follow the siren and lights. By the time Andy got to the window the ambulance had come to a stop in front of Martin's Deli. Andy froze. These were times when creativity was a liability. In the time it took to pull on his hat and coat and lace up his Nike's, his mind had sent forth no less than a dozen scenarios for what might have happened at the Martin's. There could have been a bloody mob hit, or a shoot-out between drug dealers and the police, the nephew may have broke in and went on a shooting rampage. All the ideas had to do with terrible acts of violence, which he scolded himself for and blamed on the media that he didn't watch.

He walked as quickly as his XXL body would allow to the Martin's where a small crowd had gathered. The paramedics had disappeared inside and a patrolman was stationed at the door, restricting entry. After about fifteen minutes most of the crowd of short-attention-span Americans had abandoned the front door leaving Andy and a couple other neighbors standing there with the police officer.

"Do you know what happened Officer?" someone asked.

"No, Ma'am, I don't have any information at this time." Was all he would say, which was probably true. After thirty long minutes, enough time to know something was very wrong, the Paramedics wheeled the stretcher out, carrying the small body of Maria Martin, strapped to the gurney with three yellow belts and another across her head, which had been surrounded by some kind of inflated, three sided pillow which looked sort of like the headgear boxers wear during sparring, only bigger and tighter. Mr. Martin followed close behind, locking the door behind him and climbing in to the truck to be with his Maria. He never looked around; his face was stern, his countenance broken. Andy didn't know what might have happened, some kind of accident, he supposed. He wondered if it was related to the drugs. Violence follows drugs, he remembered saying. He caught the officer as the ambulance rushed away from the corner.

"Sir, are they going to General? Can you find out?"

"Yeah, they are on their way to General. Looks like a neck or back injury of some kind. Said she fell down some stairs," the officer said.

“Thanks, okay,” Andy replied, and stood motionless on the corner for a minute as people dispersed. In three minutes the neighborhood looked like nothing every happened. That hit him hard. The hustling, bustling city just went back about its business like nothing ever happened. Depression snuck up behind the big man on the corner and grabbed him by the throat. Andy’s head hurt by the time he made it back to his house. He felt helpless and abandoned. He unconsciously walked to the freezer and took out a pint of ice cream, it didn’t matter what kind. He numbly grabbed a spoon, leaving the flatware drawer open, and slumped down in his chair. He sat silently, staring at the wall in front of him and eating slowly from the cold container. Tears were dripping down his cheeks, partly out of sadness and concern for the Martin’s and partly for his own loss. He didn’t have many friends and he secretly hoped each would out live him so he wouldn’t have to deal with the pain of losing someone. The Martin’s weren’t even that close, but they knew his name and had invited him into their home. Andy cursed himself for acting as if it were about him.

The empty cup and spoon fell to the living room floor and Andy buried his face in his hands. Rubbing his head and neck he mustered the resolve to get up and wash his face and go to the hospital.

Young Albert Martin spent forty five minutes in an alley, two blocks down 3rd Avenue, sitting behind a dumpster crying. He heard the ambulance, saw the glow of the lights and commotion of the people on the corner, but he couldn’t go back up there. This was his fault. He was damning himself for stupidity. “Why did I do this? What in the hell am I doing?” But he was running out of time. The sweat-stained little slip of yellow paper in his pocket reminded him that the business venture that he willingly started, without advice or guidance, had real deadlines, and real consequences for failing to meet them. He walked back up the quiet street toward the Deli.

The back door was locked, of course, but he tugged at it anyway. He knew there was a steel bar the size of a railroad tie holding the door fast. The front door was locked, although the lights of the deli were on. Some of the tables and chairs were scattered around, a mess of his own doing. He went back around to the rear of the store. The alley was dimly

lit. The two windows on the first floor were small and high. They were barred shut. Albert could see that the second floor windows were shut as well, but without security bars. He looked around and finally pushed a dumpster over a few feet so it was just under one of the second story windows. He climbed up the dumpster and reached as high as he could but was still well short of the second story. He rummaged quietly and quickly around the alley and collected a few vegetable crates, an old chair and a concrete block, and erected a crude ladder on top of the dumpster which he carefully ascended bringing his head and shoulders up to the level of the window. He saw, through the curtains, that the place was empty. The lights were on and the house was still a mess from his rampage, but no one was home. He wondered about his aunt. "What did I do?" he whispered. But there was no time for self-pity.

He broke the glass with a brick and turned the metal latch, pushing the old window up high enough for him to shimmy in. He was barely strong enough to lift his body weight, but urgency provided the needed adrenaline and he made it, tumbling into the living room, upsetting a floor lamp and a rack of newspapers by his uncle's chair. He received a pretty mean gash on the back of his right forearm from broken glass, which dripped freely and stung sharply. He held his arm and stood, looking back out into the alley, making sure he was still alone. He washed off his arm in the kitchen sink, the cold water felt good. He wrapped his arm in a dishtowel and immediately started looking for the box. "Where is it, Uncle Albert? Where the hell did you put it?" he asked out loud as he walked around. He was almost sure it was in the apartment, no one ever came up there besides Albert and Maria. Their nephew, himself, had only been in the residence one time.

The most private of all places would be the bedroom, and that is where he searched. He turned the place upside down like a detective with a hard lead and a warrant. Then, finally, in a small box of ladies purses, he found what he was looking for. The box was hidden inside a black purse, zipped and snapped and impossible to find. Almost. Albert quickly tore in to the brown paper wrapper and pulled out the box of Ritz Crackers, he broke open the seal and dumped the brick out. Relief overwhelmed him. He looked around and stood, at the same time sliding the key of pot back in to the box. He went back out to the kitchen and found a white plastic grocery bag and pulled a can of vegetables and a box of pasta out of the

pantry. He put them in the bag with the Ritz and exited the apartment down the steps where his aunt had recently tumbled. The lingering images and sound of her pitiful screams nearly made him lose his own balance. Removing the big metal bar from the back door of the storeroom, he exited the building and ran.

Albert stashed the groceries at his apartment and went back out to the street. He was exhausted and needed to buy some go-powder to keep him moving for another 36 hours. He got his last hundred bucks out of an ATM and knocked on a familiar door. He bought all he could-- grabbed one snort before he left and another when he got back to his place. He rubbed his hands together and cleared his nose and eyes. "Time to make some money," he said with a greedy glee.

— Chapter 11 —

When Andy arrived at San Francisco General Hospital, it was clear from the parking lot that his was not the only problem of the evening. That truth was confirmed upon entering the emergency room that was lined wall to wall with people in various stages of agony. His stomach ached as he walked through, scanning the room and adjoining hallways for Mr. Martin. He determined, from an overworked black woman at the Information Desk who, curiously, was able to see him, that Mrs. Martin had been admitted and that he might find the family on the third floor.

Mr. Martin was in a waiting room talking to a policeman when Andy stepped off the elevators. Andy waved through the closed door to the old man who acknowledged him with a nod and slight raise of an index finger. The policeman glanced back at the window to see Andy and then turned his attention back to Mr. Martin. Andy stepped to the nurse's station to ask about Mrs. Martin.

“Mrs. Martin is in ICU. Are you immediate family?”

“Uh, no.”

“Are you her minister? Clergy?”

“No.”

“Well, I'm sorry, but...” Andy didn't really hear the rest, he realized the nurses couldn't see him, he'd find out nothing from them. He walked

back by the closed door of the waiting room and stood outside, in the hallway near the elevators. He would wait for Mr. Martin and find out how Maria was doing.

“Andy, my God,” Mr. Martin said as he came out of the waiting room after the officer had finished the interview. “Thanks for coming. Maria, my Maria.” Mr. Martin held Andy’s hand, tears welling up in bloodshot eyes.

“Mrs. Martin? Is she okay?” Andy said.

“She is bad, Andy. She is really bad. She fell down the stairs, the stairs to our house... My God,” he said, reliving the scene. “It was like slow-motion. I arrive at the steps and I see her tumbling down, her poor arms and legs hitting the wall and the stairs, her head, bouncing... I thought she was dead.”

“What do the doctors say? Is she...”

“The fall, it knocked her out, you know. She got a concussion, very bad. They keep her head very still, in case, I don’t know what. Maybe a blood clot or something?”

“Yeah, I don’t know.”

“And the doctor said she has a fractured hip, but not badly, I don’t know,” the old man was shaking his head. He would do anything to trade places with his wife.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” Andy said with his hand on his neighbor’s shoulder. Mr. Martin nodded.

“I must go to Maria. Thank you, Andy. Thank you.”

“Is there anything I can do? Make any calls, anything?”

“I don’t know. Right now I don’t know.”

Andy took a seat in the waiting room while his friend went to be with his wife. At 1:15 am his cell phone rang. He was dozing and it took a while for him to realize it was his phone. It was a familiar number.

“Mom?”

“Andy, I tried to call the house, are you okay?”

Andy pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at the time on the digital screen. “It’s 1:15 am.”

“I just got home from the crusade and I wanted to call you.”

“You never call after 10:00 pm. The whole, you know, ‘the writer needs his rest,’ thing.”

“Tonight was different. Where are you? Are you at home?”

“I’m at the hospital. A friend of mine fell down some stairs, she’s in ICU at General.”

“Oh, Andy!”

“You know the Martin’s? The little deli across from my place?”

“Sure, of course.”

“Yeah, Mrs. Martin. I don’t know what happened, I was just sitting at my desk writing and all the sudden I hear sirens and see the lights and all. It’s been surreal.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. Mr. Martin said she has a concussion, and maybe a broken hip, at least. But they don’t keep you in ICU for that, do they?”

“A lot of older people die from falling down stairs,” Mrs. Boyd said.

“Jesus, mom. She looked horrible when they wheeled her out of the Deli. I mean she looked bad.”

“Well, I’ll let you go, then. You be careful out there. Okay? I’ll be praying for them.”

“Okay. Talk to you in the morning.”

“All right. Good night.”

Andy hung up the phone, still groggy from before the call. The smells and sounds of the hospital were uncomfortable enough, waking up to them in an empty waiting room while Larry King re-runs played on the overhead television in the middle of the night was worse. “Maybe this is what purgatory is like,” Andy thought, having heard some Catholics talk about a place you go after you die to pay for your sins. “I’ll be *praying* for them?” he whispered, his mother’s words finally registering in his sleepy mind. “Is that what she said?” He couldn’t remember his mother ever mentioning prayer, other than maybe in 1989 when she said the A’s didn’t have a prayer in the World Series, and then proceeded to sweep their beloved Giants in four games. But he gathered that was a different usage of the phrase than this one.

He drove silently home and spent the rest of the night in his own bed.

The morning light shining brightly into the bedroom window told Andy that it was both late in the morning and sunny outside. Sunday was generally a day of sleeping in and spending the afternoon thumbing through the Chronicle that was generally as thick as a ream of copy paper. He could never believe that they could afford to sell them for a buck seventy-five and still make a profit. Andy always thought it was a convenient double standard for liberal publishers to push their editorial agenda so far to the environmental left, and yet devour enough trees every week to re-forest a medium sized country. But he wasn't willing to pay the extra charge to have his own books published on recycled paper, so he wasn't one to talk. So he bought the paper out of a sense of brotherhood with other tree killers. The Martin's hadn't made the local news or, thank God, the three pages of obituaries, so Andy thought he might not have missed anything by sleeping till eleven o'clock. He brought two packs of Ho-Ho's and a cup of fresh coffee back to his desk after looking through the paper and opened a new blog entry.

Andy's Weblog - November 4th

Upsetting the Apple Cart

It's weird how you can be cruising through the day, working your brains out without a care in the world and all of the sudden the rug is just pulled out from under you by some event you didn't see coming. That happened to me last night as one of my neighbors was rushed to the hospital after falling down a flight of stairs. Everything can change in an instant, can't it? What was, in one moment, a pretty enjoyable day, according to my admittedly low standards, was transformed into a nightmare in a matter of moments. Of course, my reaction to the whole event was typical for a self-absorbed paranoid like myself; it was all about me and how it ruined my day and about the loss I felt and how things wouldn't be the same now. Me, me, me.

A good choice, if I can go back to that commitment I made to myself and whoever reads this, would have been to look past how the situation effected me and consider the feelings of others. And as hard as I tried to do that, I was completely unable to pry my pig-headed mind away from dwelling on myself. Like I wrote sometime recently, I can't do this. Good choices extend further than just what I choose to put in my mouth (I write as I gobble my last Ho-Ho in one bite,) good choices extend to the

way I allow myself to be ruled by the circumstances of my life. It seems like everything that happens that is the least bit out of the ordinary causes me to lapse in to a self-absorbed depression that is only comforted by food. And even that comfort is misleading, because I'm left feeling worse than before. I guess that's how things get labeled as addictions.

I know I have at least average intelligence and am relatively rational and open minded; yet I cannot, consistently, make the choices I know are right, given the circumstance. I find myself going down the same path each time, sometimes against my will and sometimes with my will leading the charge like William Wallace leading the Scot's.

And it can all be triggered by some event that upsets my apple cart. I'm as fragile as a wagon full of stacked fruit. Now that makes me feel strong and capable -- not! So, what is the answer? I have no idea, I really don't. I take one step forward and three steps back. The grand total of my progress since making my blog commitment is that I put a can of Pringles down after only eating half of them - and actually, that was only because I was scolded by Big Bird. But that's another story...

I'll keep trying - Andy

Andy opened the Rance Broadback file on his computer and looked at the last few pages of the story with a part of his mind, while another part thought about the Martin's. He called the hospital and tried to find out how Mrs. Martin was doing. All they would tell him was that she was out of ICU. He tried calling back and asking for Mrs. Martin's room but was rebuffed. He decided that he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the novel until he talked to Mr. Martin, so he got dressed and walked down to the Deli. It was closed on Sundays, but he noticed that the lights were on inside. The place was a wreck, maybe from the paramedics the night before. He figured that Mr. Martin was still at the hospital because, surely, he would have turned off the lights upon returning home. Andy got in his car and headed back to the hospital via McDonalds where he told himself he would get a cold drink. He did, only it was connected to a Double-Quarter Pounder meal, which he ate quickly as if to hide from his own conscience. Depression fought with him all the way to the General Information Desk.

He found room 623 and through the small, vertical window of the closed door, Andy saw Mr. Martin sitting in a chair facing into a closed curtain area. His head was on his chest cushioned by his double chin, asleep. Andy didn't want to wake him, the old man must have had quite a night, but he decided to tap lightly on the door anyway. Mr. Martin's head jerked up and he looked at his wife, then, over at the door. His face lightened a little and he stood and went to the door. He stepped outside quietly.

"Andy, Andy," he said, shaking Andy's hand. "Thanks for coming. It's been a long night."

"How is she?"

"Better. She's sleeping now. But she's better. She has quite a bump on her head. A little crack, the doctor said, bad concussion. She must lie very still. They have her head surrounded with sand bags, if you can believe it."

"But she is going to be okay?"

"Yes. I think so. I think so, yes."

"And her hip?"

"Oh my God," Mr. Martin said, shaking his head. "It's not good. I don't know how she will get up stairs anymore, you know? I don't know."

Andy thought about how quickly their life had changed. Everything was different now. What would they have to do, sell the business, move, leave the area? He couldn't bear the thoughts as they came scrambling into his mind.

"But she will walk, right? They have surgery, prosthetics."

"I don't know, Andy. Right now I just want her to be okay. I want her head to be okay, you know?"

"Sure," Andy said as the men started to enter the empty waiting room where Andy had spent part of the night. It was full of people, resting, waiting on news of their own.

"Let's go for some coffee, huh?" Mr. Martin said, wanting to avoid the crowd.

"Sounds good," Andy said, his stomach still bloated from the drive-through binge. The men found the cafeteria and Andy bought two cups of black coffee. They sat near a window where Mr. Martin stirred a pack of sugar in to his cup and stared out the window. He was mentally

replaying the last evening's events, still unsure what exactly had happened. They sat quietly for several minutes.

"Andy," Mr. Martin finally said in a serious tone. "It was the boy." Albert was hardly a boy, he was well past twenty-one years of age and fully capable of functioning as a rational human being. But his uncle had a hard time believing that a man could do something as hurtful and selfish as this, especially to his own family.

"Albert?"

"Ja. He came last night, as I was closing the store. He demanded the box. We fight." Mr. Martin was replaying the scene in his mind, tears swelled fresh in his puffy eyes. "He ran upstairs and began to tear my house, looking, yelling at me and my wife. He is geisteskrank, ja?"

"Did he find it? Didn't you give it to the police?" The questions began to swirl around in Andy's mind, far too many to ask.

"No," Mr. Martin replied, answering one of the questions, Andy wasn't sure which. "He finally runs to the door, he is going to look in the store room... He pushes past Maria, my Maria, and runs. She falls after him and I see her falling, tumbling down the stairs..."

"He pushed her? Did he realize... where did he go?"

"The boy runs out of the store. I don't know. I sit with Maria, but she doesn't move, you know? She is breathing, barely, but she is knocked out. I run to the front and call 911." Mr. Martin shook his head, still stirring and studying his coffee. Finally, he brought the cup to his lips.

"Did you tell the police? About the boy? About Albert?"

"Nein," Mr. Martin said, knowing it had been a mistake. "I should tell them, but... He is mi familia, ja?"

Andy leaned forward, "Mr. Martin, Albert is in trouble. He brought it on himself, and now he is bringing it into your house. He is making bad choices... And you can either enable the bad choices, or you can draw a line at your door, the door of your home." Andy could feel two fingers pointing back at him when he said the part about bad choices. "At least it's something I know about," he thought.

The hospital intercom, which constantly switched from soothing elevator music and paging Doctor Smith and Doctor Vargas, broke up the monotony with a page to Albert Martin. "Albert Martin, Albert Martin, please go to the nearest white courtesy phone." Andy and Mr. Martin looked at each other nearly jumped out of their seats; Andy asked the

cashier where the courtesy phones were while Mr. Martin headed to the elevators. “Maria,” he whispered.

Andy caught him at the elevators and pointed to the bank of courtesy phones. Mr. Martin shook his head, no time. He knew it was his Maria; he had to get to her. The elevator finally opened and the men hurried down the hall toward 623. On their way past the Nurses Station the duty nurse called for Mr. Martin.

“There you are...”

“Maria?” he said, slowing to a stop.

“No. Maria’s fine. I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to startle you. There’s a call for you, here, you can take it right here. It’s the police.”

Mr. Martin looked at Andy with concern. He was relieved, yet troubled.

“Ja. This is Albert Martin.”

“Mr. Martin, Officer Mahone, I was at your place last night, remember, I took your statement at the hospital?”

“Oh, yes, ja.”

“Mr. Martin, have you been back to your place?”

“No, I stay the night with my wife. I stay here.”

“Well, sir, I believe there has been a break-in at your building. I drove past there this morning and it looks like someone entered from the back alley. Would you be able to come back to your residence, sir?”

“Uh, I...”

“At the very least we need to secure the area from further damage, it would be good if you could come. We can have someone take you right back to the hospital.”

“Uh,” Mr. Martin closed his eyes tightly as if trying to make the entire weekend go away. “Yes, ja. I will be there soon. Please wait for me.”

“Yes sir, I’ll be right here,” Officer Mahone said.

Mr. Martin handed the phone back to the nurse and looked at Andy with another disappointed frown. He said to the nurse, “I need to go home for a few minutes.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Martin, we’ll take good care of Maria,” the duty nurse assured.

Andy offered his cell phone number to the nurse, “Can you call us if there is a change? If something happens?” Andy dictated the number while Mr. Martin checked on his wife. He came out a few moments later

and met Andy at the elevators.

“You can take me home, Andy?”

“Absolutely... I knew a car would come in handy some day,” he smiled.

The nearly non-existent Sunday traffic allowed the two men to reach Chestnut in fifteen minutes. Andy turned on 3rd Avenue and parked near the corner. A police cruiser was parked across the street. Officer Mahone spoke into his radio and exited his car as Andy and Mr. Martin hurried across the street.

“Mr. Martin? Officer Mahone,” the policeman said. “Take a look back here, sir.” The officer led the men in to the alley behind the Deli where they saw the dumpster and makeshift ladder leading to the broken window. “The back door was open as well, Sir, I went inside, but whoever did this is long gone.”

Mr. Martin was so angry he couldn't speak. His eyes were wet with emotion, his teeth clenched. He knew exactly who had done this. The three men walked into the back room and glanced around the storeroom before moving upstairs to the apartment. It had been ransacked. They walked through silently with Mr. Martin in the lead. When he got to the bedroom and saw that the closet had been torn apart, the purse-box opened and the large black purse empty and lying, discarded on the floor, he whispered, “Oh my God.”

“Mr. Martin,” the officer said, “Do you have any idea what a thief may have been looking for?”

Mr. Martin looked at Andy and back at Officer Mahone. He rubbed at his tired eyes and said quietly, “Ja. I know... Come, we go downstairs and I fix us a drink.” Without waiting for a response, Mr. Martin walked back through the apartment and headed down the steps. From behind the deli counter he filled three cups with ice and brought them back on a tray with three bottles of Coke. He unconsciously started opening the bottles and preparing the beverages for his guests who were still standing out by the tables. Andy felt like picking up the fallen chairs and straightening the tables, something to help his friend. “Sit, sit, have a drink. I need it, if nothing else,” Mr. Martin said.

Mr. Martin told Officer Mahone the whole story beginning with the Thursday delivery the strange phone calls from his nephew, how the boy showed up demanding the box, and the events of the previous night.

“My Maria, she is in the doorway and the boy just rushes past her, you see, he knocks her out of the way and she falls back. I don’t think it was on purpose, you know, it is just, he is not right, he is on drugs, I think. This is not my brothers son...”

“And you think he came back after you were gone and broke in to the place to find the dope...”

“Ja.”

“Mr. Martin,” the officer said in a serious tone, “you should have called us the minute you opened that box.”

“I know, my God, I know. My Maria...”

“And you are certain that the package is gone?”

“Ja. It is not here.”

“Do you know where we can find the young man?”

“He lives over by Cal State, I think I have the address.” Mr. Martin left the table and entered the saloon doors and turned in to the little office.

“And what is your business in all this, Sir, if I might ask,” Officer Mahone asked Andy.

“Me, I’m just a neighbor. Mr. Martin confided in me, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to need your name, for the record.”

“Andy Boyd, uh, Andrew. I live right up the street.”

“Like the writer Andrew Boyd?”

“Yeah, like that, only fatter.”

“How about that. Hey, I love your books. I got A Ring and a Prayer as a gift. Loved it.”

“Thanks,” Andy said, somewhat embarrassed under the circumstances. Mr. Martin returned with his nephews address.

“Sir, if he was in such a big rush to get this pot that he would go to these extremes, he must be under a lot of pressure from somewhere. We’ll see if we can find him and get all this straightened out.” Officer Mahone stood and shook both men’s hands. “I’ll be in touch,” he said, and left through the stock room.

“You okay?” Andy said.

“I don’t know, my friend...” Mr. Martin shook his head and stared outside. “I don’t know how I feel. I am tired... Do you want a sandwich?”

“No, I’m fine. Shall we get you back to Maria, or do you want to take a nap, maybe shower and get cleaned up and I’ll take you back in a few hours?”

“I will go now, if it is all right with you.”

“Sure, whatever you need,” Andy said.

“I’ll lock the back door and we’ll go out this way,” Mr. Martin said, and went to secure the big metal door to the alley.”

Officer Mahone took some digital pictures of the dumpster and ladder-stack and then dismantled it and pushed the dumpster back to its regular spot in order to discourage anyone else from trying the same stunt before speeding off in his patrol car, radioing local units in the University district with an address and a description of Albert Martin.

Chapter 12

Andy made it home with a sack of take-out Chinese about 4:35 pm, Sunday afternoon. What a day. He hadn't written a word. Real life had been about all he could handle today. He had just started dumping boxes of Chinese goodness onto a plate when the phone rang. He answered it with the phone wedged between shoulder and chin, carrying a heaping plate of Kung Pao chicken and Sweet-n-Sour Shrimp in one hand, and a fork and can of soda in the other.

"Hello?" he was inconvenienced.

"There you are. I tried your cell."

"Oh, hi, mom. Wild day. I didn't hear it. Sorry."

"Look, you going to be there for a while? I was going to come by."

"Anything wrong?" he asked, not really wanting to add anything heavy to a day like today.

"No. I'm just going to be out and I thought I would stop by. Wanted to talk to you."

"Sure, yeah. I'll save some Chinese for you."

"No, you go ahead. I had a late lunch. Hey, how is your friend?"

"She's out of ICU, out in a regular room, I guess. They want her head to remain very still for a few days, for the concussion, you know. Her

hip's messed up, though."

"Oh dear, poor thing."

"Their apartment is on the 2nd floor, I don't know what they're going to do, you know?"

"It's very sad. I'm glad you've been there for them, though."

"Actually, you know me; I made it about me, as usual. Actually got depressed because of how it was going to affect me. Can you believe that?"

"Well, it's hard dealing with these things. Hey, I'm getting on the road. I've got a few errands and then I'll be over."

"Okay, bye Mom." Andy clicked the phone shut and returned to Sichuan feast piled high before him.

Andy ate in the office and dumped the greasy paper plate and flatware in the little grey can by his desk. "Mom could show up in five minutes or five hours," he told the empty room as he wiped his hands on his pants. Andy opened the *Appalachian Malady* file and found his place at the bottom of the last page, he re-read a few sentences to get his bearings. It was difficult because he was still so worked up about the Martin's nephew. Sometimes his anger found release in the unsuspecting story.

He shut down his computer and returned to his rented Forerunner. He picked up an Atlas from a 24-hour Wal-Mart a few miles east of town and located Alta Loma County and the town of Rose Park. It looked to be a two-hour drive southeast which would put him in the area a little before midnight. He imagined that little mountain town would be closed for business at that hour, which he was counting on in order to protect his cover. Rance opened a Powerbar he picked up in the store and settled in for the drive.

"Oh yeah," he said out loud and paused. His mind began to wrap back around Rance Broadback's late night quest to Rose Park, Ky. "Uh... Okay."

Kentucky was a maze of little country highways that that you would never be able to navigate without GPS or a decent Atlas. It wasn't as bad as Seattle, when

it came to following a street map, but it was definitely designed for local people, those who already knew where they were going. Rance had to keep his eyes peeled to catch the proper roads or find himself twenty miles out of the way. It reminded him of the old joke where some city dude asks an old hillbilly for directions;

"You know the way to Highway 10?"

"No, I don't rightly know."

"Well, How about Johnson Street? Can you point me there?"

"Afraid I don't know that one either," Rance said out loud to the empty car in his best southern drawl.

"Then what about Smith Ridge? Am I anywhere close to there?"

"I don't really know."

"Well fella, you don't know much, do you?" The city boy said in a huff.

"Well, know, I suppose I don't," said the hillbilly, "but I'm not the one whose lost," Rance smiled. "I should do stand-up," he thought.

But it was kind of like that out here. The further Rance got off the beaten path and the closer, he believed, he got to Rose Park, the smaller and more twisted the roads became. His two-hour drive stretched out to three and a quarter, putting him in downtown Rose Park, such as it was, about 1:15 am. As close as he could tell, Rose Park covered an area of approximately two miles with Old Highway 289 running through the town connecting Rose Park to the rest of the world. Henryville, a community of five hundred, was located twenty miles north, and Jacobs, the hub of Emery County, located about 18 miles South. Rose Park boasted a whopping 1200 people who, until 1985, had all worked at the Cedar Ridge Coal Mine. When the mine went bust the town nearly disappeared. The major employers in the county now were the school system and the jail.

Rance picked up a tail while cruising slowly south on highway 289 in front of the only business open in Rose Park at this hour, Harvey's Grocery, which looked like kind of a General Store/restaurant/gas station. He thought of stopping for a drink but reconsidered when he saw the three ball-capped hell-raisers in the cab of the old Chevy, sipping cans of Busch and smoking,

tuck in behind his SUV. He instinctively reached into his jacket pocket and donned a pair of black leather batting gloves, pulling the Velcro straps tight as he kept one eye on the road and another on the rear view mirror.

The Chevy followed him South on 289, staying on his tail close enough so he would know they were pushing him out. They pulled to the side of the road and hooked a U about two miles South of town which just made Rance that much more curious. "They just wanted to make sure I was passing through," he said to the dark cab of the SUV. So he waited till they were well up the road on the way back to town, then he turned around himself. "Some guys are just asking for it," he whispered of himself. He drove back and pulled past Harvey's slowly as the boys were exiting the truck laughing and strutting into the store. One of them noticed the dark forerunner and jabbed his buddies. They jumped back in to the truck and slung gravel as they pulled out of the lot, north bound, behind the guy they had just left at the southern border of town. Now he was asking for it. One of them pulled out a cell phone.

Rance led the parade north on 289 toward Henryville and the Rednecks stayed about 1/4 mile behind. He passed the entrance to the Cedar Ridge Mine and noticed two more pickups parked in the entrance just in front of a set of sixteen-foot chain link gates. The trucks were positioned opposite each other with their motors running and lights off. In the moonlight Rance could see two heads silhouetted in each cab. As the Harvey's truck passed the mine entrance Rance noticed in his rearview that the other trucks pulled in behind them. "Ah ha, now we've got a convoy," he said. "Don't like me going this direction. South is okay but North is not allowed.

Three miles north of the mine entrance the truck behind Rance accelerated on a short straightaway and passed the SUV, the occupants of the truck didn't make eye contact as they sped past and maintained the high rate of speed till they were well out of Rance's sight. With the two trucks behind him closing ranks, Rance began to consider evasive measures. As the straight road ended and wound into another series of switchbacks,

Rance eased around a 15 mph curve and slammed to a stop before crashing into the truck from Harvey's which had pulled across the road leaving no room to pass between a mountain rising on one side and maybe room for one car to squeak through on the downhill shoulder. The three rednecks from Harvey's were standing against the bed of the truck with their arms crossed, waiting. Rance left his lights on bright, which would work to his advantage till their eyes adjusted. The other two trucks pulled a safe distance behind the rented SUV and stopped, taking up both lanes. Rance saw two men pile out of each cab from his rearview mirror. Rance exited the Forerunner and took his keys with him.

He decided to deal with the boys in back first. He lifted his hands and started walking towards them with a concerned look on his face. "Is there a problem?" Rance said. The four were in front of the trucks, silhouetted against their headlights Rance could see that two of them appeared to be carrying shotguns, another had a tire iron and one was little taller and stockier than the others, standing with his arms crossed. Tough guy.

Tough guy spoke first with Rance still a couple of car lengths away but walking slowly forward. "We don't take to people snooping around town at this hour," he called.

"Just out for a drive," Rance said. "Not looking for any trouble." He was within fifteen feet now and had a pretty clear plan. Tough guy stepped forward to meet him standing like an old west gunfighter with his head cocked to the side defiantly while the others hung back a few steps anticipating an ass kicking. Rance was hoping that the guys in front had closed ranks and followed him back. He chanced a glance behind him before Tough guy got too close and saw the three walking past his rental, closing the gap. Only one of the three behind him appeared armed.

"Too late for that," Tough guy said as Rance stepped within five feet. Rance could see the young man pretty clearly now. He was mid-twenties, built, pack of camels in his shirt pocket, definitely a ball-buster. "We escorted you out of town real gentlemanly, but you turned back. That's on you."

"Guess I just wasn't done looking around," Rance

said.

Tough Guy didn't expect the stranger to be so calm, he figured the man was just stupid, and needed a pretty serious whipping to wipe the smirk from his face. "Who are you, anyway?" Tough Guy asked.

Rance thought about that for a second before he smiled. "Me? Well, I guess you guys can call me your worst nightmare."

The three standing behind Tough guy cocked their heads and looked at each other and Rance launched forward with a crushing kick to the side of Tough Guy's left knee, snapping his leg like a twig as he simultaneously thrust a hard right fist into his gasping wind pipe, taking his breath and sending him to the ground in a convulsing heap. Before the others could react, Rance stepped past across former Tough Guy and grabbed the man furthest to the right holding the shotgun. He jerked the gun down then violently upward in a seamless motion, catching the man under his chin with the heavy butt of the shotgun, breaking his jaw and scattering teeth back across the hood of the Chevy. As he crumbled to the ground Rance pivoted, gripping the barrel of the weapon, and swung it like a Louisville Slugger toward the second shotgun wielding guard who was just beginning to raise the gun in response. The heavy end of the Winchester caught the slightly built man in the side of the head dislodging the gun and knocking him unconscious over the steep embankment at the side of the road. Rance turned again, just as the fourth man swung wildly with the tire-iron. Rance blocked the strike with the barrel of the gun and in one flowing movement turned and brought the butt of the gun down and back with a ferocious two-handed blow to the mans groin. He fell in a heap with urine and blood spilling onto the ground around him.

Rance turned as the three from the lead truck began to react. The man holding the gun was drawing it up for a shot as Rance side stepped, cocked and shot his borrowed weapon from the hip, hitting the man with the shotgun in the shoulder with a tight spray of shot that probably wouldn't kill him. As the man fell, he reflexively pulled the trigger on his gun, sending a turkey load into the gut of Tough Guy who had struggled

back to one knee. The two final men from the Harvey's truck rushed Rance together, the first of which Rance leveled with a fist to the gut and, as he doubled over trying to catch a breath, finished with a kick to the face which snapped his neck back and broke his nose in a bloody spray. Rance blocked a blow with his left forearm from a tire iron and grabbed the hand of the man wielding it, pulled violently, extending and twisting it so the elbow was up, and brought his right arm down with a thunderous crash that broke the arm with such vengeance that the young man passed out before he hit the ground.

It was over in less than thirty seconds. Without a pause Rance gathered the shotguns and hurled them over the embankment into the deep ravine. He did the same with the three sets of keys from the ignition of each of the trucks. Six of his assailants were squirming around in various stages of agony, the seventh hadn't made the climb back up to the road. He returned to the Forerunner and eased it carefully along the shoulder near the edge of the ravine, around the Harvey's truck, then, exited again, using a pine branch to erase the tires tracks. He didn't pass any vehicles the rest of the way to Henryville, so as he turned north on highway 55 to head back to Louisville, he dialed 911 from a payphone.

"Henryville... County Sheriff... Thanks," he waited on the line until whoever was on call woke up and answered the phone.

"Hi, yeah, there was some kind of brawl out on 289 between Henryville and Rose Park... Three trucks... Bunch of hell raisers beating the crap out of each other... blocking the whole road... Somebody better get out there, they had guns..." Rance clicked the phone shut and left it to the local Sheriff to clean up the mess. He pulled the batting gloves inside out as he took them off and stowed them back in his jacket pocket.

Rance settled into the comfortable bed of the upscale hotel forty-five minutes before his 6:30 am wake up call. He slept for an extra hour and spent the rest of the morning gathering information on the evening host, James Rafferty, and gaining a better geographical lay of the land.

He noted that Kentucky had two North/South interstates, I-65 and I-75, both of which were heavy traffic lanes for products moving north, to the Great Lakes, and south to Florida, Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama. The East/West lanes however were extremely limited. A state highway had been constructed to carry traffic from the western states into central Kentucky, where it jogged and continued northeast up to Lexington. Further south, an parkway had been built to usher traffic due east from the center of the state to I-75. Rance discovered that plans were in the works to adopt this highway and bring it in to the federal system, which would effectively dump money in to the region and ramp up the economy in a big way. I-66, already a developing highway back east, would eventually connect West Virginia to all points west via the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Rance cocked his head to one side and took a sip of hot tea as he pondered the implications of a federal interstate passing within thirty miles of Rose Park and Alta Loma County.

The doorbell wasn't loud enough to break through the zone Andy was in. It took three long rings on it before it tunneled through and whispered through the key-hole of the little room in the corner of his mind where he was hiding and watching the story unfold; "You-*who*, lardass, someone's at the door..." The slam from his subconscious eventually got his attention. He yelled from his seat in case he had missed more of the insistent rings, "*Okay! Coming!*"

Andy was under the spell of the story and struggled to clear his mind. The fight, the sounds, the shots and the blood, was all so vivid, that looking around at his office was surreal. The sound of his doorbell was distant like a dream.

At fifty-eight years young, Janice Boyd was, in many ways, the typical progressive Bay Area woman. Divorced and never remarried, she

was comfortably independent. She had invested much of the money left to her from her x-husband's life insurance policy, and, combined with her income as an HR manager at Macys, she was set to retire at sixty. Her life, unlike the life of her only son, was pleasantly predictable. She worked, she enjoyed her time with friends, loved to read, volunteered at the library and South San Women's Shelter, and was an absolute maniac when it came to the Giants. Andy's mother had what he never seemed to be able to achieve, balance. After the divorce, she worked her way through CSUSF while Andy was still in grade school, earning a business degree with an emphasis in Public Relations. She started working at Macys about the time Andy started college and had been there for seventeen years, working her way up the food chain.

Andy always figured that he must have gotten his metabolism from his father because Janice Boyd was trim and petite. She kept her hair short and stylish, streaked, as Andy saw it, in a pretty combination of blonds and browns. She always carried herself with class and would have appeared, to the casual eye, to be much wealthier than she really was, because of her trendy Macy's wardrobe. She was also his best friend. Andy always looked up to his mother and hoped that he could become more like her. She represented much of what he longed to be. But as perfect as she was in his eyes, she was still his mom, and as such, was a pain in the neck sometimes. He worried about her and suspected some of her friends of pulling her in to things that were not in her best interest. Like the Bunko-phase, as he called it, when she was out several nights each week playing strange games with friends and the occasional blind date. That was an interesting season that he was happy to see fade during Baseball's spring training, which she followed like a sports writer.

"Can I get you something, Mom? Coffee, bottle of water?"

"I'd have a little coffee," she said, taking a seat on the sofa. "Have a little accident?" she said while Andy was grinding some fresh beans.

"What's that?" he said as his mom stepped in to the kitchen carrying an empty ice cream container and a tablespoon.

"Fall asleep in your chair?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess," he said, as she tossed the empty container in a wastebasket where it joined three others, and placed the spoon in the sink. "It was a long night. I was at the hospital till really late, well, till you called, and then I went back this morning."

“Is your friend going to be okay?”

“I think so. But it’s a really bad situation.” Andy poured the coffee when it was done and the two stepped over to the sitting area. Andy sat in his big chair and his mother sat her cup down on the little crate Andy used as a coffee table and took a seat on the sofa near her son. “It looks like the Martin’s nephew may be responsible for the whole thing... I guess he pushed her or something and she fell down a flight of stairs.”

“Oh, Andy.”

“Yeah, and then, I guess he came back later last night and broke in to the apartment, really trashed the place.”

She sipped at the hot coffee, her face stern with concern. “What was he after, is he on drugs or something?”

“It’s a long story, Mom, but the kid had a package delivered to the Deli, and, I guess the nephew is named after Mr. Martin, so Mr. Martin thought the package might be for him - so he opened it... It was a kilo of marijuana...” Andy paused for a drink of coffee. “So his uncle hid it and, you know, he didn’t know what to do... I guess the kid came looking for it.”

“Just about the time you think you have problems,” she said, shaking her head slowly. With a soft spot for the downcast, Mrs. Boyd’s heart could break in a split second when an innocent person was harmed.

“So, yeah, I’ve been a little pre-occupied this weekend,” he said.

“I guess.”

The look on his mothers face told Andy plainly that she wanted to talk. And he could tell that she was reconsidering now. He had a lot on his plate and she wouldn’t want to add to it. She was so sweet.

“Mom? What is it?”

“What?”

“You look like you want to talk.”

“No. I, I just wanted to tell you about my weekend. But, heavens, you are dealing with so much.”

“Well, if it’s good news, I could probably use some of that,” he smiled and then caught himself. “Actually, even if it’s bad news, now I’m curious, you’ve got to tell me. You know how my mind works.”

“Yes. If I leave without saying anything you’ll have me diagnosed, dead and buried, or engaged and moving to Cancun with someone I just met,” she laughed at the thought of her sons fertile mind.

“Exactly,” he smiled. “So, which one is it?” they both laughed at that one.

“*Right*. No, it’s nothing like that... I just wanted to tell you about... You know, I went to the Jefferson Wheat crusade all three nights.”

“Really? All three nights? It was pretty good then, I guess.” Andy didn’t know where this was going, but as long as it didn’t include his mother dying or moving, he was fine. “There I am, thinking everything is about me. Idiot,” he thought.

“Andy,” she said, smiling and shaking her head slowly, mentally re-living the experience, looking for the right words, “it’s hard to describe. Good? Yes, it was good.”

He smiled, she sounded funny. Like the night the Giants beat the Angels in game four of the 2002 World Series. It was the first World Series game they’d won, at home, in like eighty years or something. And the come-from-behind victory sent Janice Boyd in to frenzy. Mother and son were at the game, stunned, elated - again, words couldn’t describe what they felt. Janice could hardly speak on the short drive home, her mind replaying every pitch, every sound, and every crack of the bat. The Giants lost the series, but, that night, the night of game four, was one of those forever-moments, for Janice Boyd. This seemed kind of like that, Andy noticed.

“So? Give. What happened?”

“Well, it was great, for one thing. I didn’t expect to be, you know, touched the way I was.”

“Quite a show, huh?”

“It wasn’t just that... Each night began with, just simple music and singing, nothing all that stunning, you know. But even in the music, there was something beautiful and simple, like they were, I don’t know, refocusing their attention. It was like attention was being redirected away from us and onto God, through the words and melodies of the music. It felt so selfless and pure.”

“Sounds kind of like hypnosis.”

“It’s hard to describe... And then they would play some videos about things that are happening around the country and in other parts of the world. They showed scenes from Katrina and the food relief and medical help they have been able to provide. It was moving. Then there were interviews with people that, you know, had been in the middle of the

whole thing. There was a choir of children from an AID's stricken region of Africa who sang about God's love..." she paused to regain her composure a little, and smiled. "You know me, I'm a sucker for the downtrodden. And these people, I mean, that is what this organization is all about, helping people in need."

"So, let me guess, you volunteered to go to Africa."

"No, but," she said with a gleam in her eyes, "that's not such a bad idea."

"Mother."

"Anyway, then Mr. Wheat would get up and talk. You know, I expected a fire-and-brimstone-thing, but he didn't really preach at us, he just talked about God and about people."

"And he asked for all your money."

"Not at all. Actually, he just talked about the longing everyone has in their heart to be loved and known; to be valued, you know."

"I guess I can relate to that," Andy admitted.

"I know, me too..." she searched deeper for the right words, "Andy?" She took a deep slow breath, "I received Christ as my Lord and Savior."

Andy got a puzzled look on his face. That one didn't compute. The extent of the Boyd religious experience amounted to a *Precious Moments* nativity scene made of cute little porcelain cartoon characters that sat on the mantel during the Christmas season. Other than that, they were resolutely agnostic. They saw religion as a social network for old people and a business enterprise for charismatic preachers. This was San Francisco, the land of the open minded, the home of the progressive, anything goes, lifestyle, which they loved. The unwritten Bay Area motto was "if it's true for you then good for you," and all the diversity in beliefs and wacky practices that such a culture produced was interesting, liberating and socially healthy. Or so they had always believed. Now she was turning to religion? It was like someone had unplugged his mother's brain from the real world.

"You received Christ? What does that mean... did you join their group, or their religion or something? I don't understand." Andy stood and retrieved the coffee pot for refills. He poured the cups and sat the carafe on the coffee table-crate before sitting back down.

"I didn't expect it either," she said. "I was sitting there on Friday night and Jefferson got up to speak and, suddenly, it was like it was just he

and I. I mean-- I didn't consciously sense anyone else in the room. And he just told me about my life, and it was like my whole life replayed before me, both the good times and the bad. My mistakes and the things I regret doing and saying..." She took another sip of coffee, there was a glassiness forming in his mother's eyes and, finally, a tear rolled down her pretty cheek. "Andy, I'm not the angel you have always thought me to be. I've made mistakes."

"Well of course, mom, we all have," he said, trying to alleviate what he perceived as pain.

"But I've always tried to cover all the bad with good, you know? My work, my friends, my team," she sniffed and smiled at that thought. "Mr. Wheat called what I was feeling, sin. That emptiness of guilt and shame that each person feels, deep down, in a place where we know that we have failed," she paused, the room was silent, lights from the city were shining through the window as another lazy Sunday was winding to a close while mother and son sat talking about life. "He said that Jesus came to fill that emptiness. His example of love and forgiveness is recorded in the Bible-- the crucifixion, His death and burial in a tomb, and resurrection - when He rose from the dead. All that was to fill that hole in my life and set me free. Not make me religious, but set me free. That's the part that struck me."

"Yeah, that's different."

"Exactly. Because I always saw religion as a kind of bondage, you know, to a belief system that forced you into a certain lifestyle, like those Muslim women wearing the Hijab."

"I can't see you in one of those."

"Right. But, I mean, that's the picture, right? But he said that following Christ is nothing like that. The whole thing is based on the fact that God the creator loves His creation - people. And He made a way, through Jesus Christ, for all of us to, once again, walk in loving relationship with Him the way He intended it back in the days of Adam and Eve. No big religious trip, no scary set of rules and someone standing behind you to whack you with a ruler each time you screw up. Just the fact that God has something better for you - something He actually designed you for, to know Him and to know His love."

"So, geez mom, what happened, what did you do, you know?"

"Well, it all just rang so true in my heart. That God loved me and

was willing to forgive me and set me free from having to live up to my own silly standards or the standards of others. That He wanted me to be fulfilled and happy, like never before. Or, I should say, differently than I ever have been before, living with purpose and meaning. Jefferson finally gave an invitation for people to receive Christ. And I looked at Marg, and I was crying and she was crying and I just stood up and walked down to the stage and Mr. Wheat led in a prayer asking God to forgive me and for Christ to be Lord of my life. I guess that was about it. But Andy... I have never felt like this, not *ever*. I wanted to tell you about it first, before anyone else. I just feel alive. Forgiven. *New*. It's like I'm a new person.

"Wow. Mom, you know me, I'm a skeptic about these things, I admit it. But... *Wow*. I can see that this has really touched you somehow. I'm really happy for you, I really am. But what happens now?"

"I don't know. He said to find a good church to become a part of, which, I'm not too excited about, but I don't know, really. I *do* know that I want to know more, though. I think there is so much that I haven't been seeing properly, you know, I'm looking at life differently now. There is more hope, more possibility."

"Amazing."

"What?" she smiled.

"Well, you are already the most positive person I know, and now you are saying that you feel even more so. Being a guy that feels exactly the opposite most of the time, what your saying sounds pretty great. Not for me, necessarily, but amazing."

"I'm really glad you're okay with it, Andy."

"Oh, are you kidding? What *I* believe in, is *you*. I totally trust your judgment and know that if something has touched you this deeply, then it must be real... I'm really happy for you." With that Andy got up and leaned his big body over the sofa and gave his mother a gentle hug. "I love you," he said. She was sniffing again when he stood and he went to the kitchen to get her a napkin.

"Listen, I really want you to meet Marg's niece Debbie sometime, she's very sweet."

"I don't know, mom."

"Really, Andy. She is a nice girl and I think you two might have some things in common. She teaches high school English."

"Don't let her anywhere near my books then."

“Your English is pretty good.”

“No, my language is good. My English sucks.”

“My word, Andrew.”

“I’m sorry, you know what I mean.”

“Well, just keep it in mind, will you. I may have Marg and Debbie over for dinner one night this week and I’d like you to come.”

“I’m busy that night.” Andy caught the look from his mother that told him it was time to stop fooling around. “Okay, I would love to come over for dinner. But give me fair warning, okay? The book and the Martin’s, you know, my plate is rather full.”

“I know, really. Hey, I’ve got to get home; I’m back to work tomorrow myself. I could have forgotten all about it after this weekend.” Janice Boyd stood, her newfound radiance was becoming clearer to her son. She did seem different. Better, if that were possible. Andy walked her down the steps to her Accord, which she parked, across his driveway in the tow-away zone like she always did. He gave her a kiss goodbye and watched as she drove down Chestnut, past Martin’s Deli and out of sight. He stood looking in that direction till long after she had vanished, thinking about what she had said and how he hoped it would prove to be a good choice for her. Her choices, as opposed to his, were usually good.

After he made it back to his office and settled into his familiar perch, it only took a minute to tunnel back into the unfolding drama in Louisville.

Appalachian Malady - 4

Rance was showered, shaved and watching the window as time approached for the car to pick him up. A few minutes before 6:00 pm a dark blue Escalade stopped in front of the hotel; moments later his room phone rang, it was the front desk.

“Mr. Pena, your party is here, sir.”

“Okay, thanks,” Rance said. “I’m just about ready, please send them on up to the room.” He wanted to appear to be a total rookie, on one hand, and on the other, he wanted Raffertys driver to take note of his suite, the finest in the hotel. “Got to play the part,” he thought

to himself. In three minutes there was a light knock on the door of the Grand Suite. Rance opened the door and for the first time this trip, he was surprised. Pleasantly surprised.

"Mr. Pena?" she said.

"Yes, uh, yes. Please, call me Michael," he stammered, not completely on purpose.

"I am Sophia. I am your escort for the evening," she said with a smile warm enough to melt Alaska. She was tall, maybe 5'9", with beautiful dark eyes and long, silky black hair. Her thick accent betrayed South American roots; he guessed Brazil, or maybe Venezuela. She was wearing a beautiful evening gown, conservative and elegant, dark green with matching pumps that elevated her to near six feet. They shook hands and Rance noticed a firm and confident grip. This woman was more than a pretty face. Much more.

"Venezuela?" he asked.

"Si. How could you tell?" she said, surprised.

"Just a guess," he said as he shut the door and they walked to the elevator. The scent she was wearing made her just as attractive walking side by side as when they were standing face to face.

"I grew up there. My father was a trainer. Trainer of champions. Mr. Rafferty brought us to the United States in 1993. I finished school here."

"And now you work for Mr. Rafferty as well?" Rance assumed, as a highly paid escort to events like this.

"Si. Yes."

On the ride down the elevator the two were quiet but looked at each other in the way men and women do when they realize they had just gotten more than they bargained for. Passing through the lobby, the snap of her pumps on the marble as she glided through the room attracted attention like a royal procession. He was invisible by her side, like a purse or an umbrella. An accessory. He rather liked it. Rance opened the hotel door, and, as they approached the Escalade, a short, thick man with a crew cut hopped down from the passenger seat and opened the door for Sophia; she got in and moved to the far side as Broadback/Pena slid in behind her. "Thank you," he said to the crew cut, and

received no response.

Crew-cut and the driver looked like former military, thick lunks with square heads, tailored suits and earphones. These were guys who didn't speak, they just hit things when they were in close and shot at things that were too far to reach. Muscle, as Rance's dad used to call them. As threatening as they thought they were, Michael Pena continued to play the oblivious Spaniard and talked to Sophia as if they were the only ones in the car. She seemed a little more cautious.

"Is the farm far from here?" he asked.

"Maybe an hour, I guess." she said.

"And how long have you worked there-- For Mr. Rafferty, I mean." Rance didn't expect that she worked at the farm. Probably a contractor like Rance Broadback-- just called in to make a good impression. Just bait the hook and wait for the fish to bite, then, adios amigo.

"It's been a couple of years, now. Right after I finished school."

"Oh, where did you go to school?"

"UK and Auburn," she said.

"Basketball fan?" Rance asked. Kentucky, in his mind, was known for horses, whiskey and basketball. And, when it came to the University of Kentucky, we are talking serious basketball.

"A little. Nothing like most people."

"I've heard that it is horses and basketball around here, right?" he asked.

"And bourbon," she smiled again, her lips parting to expose perfect teeth.

The pleasant ride was over too fast as the Escalade pulled off the interstate just west of Versailles and turned north. After a series of turns that Rance memorized, they came to an imposing iron gate with guard shack. The driver rolled down his window and the guard, a clone of the two men in the front seat, nodded and pushed a button, opening the gate. They drove along a beautiful tree lined fence for half a mile. There were corrals, barns and stables scattered around, all of which were immaculately kept, and horses of all sizes and ages grazing and playing in the pasture.

"What a beautiful setting," Rance said out loud.

"Yes, it is wonderful," Sophia echoed.

Andy swiveled from side to side in his chair. He let his head fall back and stared at the ceiling. Then, closing his eyes, he strained his mind's eye to see the horse ranch, Rafferty's house, the winding road. He rocked and swiveled for five minutes before straightening up in his chair and putting his fingers on the keyboard. For the next three hours he barely moved.

The SUV pulled to a stop in front of an imposing mansion. It was a beautiful white building with marble pillars and a massive front door. It resembled the White House, Rance thought, only newer. The heavy's in the front seat jumped out of the car and opened the passenger doors, then jog-waddled to the front door and opened it for Sophia as she approached. They remained outside as Pena and Sophia stepped in to the foyer. The floor was Italian marble with a small fountain in the center underneath an opulent chandelier that must have been eight feet in diameter. Beyond the chandelier was a grand, winding staircase to the upper floors. The original Matisse and Monet on either side of the foyer confirmed an elegance that was reserved for the very rich. Rance noted that Michael Pena, with his wealthy shipping background, was not in this league, by a long shot.

"Wow," he couldn't help but say. He looked to his escort for validation but received none.

She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "I don't like the house. Too cold." Michael/Rance looked at her curiously just as the slightly built James Rafferty rounded a corner and stepped in to the far side of the long foyer.

"Mr. Pena!" he said as he quickly traversed twenty-something feet of imported marble.

"Mr. Rafferty," he said, "What a beautiful home."

Sophia leaned in again and whispered in Rance's ear, "I think it is a Napoleon Complex, you know?" Leaving

Michael/Rance stammering to maintain his composure. He somehow kept a straight face as Rafferty stepped up to shake his hand. Sophia, knowing she had struck a chord stood aside and giggled.

"I see you have met Dr Garza," Rafferty said.

"Uh," Michael/Rance said, stunned. He looked at Sophia who knew the handsome businessman had misread her. She smiled and nodded slightly and they both chalked another point for her. "Yes, she has been excellent company."

"She agrees to these little errands sometimes, don't you dear?" Rafferty said, smiling at Sophia who gave a polite grin and curtsy.

"But they are not always this enjoyable, I assure you," she said.

"Sophia, honey, could you give us a minute?" Sophia stepped through the foyer into the palatial living room where it appeared that several other guests were already gathered. Both men watched her go, Rafferty watching the sway of her hips and Pena watching a pleasant and unexpected combination of brains and beauty.

"Michael, I appreciate you coming out here this evening. I want you to know, I'm not in the habit of inviting strangers to my home. But I have a good feeling about you. Later lets talk horses, shall we?"

"I'm honored, Mr. Rafferty."

"Please, call me James, or Jim - my friends call me Jim."

"Jim, then."

"Now, let's find Sophia and get you something to drink."

Sophia joined the men just as they entered the living room. She took the arm of her date.

"Sophia, would you get Mr. Pena something to drink and introduce him to our guests, I need to step away for a moment, the Senator is on her way in."

"It is my pleasure, of course," she said.

Rafferty stepped away and left the room through a side door. Rance tilted his head and said softly, "Dr. Garza?"

"Veterinarian," she smiled.

Michael/Rance looked at her, his eyebrows narrowed, he was at a loss for words. She nudged him with a grin

into the next room.

The living room made the foyer look pitiable. There were three seating areas and a river rock fireplace. A nine-foot Bosendorfer grand graced one corner of the room, being played masterfully by a gentleman in a white tuxedo. There were two or three servers working the room and maybe ten guests, some standing in small groups nursing cocktails and nibbling on hors d'oeuvres. Sophia led Rance across to a small bar where she ordered a white wine for herself and looked at Michael/Rance.

"Small Batch Bourbon for me, please, rocks," he said, looking at Sophia, "When in Rome."

They stepped away from the bar with their drinks and began the series of introductions. Rance didn't realize the extent to which Michael Pena would be the guest of honor, each guest had "heard so much about him," which struck him as odd. It seemed Rafferty was working a plan of his own that Rance wasn't aware of. He must have struck the right chord the previous day at the track.

Dr. Sophia Garza worked the room as if she were in the company of family. With her arm under his, she smiled and glided from group to group greeting the guests and introducing her date. Rance was having more fun being with her than he had expected. He was trained to notice everyone and every thing, and he did, but it was an unusual challenge given his disarmingly wonderful chaperone.

"Pena. Isn't there a ball player named Pena? Carlos, is it?" William Prate, CEO of Prate Industries, asked Michael after their introduction.

"I believe you are right, sir," Michael/ Rance smiled. "Actually, Pena is a very common name in Central America and Spain. Similar to Smith or Jones here in the states."

"Yes, I suppose so," responded Mr. Prate.

The small talk was interrupted as James Rafferty entered the room again, this time with another guest, the honorable Phyllis Lecter, Senator from the neighboring state of Indiana. Many of the people in the room, Pena

noticed, were acquainted with the Senator, the men standing to shake her hand and the women exchanging small talk about family and mutual friends. Mr. Prate stood as both he and Pena watched the Senator and Rafferty walk from group to group. Prate asked if the Spaniard had ever met Senator Lecter.

"No, I never have. I've heard a little about her, though."

"Well, keep an eye on her son," Mr. Prate said. "Some of us think she might be the next democratic nominee." His eyebrows shot up as he looked at Pena with a slight grin and clinked his glass against Michaels.

"Senator Lecter, you know Bill Prate and his lovely bride Cynthia?" Rafferty said as they approached.

"Bill, wonderful to see you again. And Cynthia..." Ms. Lecter said, grabbing Mrs. Prate's outstretched hand with both of her own, "you look so good. How are you feeling?"

"I'm well, thank you, Senator," Mrs. Prate said, not standing.

"And of course you know our favorite veterinarian, Dr. Garza," Rafferty said.

"Sophia, you look stunning, as usual," Lecter said, shaking hands with the doctor.

Sophia smiled, "Senator," she said simply.

"And this is the young man I was telling you about Senator Lecter, Michael Pena... Michael, this is Senator Phyllis Lecter from across the river in Indiana," Rafferty offered.

"Mr. Pena, you made quite an impression on James, that's not an easy thing to do," she said.

"He has been a perfect and unexpected host," Broadback/Pena said.

"So what brings you to Kentucky, Mr. Pena?" the Senator asked.

"Well, I am a businessman. Always looking for new opportunities and new markets, right?"

"I'm sure," she said, wondering if they were thinking along the same lines. She expected not. "Well, I'm not sure what your plans entail, but don't miss Indiana while you are out this way. There are many opportunities in the Hoosier State as well."

"I am certain there are, Senator."

The Senator pulled back and was escorted to the bar where Rafferty picked up cocktails for both of them, and continued around the room.

Sophia gave her distracted dates arm a slight tug and motioned for him to follow over to a small couch by the fireplace.

"These heels," she said. "I need to sit for a moment."

"You look like you are walking on air," he said honestly.

"You are kind... I am used to working in Nikes and jeans. My patients are not that concerned about my professional attire," she said, smiling as she crossed her long legs and slipped off a shoe for a quick moment to rub her foot. "Bad form in a group like this, I suppose," she looked back at him, then glanced around the room.

"You don't seem like the type to care what others might think," he said.

"I don't like to disappoint James, he has been very good to my family. You know, after I graduated high school his gift was to pay for college. I was able to attend the Equine Research Center at UK. From there I got my doctorate at Auburn. All paid for... By him," she nodded across the room toward Rafferty who was spinning a wild story to a couple of guests. She slipped her pump back on and leaned back on the couch. She pivoted and put an elbow on the back of the sofa, twisted slightly so she was facing Michael/Rance and asked, "So, what's your story Michael Pena? How did you end up in the middle of this group?"

It was an honest question. Rafferty had stopped by her clinic on the farm mid-morning and asked her for this favor. She had obliged on two previous occasions, both for very prominent people; one, a Congressman from Southern Kentucky and another, a thin, eerie man she didn't like from back east, both of whom became regular guests at the ranch. She knew that Rafferty had consigned "other girls," professionals, if you will, to the escorting task, but there were people inside a certain circle that he wanted treated differently. For the special ones he called on Sophia, and she knew it. So, what was special about Michael Pena?

"It's a good question, Sophia," he began. "I am really just on a business trip, looking for new business, you know, looking at opportunities to break in to this region with our transportation service. I had some free time so I went to the famous Churchill Downs. One thing leads to another and here I am," he said innocently. "So I'm a little lost as well."

He was very convincing. In fact, he would have probably believed himself if it weren't for the fact that he had been orchestrating each move thus far. In the course of twenty-four hours he had gotten dangerously close to the inside of something. He didn't know what, yet, but something. And he didn't know if Dr. Sophia Garza was part of it or not. Due to her connection and allegiance to Rafferty, he must assume, at this time, that she was mixed up in whatever this group was doing.

Time passed quickly and Rance noticed several of the couples saying good night. There were only about eight people left in the room when Pena retrieved a third glass of wine for Sophia and another bourbon for himself, delivering it with a touch of class, "My lady," he said, bowing slightly. She stood before accepting the drink.

"I think we're being summoned," she said, motioning in the direction that Michael/Rance had just returned from.

"Summoned?" he asked quietly as they began to move from their place.

"Usually this is the time when the men hold court with the Senator in the next room and the cigars come out."

"I don't smoke," he said.

"Well, you may want to take it up if you want to run with these ponys," she said smiling; she released his arm and walked toward the dining room where several of the wives were gathering around another table.

"Michael, let's step in to the next room for a smoke, shall we?" Rafferty said and followed Mr. Prate, Senator Lecter and two other men passed the big grand piano and in to a walnut paneled library that was lined with a million books. There was a fine Persian rug in the center of the room upon which sat four deep

chocolate leather chairs, the kind you sink in to and never want to leave. The Senator took a seat in one of the chairs and the one opposite hers was offered to Mr. Pena. Rafferty pulled a side chair over from the imposing desk at the end of the room and invited the other men to sit as he stepped over to a small humidor by the desk and extracted a box of fine cigars. After offering one to each guest he returned the box and sat in the side chair he pulled next to Michael Pena. Rafferty rolled the cigar under his nose, savoring the aroma. Just two of the others, Prate and John Welsh, an accountant from Lexington, joined their host in the smoke. Prate and Welsh prepared their cigars, snipping one end and rolling the other between wet lips before lighting them, while Rafferty allowed his own to remain unlit.

"Not a cigar man, eh Michael?" Welsh commented.

"Never acquired the taste, sir. Now my father, he is the cigar smoker," Pena said.

"I suppose in Spain he can import them from around the world," Welsh said, lamenting the shortage of good Cuban's in America.

"He can and he does, sir," Michael confirmed, smiling.

"So Mr. Pena," Senator Lecter interjected, "what brings you to Louisville, really."

"He certainly didn't have an inside line on the horses, did you Michael," Rafferty said, chuckling.

"That is true," Pena said. "I was a perfect seven for seven," he informed the rest of the group. "That is seven straight losers. Not a win, place or show."

The group got a little laugh out of that.

"What's your secret?" Welsh said, and then added, "Wait, never mind." Which brought the place down again.

"So we know it wasn't the horses," Rafferty said, bringing the conversation back around.

"No, not the horses. But honestly, I am fascinated by the sheer power and speed. I am looking forward to learning more about the game. Maybe investing," Pena said.

"You invested a little yesterday," Rafferty said, to which Michael raised his glass and nodded.

"That I did, Mr. Rafferty," he said. "Actually, as I was telling Dr. Garza, I am here with my company hat on. This is a business trip. I am hoping to expand in the near future and I would like to move a little further east with the services we provide."

"Intermodal freight, wasn't it?" Prate asked as if he hadn't been adequately briefed.

"Yes sir. We are based on the West Coast and I'm considering adding four additional terminals."

"You want to add an intermodal terminal in Kentucky? That might be a little like betting on seven losers, son," Welsh jested.

"Fortunately, I'm a little better at judging freight than I am at judging fillies," Michael assured the group.

"So why here, why now?" Senator Lecter asked.

"I like to stay ahead of the curve. It is a trait I get from my father... May I speak frankly?" Michael asked, glancing around the room at his curious hosts.

"Please," Rafferty said.

Michael/Rance leaned forward in his seat, drawing on the research he done in the past 24 hours and making it sound like something he'd been planning for months. "I understand that a new federal highway, Interstate 66 is going to slice right through southern Kentucky. Effectively connecting the East Coast with I-75 and I-65 and points further west..." Pena let that hang in the air for a few moments. I would like to open a terminal on the Gulf Coast, either in Mobile or maybe Florida; another in Kentucky, possible Somerset or Bowling Green; Another in the Great Lakes region, possibly Detroit; and the final one the east end of the new highway, possibly in Virginia... I want to own that new highway before it's built."

Rafferty sat back in his chair, rolling the cigar under his nose. The fragrance was lost as his mind was moving too quickly for his scent receptors to keep up. The Senator knew exactly what he was thinking, and was moving over similar terrain herself. If the man sitting across from her was as capable as he appeared to be, it could be an absolute gold mine for their little distribution business. She knew that a thorough check was in order, one that she could complete before opening

session tomorrow if she flew back to D.C. immediately.

"That, my young friend," the Senator said, "Is a fabulous idea, very keen thinking. But listen, don't leave Indiana out of your plans, we have some very favorable incentives for businesses that are looking to expand." She sounded as political and objective as a person in her position always needed to sound.

"Thank you, Senator," Michael/Rance said, "I guess we'll see how it all works out." Prate and Welsh echoed the Senators sentiments and added a little spin of their own. Welsh, the accountant, saw nothing but dollar signs lining the I-66 corridor and suggested identifying potential terminal sites immediately, if not sooner.

Senator Lecter sat forward in her chair and sat her water glass on the rich mahogany side table, "Well, gentlemen, this has been an enjoyable evening, but I really need to be heading back to D.C., we have that memorial tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right," Prate said, "Senator Hagin, wasn't it? Suicide?"

"Terrible," Rafferty said.

The Senator stood and was immediately joined by the men. "It has been especially nice to meet you, Mr. Pena, and I look forward to hearing great things about your company," she smiled and shook Michael/Rance's hand. "Jim, if you would be so kind," she said, nodding toward the door.

"If you'll excuse me," Rafferty said, setting his unlit cigar down on the side table before joining the Senator at the door. The rest of the men set back down to quiz Michael on his timetable for expansion.

Andy pulled away from the screen, visualizing the Rafferty Mansion as clearly as if he were sitting in the library along with the others. "And Sophia Garza, *a doctor*?" He said out loud. "I didn't see *that* coming," he said honestly. It seemed like there were a few sparks between Dr. Garza and Pena. Andy wondered if Sophia was part of the cartel, maybe their connection to South America, or, maybe she was innocent, just in the wrong place and the right time. He wanted to go back in to the

secret chamber and find out, but it was late and he was already getting a little rummy, he could feel it.

— Chapter 13 —

Sleep came easily to Andy but the combination of Albert Martin, Chinese take-out, Dr. Garza the Veterinarian, and his mothers strange announcement, made for some strange episodes in dreamland. In one scene Janice Boyd was dressed in some raggedy habit passing out soup to a line of hungry African children as some tune from the Sound of Music played in the background. She was dressed like Julie Andrews, but she looked like Sophia Garza, yet, somehow it was his mom. *That* scene caused him to roll over and consciously switch gears. Too weird. In another quick sequence, Rance Broadback was chasing Andy's mother and her friend Marg through the streets of San Francisco. They had big crosses around their necks and were carrying signs that predicted the end of the world. Broadback was forced to shoot them. After that sequence, Andy rolled out of bed and popped five extra strength Tums. His heart was racing and his stomach knotted. He scratched his head and walked to the front window sipping a cup of cold water. At 3:00 am the streets of his neighborhood were quiet and still. An occasional cab or police cruiser would drive by, and there were a few lights on behind closed shades in the apartments and houses, but most people, he assumed, would be sound asleep. Something he decided to revisit on the condition that his mind not replay any recent footage. It didn't, but it didn't get much better either. He was up for good by 8:30 am and feeling rather foul.

Andy's Weblog, November 5th

Definitely Half Empty

Is the glass half empty, or half full? Pretty good question, I guess, and for me the glass is definitely half empty. I realized that last night as I tossed and turned and worried about everything from losing my legs in a car accident to what I would have for breakfast if all the grocery stores suddenly went on strike. It was a strange night. But I realized that my life is wrapped up, for good or for bad, in negative impulses. It seems like everything that happens reinforces the fact that I am closer to death, more fragile than I realized, consumed with my own well-being, and, generally just a selfish bastard.

I see people all around me who seem to live outside themselves. A man down the street who is desperately trying to protect his family, a guy who is thinking only of his sick wife, not even considering himself. I don't think I've got that gene. Another person has had some kind of life-altering experience and is now better than she was, and she was already great. How does that work? For these people the glass is always half full. You can hear it in the way they talk; you can see it in the way they live. There is always a rainbow after the rain for these guys. Not me. I would just as soon have it rain all the time. It helps confirm that life is gloomy and dank. After the rain I just take off my jacket and remind myself how tight my shirts are. Rainbows are for children.

In reading this, I am half tempted to delete it all and come up with something really chipper, a happy little diatribe on the smell of fresh bread in a mother's kitchen. But that's not where I'm at for some reason. I am committed to being honest here, and, if nothing else, I know that is a good choice. So I guess I get one point for being frank, even if honesty reveals a glass that is half empty. Half empty and I suspect it has a leak. Bad sign. Being Frank (I always get a kick out of that)

Andy

Andy pushed back from the desk and wished he could take back

the post, if, for no other reason than he knew his mother would read it and call him, then he'd have to deal with that. He didn't want to have that conversation. She was in a great season of life, according to her, while he was just in his constant season, she would never understand that, and he didn't feel like explaining it. He managed to drag himself through the shower and, after rummaging through all the cupboards and looking in the refrigerator no less than six times, decided to walk somewhere for breakfast. He felt like eating and he didn't care who might scowl at him while he did. He got his hat and jacket, shoved his hands in his pockets and headed up Chestnut to Willie's Kitchen, a place where you had to wait for a booth or squeeze onto one of those revolving stools at the counter.

Willy's was nearly empty save a couple of old timers nursing some coffee in one booth and a salesman at the counter eating a bagel and juice while he studied a spreadsheet. Andy took a seat at the only clean table and grabbed a plastic menu from a little stand on the backside of the table by the condiments. It was gummy and old and probably hadn't been wiped off for years, but that probably meant the prices hadn't changed either. Willy was an old gal who had run the diner for years. She was a crusty old bird who fought the no smoking law tooth and nail till she had so many citations that she finally relented and became a non-smoking diner, not quite over her dead body, as she had promised. Some claim to fame. Andy didn't like Willy, which fit his current mood perfectly. But he did like some of the wait staff she hired. They never stayed; Willie was too nasty to work with for any length of time. But once in a while there would be a real sweet girl, usually someone from the University or a lady taking a second job, that you could really tell was a nice person. Andy enjoyed watching them interact with the other customers, and even with Willy, and, eventually he felt like he knew them, even though the extent of their relationship was always limited to the name on the little plastic bar pinned to their uniform.

The pin on the server's chest today said Annie. He knew her name before she stopped by his table because of how relentless Willy was with her. "Annie do this, Annie bus those tables, Annie get the register..." By the time poor Annie got to Andy's table she was on the verge of tears.

"What can I get you, sir?" she managed.

"Don't let her get to you," Andy said before thinking about it. The waitress gave a slight grin and said nothing.

“Uh, I’ll have #4 and coffee. Over medium,” Andy finally said to break the awkward silence that shouted, *‘mind your own damn business.’*

“Okay,” she said and whirled away.

He ate in silence as people came and went and Willy bossed Annie around the little diner. She didn’t quit, but she didn’t make life very pleasant for the customers, either. All in all it was a pretty depressing breakfast. Andy felt nothing but full when he left. He was thinking about his “Why Not” list as he walked slowly back to his house. He walked with his head down against the misty rain and fog of the morning. Don Maclean began singing American Pie in Andy’s mind, an oddly depressing yet engaging song that Andy wasted too much time trying to figure out when he was in high school. Just as Don asked Andy the musical question, “Did you write the Book of Love and do you have faith in God above - if the Bible tells you so?” Andy’s conscious self heard a familiar clanging of doorbells and then the voice of Mr. Martin.

“Andy! Andy!”

Andy raised his head and turned, across the street Mr. Martin had spotted him and stepped out of the store to call him. Andy pulled a hand out of his jacket and waved, he wasn’t in the mood. Mr. Martin waved him over.

“Come!” Mr. Martin called. Andy turned and walked back to the corner where he pushed the pedestrian crossing button. He was briefly tempted to just walk across and test his invisibility, but American Pie had pushed the “Why Not” list off the stove. He sang softly as he crossed the street, still alone, the place he felt like being right now, for a few more seconds. “So bye bye Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry...”

“Andy! Good morning! I see you walking, come in, come in.” Mr. Martin said as Andy stepped on to the sidewalk.

Andy entered the open door, which Mr. Martin then shut and locked behind them. The closed sign was still in place, the lights were on against the dreary morning, but the opera music was not yet playing. Mr. Martin had cleaned up the mess from the crazy weekend and the place was normal again except for the radio which Andy’s mind was happy to provide, “Them good ol’ boys were drinking whiskey and rye...”

“Sit down, sit down... I’ll get you a drink, some coffee?”

“Uh, okay,” it was the first that he had spoken since he ordered

breakfast and his words sounded strange. He sat in the same seat he had when Mr. Martin had told the story to Officer Mahone. “Andrew Boyd? Like the writer?”

Mr. Martin was talking to Andy from behind the counter as he fixed the coffee, but his words didn’t register through the mental fog. Slowly Andy began to focus, “... and it looks like she will be okay. The doctor said she has very strong bones for a little woman. That is good, ja?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Martin, did you say Maria would be fine?”

“Ja, yes. The concussion will be slow to heal and the hip, maybe three or six weeks, but yes.”

“Oh, that’s great. Really.” Andy forced himself to say.

“Yes. Maria told me to thank you for helping us. Thank you so much Andy, you are truly a good friend.”

The encouragement had a hard time breaking through the negative attitude that Andy had been enjoying all morning; he just smiled and nodded his head slightly. It would be tough to convince Andy Boyd that he was a good anything right now. He sipped his coffee and tried to focus.

“So, how long will she be in the hospital?”

“Mm, maybe a few weeks in the hospital and then some time at another place, for recovery, you know? To help her walk.”

“Yeah... You going to be able to run the place alone?” Andy asked, slowly coming up to speed.

“Oh, I am able. I will have my niece some days. And I will close early, to be with Maria.”

“Some people think she is the better cook.” Andy said, finally smiling.

“Ja. She is the better cook. I know that. I am just talk, ja? But I do okay.” Mr. Martin laughed.

The two men drank their coffee and Mr. Martin refilled the cups. The silence made it clear that they didn’t really have much in common except eating at the Deli and the past weekends unfortunate events. Eventually there was only one thing left to talk about, and it was clear that Mr. Martin was waiting for him to bring it up.

“So, have you heard about Albert?” Andy finally asked.

Mr. Martin looked deeply into his coffee cup, stirring sugar into the black liquid. He tapped the silver spoon on the side of the cup and

carefully sat it on a folded napkin. “Ja.”

He looked at Andy. This was clearly why Mr. Martin had called him over from across the street.

“Albert is in jail,” he said.

Andy could tell the old man felt sick that his nephew had been incarcerated. He didn’t know whether to ask about it or to leave it to Mr. Martin to volunteer to fill in the blanks. Fortunately, Mr. Martin kept talking.

“Officer Mahone came to the hospital last night. He is a good man,” Mr. Martin began. Andy nodded in agreement. “He told me what happened when the Daly City officers got to Albert’s apartment...” He looked at Andy with a solemn face, his bushy mustache drooping a little too far over his upper lip and his neck and cheeks sporting the grey stubble of a long weekend.

“The officers knocked on Albert’s door. He was not expecting anyone, you know, and he is very tired. He has been awake all night dividing the, uh, the marijuana. So he just answers the door, you know, he doesn’t think. And when he sees the officers he slams the door and runs back into the apartment. He runs out a sliding door and jumps down to the ground. From the second floor! He jumps down to the ground and starts running away. The officers rush in and follow him, you know, and they catch him in a few blocks hiding in an alley. The boy is shaking and scared and crying. They take him back to the apartment. Mahone has arrived by then and they look around and they see, you know, they find all the dope. And they arrest him. They took him to jail.”

Those words were the toughest for Uncle Albert to say. Realizing that the police had shoved the boy to the ground, pulled his hands behind his back, his face in the gravel and dirt of an alley, cuffed him and pushed him in to the back seat of a cruiser. The fact that his nephew, his brother’s son, was sitting in jail with all the criminals, was a weight that was difficult for the proud German to bear.

“Mahone said they arrested him for possession with intent to sell, which, I guess, is very bad.”

“Are you going to press charges?”

“Mahone said I don’t have to. I can, you know, about the break in and about Maria, but I don’t have to. They have all they need to put him in jail.” Mr. Martin’s eyes swelled with tears. “My God, Andy... The boy

could be in jail for a long time.”

“Mr. Martin, are you... Uh, do you have any liability? Since the drugs were here at your house?” Andy said. He assumed that the paddy wagon would be picking up Mr. Martin as an accessory, or something. He wasn’t sure how that all worked, but the fact was that the old man was holding illegal drugs and had not called the police.

Mr. Martin nodded then shook his head, “No. Mahone said that, too. But the boy tells the whole story, you know. He feels terrible for bringing us into his business.”

“Well, it was pretty stupid, actually.”

Mr. Martin squinted and shook his head again, “I know, Andy. It was stupid! He is ‘unwissend,’ ignorant, you know? I can’t believe it... He brings us in to this, you know? And he nearly kills his Aunt Maria!” Mr. Martin’s outburst was followed by another silence, which Andy eventually broke.

“What happens now?”

“I called my brother, Albert’s father. I told him that Albert is in jail. I told him everything, you know? He is very angry, disappointed, like me. He is coming today. He is flying in today.”

“Are you going over to the jail? Do you need a ride or anything?”

“Me? No,” he closed his eyes and pursed his lips. I love the boy, ja? But he has injured my wife. His father can take care of him now.”

Andy returned to the depressing safety of his house and splashed cold water on his face. He stared at the reflection in the mirror for a long time. He felt empty. He thought about going to visit his mother at the store, and about visiting Mrs. Martin, maybe bringing her some flowers, but he reconsidered. He toweled off his face and entered his office. Maybe he could unlock the secret door and disappear in to the world of Rance Broadback for a few hours and come out in a little better mood. He checked his email first; there was a message from Will Heard.

Andy -

Will here. I met this morning with the publisher and just wanted to give you an update. They are extremely worked up about the next book. They’re talking book clubs, Selection of the Month, the whole nine.

Of course they won't pull the trigger till they see the work, but if they come through with half of what they talked about, then this could be big. Patterson big. Cussler big. Get it?

No pressure, I just wanted you to know I'm out here fighting for you. I know you'll deliver something that far exceeds everyone's expectations, I'm just getting so excited I can hardly stand it.

Keep me posted on progress,

Sincerely,

Will

William Heard

Literary Agent

Bigby, Sachs & Heard

New York, NY

888-555-4646

Reply -

Dear Will,

Thanks for the note. Had a rough weekend but the book is moving along. I wish I was as confident about the deadline as you are, but I'm giving it my best, such as it is. I'll have something over to you soon.

My mother told me this process is like fine wine, I've got to give it time in order for it to be right. So blame her if I screw up. Ha!

-Andy

Send

Trading emails with Will made Andy feel a little better, although Don Maclean wouldn't stop singing "This will be the day that I die," in Andy's head like the record had skipped and negated the substance of the rest of the song. An offensive, in the form of a Neil Diamond cd Andy downloaded from iTunes, would, hopefully, beat back the current "song that wouldn't end."

"Stones would play inside her head, and where she slept, they made her bed. And she would ache..."

"Ahh, Neil to the rescue," Andy said, turning down the volume a little and scanning the last entry in the Broadback story before starting to

peck out new words.

Appalachian Malady -

"I had a hunch about this kid," Rafferty said as he helped Phyllis Lecter on with her coat and walked outside to the waiting Escalade that would take her to the private airstrip on the south side of his property. "What do you think, Phyllis?"

"I'll admit, I'm intrigued... But Jim, let's not move too fast, he's an unknown quantity and we have a pretty good thing going. Things are tense enough since the Hagin thing."

"But he's squeaky clean, I've checked him out. And he is hungry. Didn't you get that impression?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm way ahead of you on this. It could be exactly what we've been looking for. But let's not move too fast, that's all."

"Okay, yeah. I'm just excited. It's like he just fell into our lap," Rafferty said. It was quiet till they reached the SUV. "Listen, is everything kosher in D.C.? On the case, I mean," Rafferty said softly.

"There's a little snag. But you know these things, it takes a while to get the right people in place sometimes."

"A little snag?"

"The detective in charge. Kramer. He's a hardass. He doesn't think it was a suicide."

"What about Williams?"

"He's pushing Kramer to close the case, for the family and for the country, that type of thing. But he can't push Kramer too far or he'll smell something."

"Is there any possible way Kramer finds out it was in-house?" Rafferty asked.

"No way. Not a chance. Williams has too much on the line. He did it right, used people that are way off the books. Impossible to trace it back to him, or any of us."

"Okay. I still think it was a little drastic to play that card."

"Jim, you've got to trust me on D.C., okay? Hagin was breaking all the rules, I mean all of them. And it was just a matter of time before he figured out our arrangement."

"If you say so. By the way, I made a donation to the family today, they should be okay."

"Nice. Look, I've got to get on that plane," she said, still standing by the side of the closed door, the driver inside the car, oblivious to the conversation.

"I know, hey, thanks for coming, it was a good night, huh?" Rafferty said, smiling. He kissed her on the cheek and opened the door. Senator Lecter stepped in to the seat and sat down.

"A good night," she agreed. He shut the door and the driver sped off to the awaiting Cessna XL. Rafferty watched the taillights of the Escalade as they wound down the road away from the house. He took a deep breath and went back inside to join the others.

Michael/Rance tried to talk Dr. Garza out of joining him for the ride back to Louisville. "It's a long drive and you've probably got to work in the morning, am I right?"

"It's okay, really. It's early. Maybe I can get my date to spring for some coffee," she said.

"You got it," he smiled. "Let me say goodnight to our host." He walked over to the three men who had reconvened in front of the fireplace after the smoking room meeting had broken up.

"Gentlemen, it has been a wonderful evening, but I am afraid this is a working trip for me, and I must return to my hotel," he said as he stepped to the side of James Rafferty.

"Michael, thank you for coming. Really, it has been a pleasure," Rafferty said. Michael shook hands with the others and stepped away with Rafferty's hand on his shoulder. "Michael, I would like to meet again, just the two of us, if that's possible. I could fly out to the West Coast, or, of course, you know where I live now."

"I would like that. Here's my card. Please, feel

free to call me anytime," Michael said. "This has been really great, sir, thank you. When I scheduled the trip I really didn't anticipate a meeting such as this."

"You should see what we do for the people who actually win at Churchill!" Rafferty said, laughing at his own joke.

"Excellent!" Michael said. "Dr. Garza is going to accompany me on the drive, if that is all right with you." Michael looked across the room at Sophia who was standing with her coat and purse, waiting to complete the round trip with "her date."

"I think that would be great, but Michael, you be careful with that one, she's a tiger," Rafferty said as he shook his guests hand and held up the business card. "I'll be in touch, then."

"I look forward to it," Michael said. He caught the arm of Dr. Garza and stepped through the grand foyer to the waiting Escalade. They both noticed the snap of the pumps on the Italian marble.

"I've got to get out of these shoes," she said.

"Sounds like someone needs a foot massage," he offered.

"Mmm, Dr. Garza, the black haired Venezuelan beauty. What is your angle, sister?" Andy said, looking out his window. It took several minutes, but eventually Andy had snuck back in to the scene unnoticed, and had edged up behind the dashing Rance Broadback and his sexy escort. From this vantage point he could not only smell the sultry fragrance of the exotic young doctor, but listen to thoughts and anticipate the actions of the chiseled under cover agent.

Andy re-read the final page. "Well, the hero gets lucky with the Venezuelan knock-out and here I sit in an empty house with a six pack of Pepsi and a thirty year old Neil Diamond record. Is there no justice?" He smiled at his plight. He didn't feel nearly as bad as he did earlier, at least things were going well for Rance Broadback. "That makes one of us," he thought, but since, in a way, he was Rance Broadback, the sentiment held at least a little solace.

Chapter 14

Andy decided to grab some lunch before continuing the story so he left his desk licking his lips, trying to figure out what he was in the mood for. He visited the restroom on the way to the kitchen and paused to step on the bathroom scale. It was the old style with the round dial full of numbers that spin around like the big board on the Price Is Right. He wanted to see if his Good Choices commitment had resulted in any weight loss. The dial swirled and shook and dove past the red line where the numbers end before it sprung back and finally settled at 283. He had gained two pounds. He stepped off the scale and looked in the mirror, “Well, five days into the program and you’ve *gained* two pounds,” he said. “How does that make you feel Big Guy?” He could feel a combination of anger, anxiety and depression begin to push against his brain, a weird mixture of sensations that made him want to throw the scale through the front glass window, yet without the energy or the will to bend down and pick it up.

Without giving it any thought he grabbed a black garbage bag from the kitchen pantry, opened it wide and began emptying the pantry of all sweets and salty snacks. He swept through the cupboards like a crazed maid with a shop-vac. Gone were the chips, the Pringles, the Ho-Ho’s and Twinkies. Shoveled in to the bag were the candy bars and chocolate covered pretzels and goo-goo clusters. He filled one bag and reached for

another. He moved to the refrigerator where he pulled out the cans of soda pop and cake. He tore through the freezer as well and when he was done there was nothing left but a plastic container of ice and a carton of Lean Cuisine meatloaf. The refrigerator had been raped and pillaged with all that remained being a bottle of V8-Splash, a lone can of Slim Fast Chocolate Royale and a couple stalks of celery. Before he could talk himself out of it he drug the black bags down the stairs like a couple of dead bodies and hefted them into the dumpster. He went back in the house and grabbed the last slim fast drink and fell into his chair. He wasn't sure if he'd taken a breath in the past ten minutes. He sat staring at the wall, holding the unopened drink with one hand and clutching the sides of the chair with the other.

Albert Martin, a first offender, was scared and spent Sunday night in the corner of a group cell cursing himself. He wasn't ashamed of his business idea, "*Hell* no," he thought. It was easy money. The stupid part was involving his family. But he had no idea that Uncle Albert would be such an asshole. "Why did he open my package," he kept asking himself, blaming his Uncle for screwing up the plan. "It was my mail for crissake." He mumbled and whined through much of the night as he sank in to despair after the cocaine wore off. His red jacket reeked of sweat and was smeared with his own snot, his hair was oily and tangled; the black bags under his eyes betrayed three days without sleep. He just wanted to get out of this hellhole and crash.

His father arrived at SFO at 2:00 pm, Monday, and took a cab downtown to post bail. He placed a lien on his home in Phoenix and purchased a \$250,000 bond. When his spindly, wasted son was marched out from behind the iron bars with his hands cuffed behind his back, his father didn't know whether to deck him or hug him. How could his son have sunk this low? They didn't speak, just turned and walked back out to the curb where his dad stepped up to the front car in the line of taxis.

"Get in," was the first thing he said to his adult child as the frustrated older man stood by the open door of the cab.

"Give the man your address," Albert's father said.

"1331 4th Ave., Daly City," he said grudgingly. The cab driver

engaged the meter and drove away from the jail.

“What are we doing?” Albert asked.

“Going to get you cleaned up, you stink.” His father was in no mood for small talk. He had been awakened early by his older brother and told a story that he would never have believed. Now he sat with a bum who barely resembled the young man he had raised and poured his life in to. The cab was silent save the buzz of the talk radio diatribe in which the driver was engrossed. His father paid the fare when they stopped in front of the old complex that his son called home. Due to his hasty exit the previous day, Albert had to stop by the manager’s apartment for a key. He was informed that he had one day to clean out the place and get lost.

“We won’t have no drug dealers in our place,” the lady said. “This is a family complex.”

Albert didn’t say, but his friend in 1-C was brokering deals just like his all day long right under her nose. All he did say in response, was, “Whatever.”

They stepped in to the dingy apartment. Albert’s father was repulsed at the way his son had been living. The police had contributed to the clutter as they rummaged through collecting the drugs and evidence. But the dirt and scum was all his. “How can you live like this,” his father wanted to say, but held his tongue. The boy had made his choices. Bad ones. What he did say was simple and direct, “Get cleaned up.”

“I need to sleep for a while,” Albert said, not so much as a question.

“You’ll sleep later. We’re going to the hospital,” his father announced.

“What? No. I’ve gotta sleep.” Albert started to step into the small hallway and open door of his bedroom when his father caught him by the sleeve of his jacket and spun him around. His dad was trembling mad.

“Albert. You nearly killed your Aunt Maria. She is my brother’s wife... You will shower and get cleaned up and we will go to the hospital. *Now.*” He shoved Albert’s skinny body toward the bathroom. Albert realized he had little choice.

“Whatever,” was his strongest rebuttal.

The cab ride to the hospital was a bit more pleasant for the older Martin, as the smell of the other passenger was not so rank. He still had very little to say to his son, though. He knew a conversation was pointless.

What was done, was done and talking about it would just make the old man angrier. He wanted to walk his son through the process of apologizing, get him settled in a new apartment, and, be on the last flight out of San Francisco Monday night.

Mr. Martin was helping his Maria with her dinner when the knock came at the door of the semi-private room. The curtain was pulled, veiling the view to the door, so Mr. Martin excused himself from his wife's side and stepped quietly out of the room. His brother and nephew were standing there. Mr. Martin glanced at Albert who was looking at his own shoes, and saw the broken look in the eyes of the young mans father.

"My brother," he said. And the two men embraced. It had not been long since they had last been together, but it had been under markedly better circumstances.

"Maria?" his brother said.

"She will be alright. She is strong, ja?"

"Good. I am so glad... Albert?" his father said, redirecting his attention to the youngest Martin. Albert couldn't bring himself to look at his uncle. He looked past him, his eyes darting. He looked at his feet and glanced again at his father.

Mr. Martin stared at the boy. He was ashamed and disappointed. He wasn't interested in having this exchange but his brother had requested the time. He wanted the boy to take responsibility for his actions.

"Albert. Don't you have anything to say to your uncle?" his father asked, not meaning for it to be understood as a question so much as a demand.

The younger man looked around, he was self-conscious, he felt every eye in the place; he wanted to run, get on with his life, and leave these two dinosaurs to their love-fest. But there was no getting away-- for now anyway, he was stuck.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, looking briefly at the his uncles face, then back at his father, then back down at the floor. "But you shouldn't have opened the damn box," he thought to himself.

"Albert." Mr. Martin said. "Albert. Look at me." The young man forced his eyes to meet those of his uncle.

"Albert. You are my blood. The son of my brother. We are family, ja?" Mr. Martin said and the younger Martin nodded slightly with a look on his face that said he just wanted to survive the speech and get on with

life. He looked away again.

“Look at your uncle, dammit,” his father demanded with a slap to the side of the young man’s head. Albert glared briefly and then looked back at his uncle.

“Albert. You are my blood,” Mr. Martin restated, “But she,” he said, pointing back to the closed door, “she... is my *life*.” Mr. Martin’s small grey eyes welled with emotion. His hand shook as he pointed back to the hospital room where his wife of over three decades lay hurting for no reason but the selfish greed of an out of control young man. “She is my life!” he said again, looking firmly, sternly at his nephew, then at his own brother. The young man got the point. At least to the extent he could in the sleep deprived state he was in.

“What can I do?” his brother finally asked when it was clear the boy would not respond. Mr. Martin just shook his head as his pulse slowed and he calmed down.

“We are okay,” he said. “You go home. Take the boy.”

“He can’t leave the state. Stipulation of the bond. He’s got to stay till trial, then, probably jail.”

Mr. Martin nodded, not volunteering to be of any help.

“I’m going to get him set up in a new place. He’s been evicted from. I can’t stay out here for a month.”

“I know,” Mr. Martin said.

“At some point, he is an adult, right? We can do only so much,” Albert’s father said to his brother as if the younger man were not standing right next to them. Young Albert counted the tiles on the floor and the ceiling wishing he could die right then or at least be anywhere else, even back in the cell. He had to get away from these idiots. The brothers hugged. “Give Maria my love and apologies,” Mr. Martin’s brother pleaded.

“I will,” Mr. Martin said. “Thank you my brother.”

Albert and his father left down the same hallway they had entered--took the elevator back to the lobby and hailed a cab for Daly City. The old man picked up a newspaper from a stand outside before getting into the cab and was marking low-end rentals all the way back to Albert’s apartment. Albert watched silently, it looked like his old man was going to help him get set up in a new place. Better just be quiet and take what he could get.

The sun had retired for the day before Andy moved again from the overstuffed chair in the living room. He had sat for nearly four hours in silence. He dozed off a few times, but mostly just sat quietly, his brain disengaged, not thinking about anything. He wasn't planning the next twist in the Rance Broadback story, he wasn't dwelling on his loneliness or lack of discipline, he was just staring in to space. If someone would have given him a penny for his thoughts they would have deserved a refund. The normally fertile field of Andy Boyd's imagination had shut down, offering no levity, no questions, and no comments. He didn't wonder if his mental hard drive were rebooting, because that would have required rational observation. For almost four hours he was a zombie. His first conscious thought was that it was cold. That caused him to look around and notice it was dark. Next his stomach joined the awakening with a complaint of starvation. Andy leaned up in the chair to stand and found that all his muscles had either fallen asleep or had grown accustomed to the previous position and were in the process of rigor mortis. Moving his body felt like Gulliver breaking the ropes of the Lilliputians. "Rrrr," he said, stretching his arms widely and twisting at the waist. He shook the cobwebs from his head and looked around the darkening condo. As if he had dreamed his earlier pantry-purging episode, he stood and walked to the kitchen, looking in the cupboards and refrigerator. "Wow," was all he could muster.

His eyes were still heavy and his body weak and sore. He thought about going to bed. It was 5:30 pm. Not typical, but not something he was unfamiliar with, either. Sometimes the day just got the upper hand and wouldn't let him get up to speed. He thought about retrieving the black bags from the dumpster and getting something to eat, but that sounded too much like work. So he decided on a nap. The next time his eyes opened it was 8:00 am, Tuesday morning. He hadn't moved all night and, except for a Cal State sweatshirt that he didn't remember putting on, he was dressed exactly as he had been the previous day. After a long shower in which he stood motionless for twenty minutes before actually washing himself, he pulled on a change of clothes and realized that it had been twenty hours since his last meal, now he really was starving, at least by his standards. He habitually posted his morning blog before deciding on food.

Depression

Depression, by dictionary definition, is a sunken place. That is, an area lower than the surrounding surface. It's a hole. There are, of course, the definitions for depression that are applied to people as well. Like sadness, dejection, being gloomy for no objective reason, things like that. But I like this picture of a hole. That comes pretty close to how I feel much of the time. On the sidewalk, I seem to lag behind and below the rest of the people. They are energetic and driven, while I am slogging as if through quicksand.

I think it is this whole preoccupation I have with my weight and how I have been so quick to blame my waistline for my loneliness, my singleness and the fact that I seem to reside in this sunken place. It is times like this when I wonder, and it is an honest question, what happens after this life. Could it be, like my mother has discovered, that there is a beautiful, eternal home awaiting those who follow a certain path? Or, is death just the end of conscious existence, which I've always seemed to believe. Because, I'll tell you what, living in a perpetual sunken place is no fun, and being done with it, just not existing any more, seems somewhat attractive at times. I can't help but think that if there really were a heavenly mansion, that mine would have a sunken living room. I'm not sure I want to risk the belief that I might be like this for eternity. Thirty-five years has been hard enough.

I don't know who reads this tripe, actually, I know one person who does (Hi, Mom), and she seems to love me the way I am. But to anyone else who stumbles upon these ramblings, I apologize if I've pushed you into a little 'sunken place,' by reading this. Take a look around while you're here, welcome to my world.

Looking up

- Andy

Andy posted the blog and shut his eyes, his morning dose of honesty hadn't really made him feel any better, but it had, at least, gotten the feelings out of his head and that was probably better than holding them inside, at least that's what he told himself. He decided to walk up the street

to Martin's Deli and see if an Italian Special might perk up his day.

He stepped in to the little corner Deli a few minutes before 11:00 am, at least half an hour before the beginning of the lunchtime rush. Mr. Martin was behind the counter, taking inventory of assorted meats and cheeses, and writing his findings on a small spiral notebook while singing along quietly with the opera that was playing on the old boom box. He stepped on tiptoes to look over the counter and see who'd come in to the shop. His eyebrows perked up when he saw his young friend.

"Andy! Gut morgen! Come in, come in." Mr. Martin stepped over to the cash register area; he tossed the notebook back by the boom box and wiped his hands on his apron. If Andy didn't know better, he would have thought the old man was just excited at the prospect of a big sale, but Mr. Martin wasn't like that.

"Gut morgen," Andy replied. "How is Mrs. Martin?"

"Getting better, thank you." She is eating, you know, Jell-O, and juice. Soft things. She wants her puzzles, ja?" he said, smiling. "The doctor says no puzzles for one week. He doesn't want her eyes to strain, ja?"

Andy nodded, "I guess that makes sense."

"What do you have today, Andy? It is a good day, no rain today."

"I think I'll have the Italian Special. If you can do it like Mrs. Martin, that is." He said, kidding with the old German.

"Ja, I think I can do it." Mr. Martin said proudly.

Andy added a bag of Doritos and two cookies to his order and sat down at his familiar perch by the window, watching the people and wondering about their lives. His sandwich came and he immediately noticed that Mr. Martin had tried to out-do his wife. The sandwich was enormous.

"I do okay, Ja?" he boasted.

"Looks great to me," Andy said.

In truth, the sandwich wasn't really as good as Mrs. Martins, but it was bigger. Much bigger. Mr. Martin had added double-everything in an effort both to say thank you and demonstrate his preeminence behind the counter. Andy got a kick out of the thought. While the old man went back to his inventory Andy got to work on his first meal in almost an entire day.

His first impulse was to devour the sandwich like Attila the Hun ripping off the first hunk of roasted pig. But after two bites he began to slow down and appreciate the flavor, the subtle combination of ingredients. "I'm going to choose to enjoy this, not inhale it," Andy whispered to himself.

Still focused on his meal, taking sips of brewed ice tea between luscious bites, Andy noticed a familiar car make the turn off off Chestnut in front of the deli. A few minutes later the two men walked in whom Andy had met the previous Saturday. The two men who were either stand-in's for a Soprano's episode, or, probably less likely, real bad guys. The monster in the black bomber jacket held the door open for the sharp looking older man in the topcoat. Instead of taking their coats off in the warm deli, the two men stepped over to the counter, glancing at Andy in a way that suggested that he find another place to finish his meal. He ignored the look.

"Hey, come in, come in," Mr. Martin said to his customers. "What will it be today? Everything is good, ja?"

The older man stood close to the counter with his hands tucked in the pockets of his top coat while the gentleman with no neck stood to the side, bending to look at the meat and cheese and inspecting the bread and biscotti on top of the case.

"Just need a minute of your time today my friend," Top Coat said to Mr. Martin.

"Sure. Ja."

"We have a young business associate who missed an appointment. We haven't heard from him and are growing concerned. We wanted to know if you could help us find him."

"No," Mr. Martin shook his head slightly, not following the man. "I don't know..."

"Albert Marteen," Top Coat said, his eyes never leaving those of the deli owner. "The young man's name is Albert Marteen... Like Marteen's Deli," he added for effect.

"Albert is my nephew. Ja? But I don't know where he is." Mr. Martin was catching up to the conversation.

Top Coat was still wearing a small, disbelieving smile, and a cold stare, "Of course. Well, we went to his apartment and it seems he left sometime last night. The manager said he was evicted and didn't leave a forwarding address." Mr. Martin pursed his lips and nodded.

"That sounds like Albert, ja," he said.

Top Coat leaned in to the counter slightly, “When our company did business with the young Mr. Martin, he listed you as a reference. His only reference.”

“I cannot vouch for my nephew,” Mr. Martin replied, “I rarely see him.”

“Be that as it may,” Top Coat said, “our policy is that if something happens, wherein the primary party is unable to meet the obligation of the contract, then the contract becomes the responsibility of the personal reference.”

“I will not be responsible for my nephews business, I am sorry,” Mr. Martin said.

Top Coat was unmoved. “Of course. However, that is the way our contracts work. Young Albert should have appraised you of the details before he entered in to the contract. His inability to inform you is not really our responsibility,” he said, his thin smile never leaving his face.

“I don’t understand this,” Mr. Martin said, “Do I need to call the police or talk to my lawyer?”

“Or,” Top Coat affirmed, “just tell us where young Albert went last night and we will be happy to take up the matter with him personally. Because, as you said, this is not your problem.”

“But I don’t know...” Mr. Martin began before being cut off by a firm rebuttal.

“But I assure you, Mr. Martin, that this will become your problem, if young Albert does not meet his obligation.”

“Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?” Mr. Martin was heating up.

“It is not a threat,” Top Coat said, removing a hand from his jacket and raising it slightly in protest, “it is the contract. According to the contract, you are the liable party should Mr. Martin fail to meet the obligation. It is simply business. I’m sure you understand.”

“I don’t understand and I don’t like it,” Mr. Martin said.

“My advice, Sir, in all sincerity, would be to communicate our request to young Mr. Martin and assure him that this is an issue to which he must attend, as soon as possible.”

Andy thought the guy even sounded like a TV show mobster, but he consciously remained focused on his dwindling Italian Special and bag of Doritos.

“What are we talking about, exactly?” Mr. Martin said.

“It would be best if your nephew explain the terms of the contract. But if we have not yet heard from him by tomorrow morning, we will come back with a copy for you, as you will become the lien-holder.”

“But I...” Mr. Martin began only to be rebuffed again.

“Now, Mr. Marteen, again, your involvement is a non-issue as long as your nephew meets the terms, which I am certain he will do.” Top Coat now smiled and nodded, “So we will say good bye for now, and please, give young Mr. Martin our message.” He stepped away from the counter and turned to leave. No Neck pulled a twenty from his pocket and tossed it on the counter to pay for the biscotti he had been eating and the loaf of fresh bread he grabbed from the counter basket. Mr. Martin was too stunned to ring up the sale or make change. The room fell silent after the clang of the bells on the door. Mr. Martin looked at Andy, speechless. He paced up and back behind the counter for several moments before picking up the wireless phone and dialing a number.

“Brother, where is Albert?” Andy heard Mr. Martin say in to the receiver.

“He has people looking for him... They came to my store...”

“No. They were not police... I don’t know, I just... Okay.” Mr. Martin took a pen and flipped to a new page in his inventory book. He wrote down an address.

“Okay. I know... It’s not your fault... Auf Wiedersehen.” He hung up the phone and tore the page out of the notebook. Mr. Martin stepped through the saloon doors and came over the Andy’s table.

“Did you hear any of that?” he said.

Andy nodded, “Who were those guys?”

“I don’t know. I think Albert is in trouble.”

“More trouble,” Andy said.

“Ja. I need to find him, I think. Can you help me?”

“Whatever you need, Mr. Martin.”

“I will close the deli early and go to his new place. You can take me?”

“What time.”

“Three o’clock?”

“I’ll be here.” Andy looked at his watch, 11:33 am. A small group of people entered the deli and Mr. Martin glanced in their direction and

then back.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly, patting Andy on the shoulder before returning to his post.

Andy finished quickly and walked back to his house. Now that his mind was nourished it was filling his head with a plethora of mobster scenarios right out of the movies. He was envisioning all the possible bloody endings to this drama when his cell phone chirped breaking the spell.

“Andy Boyd,” he said without checking the number.

“You sound pre-occupied,” his mother said, “Is this a bad time?”

“Oh, hi mom. No. Just walking back to the house. How’s it going?”

“Good, real good. Listen, I’m having Marg over for dinner tonight. Will tonight work for you?”

“Oh, I don’t know, mom. I’m taking Mr. Martin on an errand at 3:00 pm., don’t know when we’ll be back.”

“I was thinking 6:30-ish.”

“Well, uh, I can plan on it and call you if I’m not going to make it. How’s that?”

“I’ll take what I can get from the big-time author. Let’s try for six thirty, then?”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Okay. Love you honey,” his mom said.

“Love you, mom.” he clicked the phone shut and looked at his watch again. He was absent most of yesterday and today was closing in on him. “I need a ghost-writer,” he thought to himself, “I’m too busy to write the dang book and it’s all I do.” He shook his head and climbed the steps to his front door. He had trouble finding the key to unlock the Broadback story in his head and was only able to pound out a few lines before time to drive Mr. Martin.

Appalachian Malady - 5

“John Sanchez.”

“John, Rance,” Broadback said into the satellite phone from his room on the third floor.

"Hey buddy," Sanchez replied.

"Up for a field trip?"

"I can shuffle some things around. Where we headed?"

"The Bluegrass state. Fly in to Nashville and rent a car, I'll meet you in Somerset, KY tomorrow afternoon. Here's a cell number, call when you're close."

"Any special tools?"

"We might use that GPR thing you were telling me about."

"Ground Penetrating Radar? Digging for gold?"

"Something like that. Tomorrow then?"

"On my way."

He didn't want to leave the story right now. This was the time the scribe looked forward to, the time when the plot began to come together and the story wrote itself. He wanted to stay in the secret room and find out what Rance was planning with John Sanchez. Andy liked Sanchez. The guy was amazing. He was a natural mechanical genius that most men wish they could be. He loved it when Sanchez was brought in to a story. Even though Andy didn't understand how Sanchez came up with half the gadgets he made, Andy just loved to sit back and watch him work.

"Okay Broadback. You guys wait till I get back, okay?" Andy said to the screen as he clicked Apple-S and put the computer to sleep.

Mr. Martin was locking the door to the Deli when Andy pulled around the corner in the white Buick. Mr. Martin saw him and hurried across the street to the passenger's side. Andy could see the anxious look on the old man's face as he approached the car. Mr. Martin had scratched out rough directions to his nephew's new apartment complex that was right off Junipero Serra Blvd, in Daly City on the other side of town.

The address belonged to a house that had been converted in to a 4-plex. Albert's father had told his brother that he had moved his son into unit 3, on the second floor, up the wooden stairs along the left side of the house.

“Do you want me to go up with you?” Andy said as he turned off the ignition.

“No. Thank you, Andy. I will talk to the boy.” Mr. Martin was madder than he was nervous, and Andy was a little relieved that he wasn’t invited in. Mr. Martin stepped from the car and made his way around to the side of the house where Andy lost sight of him. For an instant Andy was in one of his stories and he had the instinctive feeling that he had been followed. He should have been careful. He should have considered that Top Coat might have been waiting for the old man to make this move.

“Oh crap,” Andy said out loud and began scanning the street for the dark Lincoln or any other car that looked suspicious. “Some Secret Agent you are, Andrew Boyd. Can’t even anticipate being tailed by the bad guys.” He tried to convince himself that he was thinking crazy and those things only happened in books but his nerves began tickling his bladder and Andy found himself needing to pee like a little kid hiding in a closet during Hide and Seek. “Great!” he said.

He didn’t want to abandon Mr. Martin in search of a restroom, and he couldn’t very well go in the hedges, so he squeezed and wiggled and willed himself to think about something else.

At the top of the stairs, Mr. Martin confirmed the apartment by the black, peel and stick, numeral 3 that was stuck to the middle of the door. He knocked firmly. Behind the door was quiet. He tried to see through the glass on the window, but the sheer white curtain on the inside and the accumulated grime on the outside obstructed the view. He knocked harder on the door, then on the glass. He tried the door handle, locked. “Albert!” he said, “Albert! It is your uncle, open the door!” Just as he was about to give up and return down the steps the curtain pushed to the side slightly and his nephew peeked out. Albert grudgingly opened the door for his uncle who stepped inside without invitation. Albert had been asleep on a twin mattress on the floor in one corner of the studio apartment. Mr. Martin scanned the room and saw that the boy’s father had set him up with a bare minimum of comforts; a folding metal chair, a card table that was well used, the mattress, and a package of paper plates, flatware and cups. Albert closed the door and stood scratching his bare chest.

“Dad give you my address?” he yawned.

“Albert. You have a problem,” his uncle began, to which the boy shrugged.

“I’ll be alright,” Albert said.

“Did you enter some kind of contract last week?” Mr. Martin said, refreshing the boy’s memory. Albert’s life flashed before his eyes.

“Oh shit,” he said, putting his face in his hands. “Dammit... What’s today?” He demanded from his uncle.

“It is Tuesday for Crissake,” Mr. Martin said. Albert started pacing around the small room, glancing out the window on the door, nervous as a squirrel. “What did you do? Albert?”

“It’s nothing. I’ll take care of it,” Albert said.

“It must be something, because two men came to my store this morning and said if you didn’t pay them back that I would have to. Now what is that all about?”

“That’s crap. You don’t have to...” His voice trailed off. They were going to hold his uncle responsible for the debt if Albert didn’t pay. Why waste time hunting for Albert when his Aunt and Uncle sat like ducks on a pond. A wave of nausea hit him. Albert sat limply on the folding chair and put his face in his hands.

“What? What did you do, Albert?”

“I took out a loan from those guys. For the dope,” he mumbled through his fingers. “I was gonna pay it back after I sold the stuff... god.”

“Well, you’ve just got to contact the company and make other arrangements. You’ve got a job.”

“They fired me... Besides, there’s no way. The loan goes up five hundred bucks a day. Interest.”

“What?”

“I didn’t think...”

“I guess you didn’t think. You borrowed from loan sharks? Those guys will break your legs or worse, do you know that?” Mr. Martin couldn’t believe his nephew was this stupid, although, after the weekend, he had a pretty good hunch. “You have already hurt my family, Albert. And now this? You call your father... Or something. You deal with this, do you understand me?” Albert sat motionless. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Albert said. He felt like a child being scolded for breaking a stupid vase. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Look. These two guys said they are coming back to my store. You deal with them before they come to me. Understand? You talk to them today. Right now.”

“Yeah.”

Mr. Martin left the room without saying goodbye. He couldn't fix this for the boy. Albert had gotten himself in to the mess and he would have to get himself out.

The apartment fell silent again after his uncle left. Albert sat in the chair with his face buried in his hands, his mind like a chalkboard that has been erased right after class. He struggled to find anything rational. His dad wasn't an option. He burned the bridge with his uncle. He thought about stealing the dough, but didn't have the first clue how to do that. Thinking made him tired. He eventually moved from the chair to the mattress. So he could think...

Andy sped to the nearest McDonalds to relieve himself before the two men spoke much about the encounter.

“Sorry about that,” Andy said as he got back in the car, silently thankful that Mr. Martin hadn't taken a second longer with his nephew. “Did you get it all sorted out?” he asked.

“The boy has taken a loan with these guys. Loan sharks... He borrowed the money to buy the marijuana. Can you believe it? Easy money, right? For crissake, Andy.”

“So he borrows the money to buy the dope. The dope gets confiscated and he gets arrested, but he still owes the money.”

“Exactly.”

Andy just shook his head. That was a bonehead move if he'd ever heard of one, but it wasn't necessary for him to point that out. “What's he going to do?”

“Probably get his leg's broken,” Mr. Martin said, exasperated and worn out by the boy. “And then, he makes me the co-signer, or something...”

“He can't do that without your signature,” Andy said before he could stop himself.

“I don't think these guys look at it that way,” Mr. Martin said, but didn't need to.

“Right.”

They rode across town quietly, distracted by their own thoughts.

Andy dropped Mr. Martin off at the curb in front of his store. “If there is anything I can do,” he said, breaking the silence as Mr. Martin got out of the car.

“You’ve done plenty, Andy, you go now. Come see me this week, huh?”

Mr. Martin was sad and scared. So much had changed so quickly and it wasn’t getting any easier. Part of Andy wanted to fix Mr. Martin’s problems, doctor Mrs. Martin’s wounds, and make things go back to the way they were as recently as last week. Back when all he had to whine about was his weight problem. As he drove away he thought about calling his mother and canceling dinner so he could go to his place and be alone. He pulled to the curb again across from his house and sat quietly, thinking about what to do. Pull in to the garage; go in to the house and sulk, cry and sleep, wish the whole drama would go away. Or go to his mother’s house and meet new people. Solitude sounded much more appealing in his current mood. The clincher was the fact that there was no food in his house.

He put the car in to gear and drove to South San Francisco. His heart wasn’t in to it, but his appetite was.

Chapter 15

Andy got to his mothers place at 6:40 pm. It took forever to get out of the City at this time of day. People scattered in all directions like a bomb was ticking down. “That’s why I live in town,” he thought, “leave this craziness to these Loons. Let them spend half their lives on the freeway, ‘Not I, said the Cat’,” Andy said, quoting a nursery rhyme he couldn’t remember. There was another car in the small driveway besides his mothers, which made him consider backing out and taking a pizza back to his own place.

He knocked on the door which frustrated his mother who wanted him to feel at home and come right in - he had a key, but he couldn’t bring himself to just walk in. He felt like an intruder wherever he went. Andy told himself he was just respectful of others privacy, when, in truth, it was just poor self image.

“That’s Andy, he always knocks...” he heard his mother say as she approached the front door.

“You made it!” She said, opening the door wide.

“I made it,” he said without enthusiasm and stepped across the threshold.

“Andy, you’ve met my friend Marg,” Andy’s mother said by way of introduction. “And this is Margs niece, Debbie Williams.”

“Nice to meet you, Debbie,” he said shaking her hand. She nodded and smiled. “Williams?” Andy said, cocking his head to the side, “Are we cousins?”

“What?” Debbie said, caught off guard, “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, sure. Williams is my maiden name,” Janice said. “I hadn’t really made that connection. Funny.”

Marg went in to some story about how her family was from Kentucky and how her sister met this boy at college who swept her off her feet and promptly moved her back to his father’s dairy farm in the middle of cheese country, where she raised about a dozen kids and a million cows. Marg moved to California after high school to become an actress, which never quite panned out. She ended up in the Bay Area and her big sister never left the farm. Andy was only half listening as he was noticing how nice Debbie Williams’ smile was and how stupid his comment must have sounded.

Andy didn’t want to be attracted to the girl; he had too many complications in his life. But he found himself being quieter than usual and he somehow resisted the urge to fill his plate a second time. So he knew his feelings were moving ahead without permission. After everyone but Marg was finished, and, according to his mother, she would never be finished, Janice and Debbie stood to clear the table. Marg was regaling the group with stories of auditions and parts she nearly got in movies that they may have heard of, between occasional bites of cold food. She was entertaining, in a goofy sort of way. Somewhat eccentric. Andy always liked her. And she didn’t require you to listen closely, she didn’t really care, she just wanted to tell the story. As long as you laughed or nodded when she paused for effect, she knew you were still with her and that was enough. Andy’s mind was loosely following Marg while his eyes were trained on her niece.

Debbie was pretty. She seemed older than she probably was due to the confident way she carried herself, stepping right in to rinse dishes and put things away, asking Janice what went where and hunting herself if Andy’s mom was talking to Marg. She had chin length brown hair, parted in the middle, a teachers cut, Andy decided to call it. She had a beautiful smile which, when fully engaged, pushed her round cheeks up against her big blue eyes in a way that forced them shut a little, into an engaging kind of squint. Very cute. She dressed refreshingly conservative, wearing slacks

and a thin cardigan sweater over a buttoned knit top. Andy thought that if he had had a teacher like “Miss Williams” he would have probably fallen in love and married at twelve. Debbie Williams was the kind of pretty that you had to watch for a few minutes to appreciate. You had to watch her move, hear her talk, see her smile. After watching her from a distance you found yourself wanting to know more about her - listen to her story and find out what how she thought about life.

Andy was self-conscious and sad. This was the type of girl he would really like to know. But the feeling was never mutual. Why would his mother put him through this torture? Sure Debbie was great. Sure he would like her. But that was precisely the problem. Because that inevitably led to letdown and disappointment when she found out what a self-absorbed idiot he was. Sense of humor aside, Andy was a dysfunctional mess and girls could size him up like dresses on the sale rack. He wanted to leave and avoid the pain. Unfortunately, pie and coffee served in the living room stood between him and escape. He willed himself to resist becoming interested in her. He would try to separate himself from the situation and think about Albert Martin, or try to peek in to the Rance Broadback room in his mind. Anything but allow himself to be sucked in to longing.

“So Andy,” Debbie said from the couch as she sat down her half-eaten slice of pie.

“See, I could never do that,” he told himself as he watched her. “I’ve never put down a plate of dessert without finishing it. She’s in a different league, protect yourself.”

“...the other night after coffee with my aunt and Janice, I went out and bought your book,” she said.

“Oh, you’re the one,” he deadpanned.

“Yeah, right,” she joked.

“Which one?” Janice chimed in.

“A Ring and a Prayer,” Debbie said, looking back at Andy. “It was really good. Exciting.”

“They aren’t for everybody, I guess,” he said in defense of something.

“No, really. I liked it. And you have more, I mean, it’s a series?”

“Only because of the publisher. I’d like to write something else but they keep asking for the Secret Agent stuff.”

“How many are there?” Debbie asked.

“Four,” Janice said proudly. “And the fifth will be done any time now, right Andy?”

“That’s the rumor.”

“You are actually writing one right now?”

“Between dinner engagements, you know, the glamorous life of the Best Selling Author,” he said with noticeable sarcasm.

“Can I ask what it’s about? The current book, I mean.”

“Same thing, you know. The world is going to end and at the last second the hero steps in to save the day and everybody lives happily ever after.”

“So you don’t really want to say.”

“It’s not that. It’s just...” Andy trailed off. Nobody really asked him stuff like this. His stories were locked in his head until they made their way to a computer screen and from there to a printing press somewhere and eventually to a book store shelf. That’s when they became public property. While they were still locked in the secret room of his mind the story was ongoing. It would be wrong to expose it to the world before it happened. It would be like knowing how your own life played out before it happened. You could make different choices and change the ending. That’s playing God. Andy couldn’t articulate it quite that way, but he found that he couldn’t really talk about the story either. Maybe he was just protective of Rance Broadback. Maybe he was embarrassed to talk about making a living writing what he sometimes viewed as empty-headed tripe.

“But does the hero get the girl?” Marg put in to break any tension.

“Well he sure did in the book I read,” Debbie confirmed.

“He usually does, I guess,” Andy said, knowing even as he spoke the words that he had said too much. “*Sorry Rance,*” he thought to himself.

“All the books are good. I’m a little biased, I know, but I think they’re great,” Janice said. “I sometimes wish there was less cussing, but...”

“Mom, I’ve told you a million times, it’s not me, it is the characters. I’m not the one cussing.”

Janice held up a hand in protest, “I know, I know. It’s just that you are their voice, you know, they only cuss because you allow them to.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Andy said feeling an inquisition coming

on.

“No, I understand what he is saying, Janice.” Debbie said. “It is like that in all good fiction. If the author projects too much of his or her personal morals or personality in to a story then the characters never become real to the reader. It works for, say, the hero, or star of the story to be somewhat of a projection, but the other characters, they have to be themselves. If not, then the book will be, uh,” she looked at Andy for help.

“One dimensional?”

“Exactly,” she affirmed. “And that’s what made “A Ring and A Prayer” so good. The people were real, we know people just like each of those characters.”

“That’s what Andy always tells me,” Janice said smiling. “But I still don’t like it.”

“Nobody is holding your eyelids open forcing you to read them,” Andy joked.

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait to get the next one!” his mother laughed. “I’m in love with Rance Broadback, I can’t help it.” That broke up the room and gave Andy an image that he would have rather not had, of Rance Broadback, his alter ego, as his mother’s boyfriend.

“On that note,” Andy said moving his weight to the edge of the chair, “I’ve got to get going... Mom, thanks for a great meal. Marg, always a treat to hear your stories.” He stood, as did Debbie Williams. He shook her hand, “Thanks for sticking up for the writing,” he smiled.

“Not a problem. And I wasn’t kidding, I liked it.”

“I’m glad. Really,” he said, realizing he hadn’t yet let go of her hand, which was awkward. “Anyway, uh,” he let go as quickly as he could, “it was really nice meeting you.”

“And you, Andy. I hope to see you again,” Debbie said.

“Okay,” was all Andy could manage. He kissed his mom on the forehead and walked to the door, “See you later,” he said.

As soon as he shut the door behind him he could feel his ears burning with the thought of them talking about him, mercilessly. “Oh, that Andy, he’s so insecure. He’s so sweet, what a marshmallow.” They would feel sorry for him and hope that he found his way in life. “Grrr,” he said out loud as he buckled in for the ride home.

It was nearly 10:30 pm when he finally got the Buick parked and made his way up the ever-increasing number of steps to his living room. He knew that if he decided to post a blog entry right now it would be completely void of anything positive, so he resisted the urge, deciding instead to sip on a bottle of water and re-read a little of the story he had accidentally prostituted earlier in the evening.

Appalachian Malady

"...The Bluegrass state. Fly in to Nashville and rent a car, I'll meet you in Somerset, KY tomorrow afternoon. Here's a cell number, call when you're close."

"Any special tools?"

"We might use that GPR thing you were telling me about."

"Ground Penetrating Radar? We digging for gold?"

"Something like that. Tomorrow then?"

"On my way."

Rance hung up the phone and dialed another number from his mental Rolodex.

"Detective Tate."

"Jim, Rance."

"Hey dude, thought we had a game set for Saturday."

"Bigger name on the other line. You know how it is," Rance said.

"You get pulled in to the Hagin thing?"

"Not sure if it's connected or not. Just wanted you to go ears up, I might have something for you in a few days."

"Room for one more?"

"Not yet. I'm in a place where badges are not very welcome. Just be ready to get on a plane."

"Will said airplane have a particular destination?"

"Kentucky."

"Ah ha..."

"Don't 'Ah he' me, now... And listen, don't try and look over my shoulder. If my hunch is right, what I'm working on might have D.C. connections. You start trying to figure it out and it might draw some attention."

"Excuse me, partner, but I wasn't born yesterday."

"Sorry, didn't mean to preach."

"No worries, I'll be ready. Anything else?"

"Has Kramer come up with anything else on the Hagin case?"

"Not that I am aware. Rumor was they were trying to bump him off the case, but he put his foot down, seniority."

"Why wouldn't they want their best man on the biggest case?"

"I don't know, but somebody didn't. They lost the pissing contest, though. He's on it big time."

"Good. Well, I may need an update on that sometime, can I call you?"

"I'll be right here, Ran. About all I do is play racquetball and sit around waiting for you to call," Tate said with extra sarcasm.

"Nice to know."

"Bye."

"Yeah." Rance clicked the disconnect button and sat back on the loveseat in his comfortable suite. He decided to make one more call before turning in.

"Hello?"

"Spin, Rance," he said.

"Hi Ran. Hey, I don't know what time zone you're in, but it's late here," Tami Beatty yawned.

"Sorry. You still down south?"

"Yeah. I don't know if this guy has anything or not. It seems really far-fetched, if you ask me."

"When you coming home?"

"I'm going to snoop around a little more tomorrow and head back in the evening."

"How about wine and bread at The Cure?"

"Now that's what I need. Nine-ish?"

"Sounds good." Rance ended that call figuring it was better if Tami Beatty didn't know they were within

a stones throw of one another. If he were being watched he would rather be seen getting on an airplane than meeting a reporter at some Louisville club. He would meet with John Sanchez in the afternoon and then grab a puddle-jumper out of Knoxville and be to D.C. and back before the concierge changed shifts at his hotel. He opened a satellite map on his iBook and began to search the Daniel Boone National Forest for clues.

Rance had breakfast in the hotel cafe at 6:05 and was casually reading the newspaper in the lobby when his cell phone rang at 8:15 am.

"Michael Pena," he said, instinctively.

"Mr. Pena. It's Sophia Garza, I am sorry for calling so early," she said self-consciously.

"Not at all," Pena/Broadback replied. "What can I do for you, Dr. Garza?"

"Sophia, please."

"Sophia, then."

"I - I just wanted to tell you what a nice time I had last night."

"As did I, thank you. You were the perfect hostess."

"You are not the typical gambler that James invites to the ranch."

"No? He probably invites the winners," he offered.

"No. Listen, I would like to see you."

"Officially? I mean, is Mr. Rafferty suggesting that you see me again?"

"No. Not like that. He is my boss, not my father. I am saying that I would like to see you."

"I would like to see you again as well," Pena/Broadback said.

"It is kind of embarrassing. Making a call like this. But I wasn't sure how long you would be in town."

"May I lessen the embarrassment by saying that I have thought of little besides you, since we parted last night?"

"You are kind."

"Tomorrow? Lunch?"

"I'll come to the hotel," she said.

"I can't wait... Sophia?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you," Michael/Rance said.

"Hasta manana," she replied.

Rance hung up the phone and folded the newspaper. His mind was spinning. Was the good doctor working him under orders from James Rafferty? Or was she just a girl that wanted to get to know someone. He thought the later, but suspected the former. It was his nature.

He left for Somerset early, giving himself time to evade any possible tail by taking some sightseeing detours. He nearly made himself late with a stop at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green. He pulled himself away drooling and wishing he led the kind of life where driving one of those beauties wouldn't draw unwanted attention. It would, so his lust to go fast had to be satisfied on the saddle of his Buell. Oh well.

"Oh well," Andy thought. "Oh well that Rance is stuck with a 140 mph motorcycle, saving the country. And with women chasing him, no less-- it must be tough. Meanwhile, here I am, just a guy who meets a nice girl and knows he doesn't have a chance in hell... Oh well." Andy shook the image of Debbie Williams out of his mind and tried to focus on the story.

Appalachian Malady -

Although John Sanchez was somewhat new to the spy game, he was a quick study and a solid right hand. Serving four peacetime years in the Army, he excelled in hand-to-hand combat before discovering his niche in mechanics. It wasn't long before he was the lead wrench at the base equipment yard where he found the time to retrofit, upgrade and soup-up all the toys in order to give his guys competitive advantage in whatever games they decided to play. He could have

had a pretty nice career in the Army, but he wanted to solve his own design problems, not those of Uncle Sam. His business, Elite Design, had quickly risen to the top of the architectural field, especially among high-end commercial builders in the South, which is where he caught the eye of the former first lady. He fabricated an addition and safe-room for the state capital, which was so well received that he was invited to fashion a similar project in D.C., which is where he met Rance Broadback, a man with no past and no apparent job. Their relationship had grown to the point where John Sanchez had become a somewhat regular part of Rance's off-the-books work. John knew only that their work usually had to do with National Security, although his specific role was usually well out of harms way.

Rance passed an envelope across the table. It was a background sketch and identification documents of a John Garcia. Sanchez read the brief, "At least I get to be Mexican this time," he smiled. "John Garcia, huh? Okay."

"I brought a sat-phone unit for you to have in case you need to communicate. There won't be many phone towers out where you're going," Rance began. He got out a satellite map and described the region to Sanchez. "It's wilderness, man. It's dense forest, mountains and rugged, rugged terrain. It's all going to look the same, so I want you to concentrate on this perimeter, here, and kind of work your way in." He drew a half-circle on the map. This community here, Rose Park, this is the center point, and we go about twenty miles north and spread out in a radius from there."

"What are we looking for?"

"Drugs. Marijuana, specifically. Lot's of it. But it's going to be protected, big time. Watch for traps, guards, maybe quad-runners, land mines, some of these people will even cut the vocal chords out of their guard dogs so you can't hear them coming. So be careful. The closer you get to gold, the more dangerous it will get."

"I thought they just ran 'shine down here."

"Join the club. The other thing is, I don't think it's going to be obvious, you know. Actually, I think the big prize is underground," Rance said.

"Warehousing?"

"And growing. I think the whole operation is underground."

"Hydroponics and lights?"

"Something, I don't know. But it's got to be hidden somehow. The feds are flying this area all the time, confiscating tons of the stuff from forest growers. But the sheer volume they're talking about has to point to a bigger operation. Maybe it's being imported and warehoused somehow, but I just don't think that's all," Rance trailed off. He was out on a limb and he knew it. His gut was usually right, but he usually ran the ball a little further up the field before he let anyone in on the hunch. He was asking Sanchez to put his life on the line for an idea that was purely conjecture at this point. That was dangerous.

"So I go native and find the stash without getting strung up by a band of hillbillies, is that it?" Sanchez summed up what he knew so far with his unique spin.

"I guess that's about it," he smiled along with Sanchez. "I hope that GPR can give us an outline of the underground facility, if there is one. You find the big prize and then you get back home, that's the plan."

"So what do you get to do while I'm out scratching chiggers and picking ticks off my ass? Or do I want to know?"

"Thanks for the visual," Rance said, shaking his head. "Me, I'll just be doing what I do, chasing girls and taking all the credit."

"Right. Somehow I don't think so," Sanchez said.

"The thing is we have to stay way under the radar, here. If this is as big as I think it is, it goes all the way up line-- maybe connected to the Hagin thing."

"No shit?" Sanchez said, "That is way up the food chain."

"Yeah," Rance agreed. "Here's some cash, rent what you need down here and take a back road into the target zone. Stay away from the towns, they are all wired, everybody is connected in some way. Target a five-mile radius northwest of the Cedar Ridge Mine. That's where they seem to be the most anxious. And John, be careful. These rednecks shoot first and ask questions later."

"Sounds like fun," Sanchez grinned

sarcastically.

"Trust me John, they are going to know those 'hollers' and mountains like the back of their own hands. If you are exposed and they track you, the wolves will find you before I ever do. So, are you with me."

"Yeah, but sometimes I wonder why."

"Just so we're clear,"

"Sounds like Baghdad meets the Amazon."

"That's probably not too far from right."

Sanchez found an army surplus store, it wasn't hard, it seemed like they were on every corner, and stocked up on camo and supplies. He rented a truck and trailer from U-haul and bought a used Quad-runner from a Yamaha dealer. He bought a turkey permit from Wal-Mart and a Savage turkey gun with Winchester ammo. He got three days worth of gas and headed east. He picked his way around the eastern perimeter of the target zone before parking the truck and trailer behind an old General Store that looked like it hadn't been open since the turn of the last century. He changed clothes and climbed aboard the quad. He looked like any other hunter, except for the fact that he was traveling alone. He picked along fire roads and trails until he determined by the map that he was about three miles outside the target perimeter. He dismounted and covered the quad with brush. The sun was nearly down and the forest tree cover was so dense that it was nearly dark by the time he stashed his gear. He donned his night-vision goggles and GPR pack and set out west on foot. He didn't need the goggles yet, but he would inside an hour. The terrain was everything Rance said it would be and he had to be careful with every step. The forest floor was covered in a bed of moist grey and brown leaves that gave in like a pillow under the weight of his step. Sapling trees were nearly as dense as the thorny blackberry and other wait-a-minute bushes that grabbed at his clothing from every side.

After an hour of careful negotiation, Sanchez turned on the GPR and began scanning the surface in front

of him in slow, sweeping passes. Ground Penetrating Radar was a fairly new technology that was being developed for city and county jurisdictions as a way to help city workers determine the exact locations of things like electrical and water lines. Hand-held units like the one John Sanchez had invented weren't available yet, but as soon as they were, the risk and resulting financial losses connected with digging across buried cable and lines would be dramatically reduced. John's unit used a super low frequency transmitter that, depending on the make up of the substrata, was able to conduct a signal as deep as fifteen to twenty five meters. As long as the geological maps were correct and the terrain around here was largely limestone base, he knew he would be able to achieve optimal results. And, if he actually located an underground bunker or structure made of metal and concrete, the pulses of the electromagnetic radiation would allow him to visualize the target in precised detail.

He swept the area from East to West and then from South to North without result. He hadn't seen or heard any security personnel, either, so he figured he might have started in the wrong place or be a little too far outside the perimeter. He made his way back to the make shift camp and crawled in to a pine-branch shelter for some sleep.

Andy rolled his head around to loosen and crack his tight neck and looked at the clock. 1:15 am. He decided that if John Sanchez was getting some sleep that he might as well do the same. "Only, while Sanchez is flicking ticks in the forest, I'll be here in the comfort of my bed," he said to the computer screen. He clicked Apple-S and put the iBook to sleep for the night.

— Chapter 16 —

He rolled out of bed at the crack of 10:00 am starving and still exhausted from Tuesday. He hadn't dreamed at all, hadn't even moved as far as he could tell. He really didn't feel like going out for food but realized that his rampage had left little in the house to eat. "I'll have to shop today, I suppose," he thought as he made his way through the shower. Laundry made the 'to-do' list as well when he realized that his wardrobe was down to a few tee shirts and a pair of jeans that had to be held up with one hand while he walked. He'd learned the hard way climbing some stairs that if left unattended they would dislodge from his belly and drop to his ankles as if there were stones in the pockets. He had nightmares of his pants deserting him on a stairwell as he led a group of female fans up to a second floor book signing. He always awoke to the sound of their cameras clicking and winding furiously amidst the laughter.

He drove to a local market and replenished his pantry and freezer, replacing a lot of the things he had thrown away but satisfying his conscience by including a box of oatmeal, a case of Slimfast Chocolate Royale and some boneless chicken breasts to replace the frost bitten bag he'd pryed out of the freezer. Seven days after his commitment to make good choices and lose some unwanted weight; and there had been exactly zero noticeable progress. He pondered what the problem over a

Lumberjack Breakfast at a greasy Denny's knock-off near his market.

"Normally," he thought, "I would have been able to do this, to be disciplined and make the good choices. But this past few days has been nuts. Between the Martins and the book and..." His excuses were thin, even to his easily convinced mind, and he finally admitted what he really believed. "I just can't do it. I can make good choices in some areas, but not in others. I've just got to let myself off the hook and live my life. I'll just live it a little bigger than I would prefer... Okay, a lot bigger than I would prefer." He chuckled to himself as he spread a 2nd container of jam on an unsuspecting biscuit.

After lugging the groceries up from the garage one-handed, he brought his iBook into the living room to write from his favorite chair. A change of scenery might do his mind some good.

Andy's Weblog - November 7th

Letting Myself Down Easy

It's been a week since I made the pact. Each entry is here, I can scroll down, myself, and see the words I wrote - "I will commit to making good choices and be accountable to this page." Easy to say, but, as it turns out, very hard for me to do. Not the honesty part, I'm good at that. It's the good choices part that I can't do. I don't know why. I am okay for an hour or two, but give me a whole day and I've taken three steps backward for every one I've taken forward. So I'm letting myself down easy. I decided that over breakfast. I can't do it. Oh, I'm still going to try, don't get me wrong. And I'm still going to be sick every time I look in the mirror, but I'm going to attempt a new tactic. I'm going to try that whole, "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative" thing. I'm going to just relax and not worry too much about my weight problem right now because I have some other issues pressing in that need my full attention. I can't screw them up or I'll really be depressed. I've got to at least keep that plate spinning, if my work crashes and burns... I can't imagine. So I hope to make good choices, I will try to make good choices and I don't really expect to make good choices most of the time. I'll plan on being pleasantly surprised when I do. How's that? I think if I reread what I've written that I'll probably barf and delete the whole thing. So I'm going to post it and try to maintain what I already know is flawed thinking.

Your screwed up blogger - and I'm okay with that...

He stared out the window for a long time, his mind alternating between images of Debbie Williams, the confident young schoolteacher that stuck up for his writing in front of his own mother. “What a woman she must be,” he thought. And he thought about the two thugs at Martin’s deli and how intimidated he was, listening to them, wishing he were more like the hero in his stories so he could stand up to them and really help Mr. Martin. He thought about John Sanchez, out in the Daniel Boone Forest surrounded by a million acres of trees and maybe some really bad people. He was just about to open his story document when the phone rang, he didn’t want to be bothered, so he looked at the caller id screen. He didn’t recognize the number so he let it go to voicemail where he could screen the call.

“Hi, this is Andy, I can’t come to the phone right now, please leave a message - sorry I can’t think of anything more original right now.”
Beep.

“Hi, Andy. This is Debbie Williams. From last night? I got your number from your mother...” Andy froze. Should he grab the phone and pretend he was just walking in from the gym or something, should he call her right back after the message? What if she didn’t leave a number? He couldn’t breathe.

“Anyway, she thought it would be okay if I called, ‘just not too early’ was her only suggestion. Well, I just wanted to say hi. If you get a chance, give me a call back. My number is 415-555-3434. So, uh, bye.” *Click.*

Andy sat motionless in the living room, the answering machine began its incessant beeping from behind him in the kitchen announcing that there was a message. There is no way he would be able to concentrate on writing now, not until he called her back. He sat the computer down and stood to pace around the house. He looked in the refrigerator for answers, it held none. He took his computer back into the office and hooked up the power supply, he washed off his face with some cold water and mustered what little confidence he had, and walked to the phone to return the call, his chubby fingers carefully tapping out the numbers.

“Hello?”

“Debbie? It’s Andy Boyd.”

“Andy...”

“Sorry I missed your call. I was, uh...”

“It’s okay. How are you?”

“Uh, okay. Yourself?” Andy said, this was strange to him; he didn’t talk with women much, and never without a particular agenda, maybe a marketing call or setting up a book signing. Sometimes he chatted with the girl that worked the phones at his pizza place. But nothing like this.

“Oh, fine. Just got home from school. Listen, I was thinking. I’d really like to have you come in to my honors class sometime and talk, you know, just tell the students what you do and let them ask some questions. It’s a pretty good group.”

“Well, I.. I’ve never really done anything like that before. I’m sure they’ve never read anything I’ve written.”

“Oh, I don’t know. But even if they haven’t, the idea of having a New York Times Bestselling Author in the class room would be amazing.”

“Yeah, they might think, ‘Gosh, if he can do it, anybody can do it.’

“That’s not what I mean. Absolutely not. But really, what do you think, the students would love it, we all would.”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, would you be interested in getting together, for coffee or something? To talk about it?”

“Uh...”

“My treat, come on,” she said.

“Well, sure, I guess,” he said. This was as surreal as anything in his odd life. If his ears weren’t playing tricks on him, it sounded as if he was just asked to coffee by a single young woman.

“How about Saturday?” she said.

“Uh, sure,” he said, wishing she had said ‘how about in an hour.’

“I can come up that way. Where should we meet?”

Andy eventually hung up the phone and replayed the conversation in his mind several times to make certain that it had all really just happened. Everything he had said sounded idiotic, of course, which made him grimace to think about. But the fact was that Debbie Williams had called *him*. She asked him out for coffee. She was coming to the City on Saturday morning

to be with him. Three days from now. They were meeting at 10:00 am, at the Daily Grind. Andy's mouth was dry and his mind spinning with excitement. He couldn't consider the possibility that her call was strictly professional. Maybe she thought he was okay, maybe she liked him. He couldn't get ahead of himself, but unfortunately, he always did. It took two full hours for his heart rate and mind to settle down enough to get some work done.

Appalachian Malady -

Broadback/Pena rented a puddle-jumper from a county airport outside of Knoxville and flew to New Castle airport in Wilmington where he took Amtrak into D.C. He made it to Curious Georgetown at 8:55 pm where he was certain to beat his date by at least ten minutes. It was actually more like fifteen.

"Sorry I'm late, Ran. It just takes forever to get through Dulles these days," Tami said as she approached the table. Rance stood and took her coat, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Don't apologize," he said. "I like to get here first so I can watch you walk in." His flattery was not lost on her. Even though they had never been intimate, each was the closest thing the other had to a serious relationship. To say they loved each other was probably close, although the course of their lives may never allow their affection to be consummated.

"Flirting with a reporter is dangerous, mister," she smiled. "You might find yourself on the front page."

"I'll take my chances," he said. "Let's eat tonight, huh?" Rance waved over a server and asked for two menus and they ordered drinks-- wine for Tami Beatty and a tea for her date.

"You on the job?" she asked as the server disappeared.

He nodded slightly, "So, tell me about Kentucky."

She wondered, momentarily about the nature of his assignment, but knew better than to ask. "First, I love

it there. Ran, it is so peaceful and beautiful." She shook her head, almost in disbelief, "I had forgotten how nice it really is. You know, when you are from a place, its beauty is sometimes lost on you."

"I know what you mean."

"The sky is the deepest blue, and, this time of year the trees, oh," she raised her eyebrows and her eyes got big as saucers reliving the image, "the leaves were mostly down already, but the colors were still amazing."

"Georgetown's not bad either."

"Oh, I know, it's not that. It's just, you know, the whole package, the whole Southern charm and all. I just love it."

"Well, I for one am glad you decided to come back," he smiled and tipped his glass.

"No worries there, Ran. It's like, a nice place to visit, but... You know what I mean? Not enough action for me, I need the city. I'm wired for D.C."

"Maybe some day, though, huh?"

"Someday when we're old and grey, right? And you come riding in and sweep me off my feet and buy me a big southern mansion with the white pillars and the tree-lined drive. I can see that."

"I've heard there are some nice places down there," he said, thinking of the palatial estate of James Rafferty.

"Very nice places," she confirmed. The meal came and Tami ate like she'd never seen a decent steak, Mm-ing and Ah-ing in a way that would have been comical had it not been so endearing to Rance Broadback. He loved to watch her and couldn't help but smile.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing. You just get your money's worth out of a good steak - more than anyone I know."

"I can't help it."

"I know. I love it."

"I get to be myself around you, Ran. No pretense, no reporter hat. Just me." she said between bites, holding her steak knife in one hand and fork in the other. She cocked her head and smiled at him in a way that said he was her only real 'boy' friend, and he laughed.

"Maybe we shouldn't wait till we're old and grey," he said.

"I've heard that before, Mr. Commitment." She smiled and bit an asparagus spear in half.

They finished their meal and ordered coffee before Tami began downloading her findings from the trip. The crowded room was filled with students and staff from the college, artists from the downtown loft studios and some political underlings. Everyone was either off-loading from a long day, flirting, scheming or working some kind of angle. The house band was playing classic rock and the dim lights of the dance floor revealed a handful of couples that were reliving the glory days.

"Like I said on the phone, I think my contact out there is betting on a long-shot," she said.

"I've done that before," Rance smiled. "So he's thinking there's some connection between Hagin and the horse guy?"

She nodded, stirring a bit of cream in to her coffee, "Big time." She sipped at the edge of the hot mug and continued. "He said he had followed Hagin out to Rafferty's place at several times in the past few months. I guess Rafferty's got this high security horse ranch slash mansion outside of Lexington somewhere." Rance nodded as she spoke. "So Hagin comes and goes from Rafferty's place for, like two months."

"Okay..."

"And in the meantime, Hagin starts really pushing the marijuana legalization thing. I mean, it was always a pet issue of his, but now it's his whole soapbox. It's all over the state and national news. He's going on all the Sunday morning news shows, the whole thing. According to my guy, Rafferty is trying to get Hagin to get off the soapbox. But Hagin won't do it. And it becomes this big pissing match. The more Rafferty pushes him to stop, the louder Hagin gets... And then Hagin winds up DOA." Tami held the coffee mug in both hands and sipped at the edge, licking her lips and setting the cup on the table. Her eyes never left Broadbacks.

"But aren't they working it as a suicide?"

"That's what I mean. The connection is too thin. This Rafferty guy is Teflon, I'll tell you that. If he was involved I would bet there would be fifty layers

between him and whoever pulled the trigger, if it wasn't Hagin, himself, I mean."

"So why does your guy think Rafferty was pushing the Senator, in general? Did he say?"

"That's where it gets just silly. According to him, behind the scenes Rafferty is some huge drug kingpin," she smiled and raised her eyebrows, "oooooh, right? And he doesn't want Hagin; "A," to draw attention to the issue of illegal drugs, and "B," he doesn't want to open the market up to competition... Crazy. He says that capitalists talk about competition all day long, but they would always rather have a monopoly if they can get it."

"That part makes sense, I guess. Human nature and all," Rance shrugged. "But the drug-lord thing... that's out there... What about all the Mary Jane that the feds seize out there? Wouldn't that problem go away if there were legalization? You'd think Rafferty, or whoever, would welcome that."

"I know. But my friend said all those huge crop busts are all just a front. They actually plant all this stuff knowing it will be found and destroyed. Then the DEA gets all this credit for the tons of drugs that were seized, or whatever, and they go pick on someone else. All the while the main production and distribution pipeline is never touched, never even noticed."

"But where?"

"He doesn't know, he thinks it's all smuggled in. But he said this, and this is the only thing that makes sense to me. He said, 'If the feds are eradicating all these drugs, then how come exports linked to the region are up exponentially in the past few years?' In other words, if they are constantly watching for the stuff, and then swooping in to confiscate it, how is production increasing instead of decreasing?"

"Good question. So why not just arrest Rafferty and squeeze him a little? If you're the feds, why not just shake his tree?"

"I guess he's pretty connected."

"Mob?"

"D.C." she said, now glancing around, realizing where she is sitting.

"What's your angle going to be?"

"Don't have one. As far as I'm concerned, he made no compelling connection to Hagin's death, which is my story. I've got to keep the two things separate unless the dots connect themselves."

"Of course." Rance leaned in and reached across the table to whisper. If anyone was watching, and he was never quite sure that they weren't, he wanted it to appear that he was expressing his affection. He took her left hand in both of his. "Listen," he smiled romantically, causing his date to lean forward and look deeply in to his eyes, "you might want to look at Phyllis Lecter."

Tami didn't really expect a diamond ring, but she didn't expect a lead, either. Her smile faded and she looked carefully at Rance's face. She knew she shouldn't ask any questions. When all was said and done she knew that he was in another league and only passed her information that was solid.

She sat up a little straighter, still holding his gaze and his hands. "Rance Broadback," she said, "are you flirting with me?"

He knew she got the message and smiled, looking down at his own coffee cup and shrugging, "I guess I am... but I know you've got to get going. And so do I." They sat for a few more minutes watching people and enjoying each other's company.

"I don't want to leave," she said with a sigh.

"I know."

Daylight had slipped away. The sun was setting over the western skyline and his mind reluctantly returned to the real world. He stood and stretched and pulled on his jacket and hat. Traffic was thick on Chestnut as commuters and tourists looked for short cuts through the City. Horns blasted and brakes squealed as people engaged in their daily escape. Others waited for buses at crowded corners that would take them to a BART station for a long train ride to a parking lot where they would find their car and drive the rest of the way home. A short line of customers was in Martin's Deli getting drinks for the ride home and maybe a loaf of fresh bread for the family. Andy took a seat by the window and watched

the madness. It was like an evacuation had been declared that only some had heard. And they each wanted to be the first one out. Finally, during a break in the flow of deli customers, he stepped to the counter, “Hey Mr. Martin.”

“Andy, how are you?”

“Good. And Mrs. Martin?”

Mr. Martin, who had aged five years in the past week, nodded with a weary smile. “She is doing good. Thank you for asking. She is eating. She is starting physical therapy. She is going to be okay.”

“Great. That’s good news.” Andy stepped aside so more commuters could do business. After people disbursed he returned to the counter.

“I called my brother. The boy never called him... I don’t know what to do with him. Nothing? Right? I can do nothing?”

“Maybe he just figured it out another way,” Andy said.

“I hope so,” Mr. Martin shook his head, “Sometimes you wonder what it takes for some people to learn a lesson. You know?”

Andy couldn’t help but apply those words to himself, “I know what I need to be doing, but I don’t do it... I’m just like that idiot kid,” he thought. Finally he responded, “A lot of people are like that.”

“I suppose so, Andy... Hey, it’s about time for me to lock up. It’s been a long day, I’ll tell you that.” Mr. Martin stepped through the saloon doors and fished in a pants pocket for the keys to the front door. “You want to have a sandwich or something, I’m going to take something to Maria, she won’t eat the hospital food.”

“Are you going to eat?” Andy said, not wanting to impose.

“Yeah, we will take some bread up to my house, huh? I’ll make us a little sandwich.” Mr. Martin located the proper key and started to reach for the door when it was pulled away from him and opened wide. “I’m sorry, we are clos...” he started to say as he looked up and saw the smiling face of Top Coat who stepped through the door as if he owned the place. Johnny followed him, scowling at Mr. Martin as he walked passed. He looked a lot bigger since the last time, Andy thought.

Top Coat spoke to Andy first, “Do you work here or something?” his smile never leaving his face.

“Just a friend,” Andy managed.

Top Coat nodded and said, “We have a little business to conduct with Mr. Martin. So, if you don’t mind...” he motioned for the door. Andy

looked at Mr. Martin who was still standing at the door with his keys in his hand.

“I, uh, we have plans,” Andy said. “I can wait.”

“It wasn’t exactly a question,” Top Coat said firmly, glancing at Johnny who stood from the seat he had quickly taken to enjoy a cookie. Johnny scowled at Andy in a way Andy remembered well from Junior High. He didn’t like the look. Mr. Martin stepped forward.

“He will stay. What do you want?”

Top Coat shrugged and unbuttoned his coat. He took it off and handed it to his sidekick who had already returned to his seat. “Suit yourself.” He said in a way that Andy didn’t like. As soon as he was in a comfortable stance he focused on Mr. Martin and got straight to business. “Sir. Your nephew has become delinquent on his obligation and he has failed to contact us regarding the status of our arrangement.”

“He told me he owes you some money,” Mr. Martin said without humor.

“Oh, you have spoken to young Mr. Martin. Good.”

“I talked to him. He doesn’t have the money. He got arrested.”

Top Coat shook his head sympathetically. “Possibly the young man was planning to use the loaned funds for some untoward reason,” he suggested.

“Whatever it was, he doesn’t have it. He will have to make arrangements with you to pay back the loan on time.”

Top Coat again shook his head, this time he sucked in his lips and squinted his steely eyes. “I am afraid our company just deals in short-term programs, Mr. Martin. With the interest rates our customers agree to, it would be much better to borrow the money from somewhere else, an uncle perhaps, and pay this debt first. Then make arrangements to pay back the relative or whomsoever.”

The way he emphasized paying him first caused Andy to miss the rest of what he said. No Neck Johnny had begun pulling apart a fresh loaf of bread while his boss negotiated payment with the Deli owner. Andy noticed that Johnny had tossed a twenty on the counter to cover the costs of his grazing. Andy decided that now was as good a time as any for him to speak. He tried and his voice cracked. His mouth was dry and he realized he hadn’t taken a breath for a while. He wasn’t used to this kind of drama.

“Wha... Excuse me,” he swallowed hard, “What, exactly, does the nephew owe? Do you have a copy of the contract?” Andy finally got it out. Mr. Martin looked at him, then back at Top Coat who was grinning with an ‘I should shoot you in the face’ look that caused the little wrinkles on the outsides of his eyes to arc down toward his cheeks. He tilted his head slightly while Andy spoke and then addressed Mr. Martin again. He slowly reached in to an inside jacket pocket causing both Andy and Mr. Martin to suck in a quick breath, Andy now wished he could have gone to the restroom before this started. Top Coat produced a letter envelope, the top of which was tucked under instead of sealed. He carefully opened the envelope and removed a folded piece of copy paper.

“Our contracts are quite simple,” Top Coat said as he stepped forward, very close to Andy and Mr. Martin who were now standing together by the cash register. “This,” he shook the paper in his hand as if cooling it, “is a copy of the contract. The original is at my office.”

He handed the paper to Mr. Martin who gave it to Andy, “I need my glasses.” Mr. Martin disappeared for a moment through the saloon doors and re-entered while they were still swinging; he reached for the paper again which he received from Andy. “What is all this, it’s just numbers.”

As patiently as he could, Top Coat explained the numbers to Mr. Martin. “This figure, the \$2000, is what young Mr. Martin borrowed from our firm. It was a short term loan due this past Monday as shown here by the hand written date, and the amount of 2500.”

“Wait a minute. Five hundred in interest for a three day loan?” Mr. Martin said.

“It was actually a five day term. But yes,” Top Coat confirmed. The rest of the numbers and dates you see are the amounts due if the loan becomes delinquent. There is a \$500 per day interest charge, billable each day, until the debt is cleared.” He said firmly and clearly.

“This is robbery. This is illegal. You can’t do this,” Mr. Martin looked over his glasses as if to inform the professional loan shark of something he didn’t know.

“It is a grey business, I’ll admit. But we did not force young Albert to sign the paper, which, as you see, he did. He came to us and I explained the terms as clearly as I am now, Johnny?” Top Coat said.

“Yeah boss, you were very clear. Clear as crystal.”

“Mr. Martin, I’ve been doing this a long time and I have many,

for the most part, very satisfied customers who pay a generous fee for the privilege of obtaining short term financing. It's a win-win, really. That is, until someone like young Mr. Martin decides that he doesn't have to meet his obligation," he said, his face visibly changing from pleasant to cold. "When that happens, we approach the persons that were given as references and try to work something out - before we take further action against our client." Top Coat had a way of making threats that was both intimidating and well spoken.

"According to this Albert owes you \$3500. Today?" Mr. Martin said in disbelief.

"And an even \$4000 tomorrow, yes, you are reading it correctly," Top Coat affirmed without apology. "You can see why it is usually better if the primary borrower find a solution to settle this debt by arranging terms with someone whose rates are not so, shall we say, aggressive," he said, the greedy smile returning.

"I'm not going to pay this," Mr. Martin announced. "This is my nephews debt, he's burned enough bridges with my family recently, I'm not bailing him out of this one."

Top Coats face curled in to a sorrowful frown. "I'm sorry to hear you say that Mr. Martin. I came here like a reasonable businessman, hoping to speak frankly with another mature, intelligent man. Hoping to make some kind of arrangement that would cause this debt to be remedied and young Albert to be released from the lien. And you say this." He shook his head and looked out the front windows as if thinking of how to break the following news. "You leave us no choice but to pursue further action against young Albert Martin."

"Good luck," Mr. Martin said, assuming Top Coat was referring to legal action.

"Oh, he will be the one who is in need of luck, Mr. Martin," Top Coat said coldly.

"But..." Mr. Martin began to say before being cut off by a raised hand.

"I need to tell you though, sir. That this debt will remain. And, it will continue to accrue interest. If young Albert accidentally falls out a window or steps in front of a train, while it would be sad and unfortunate, the fact will remain that he has an unpaid debt that must be collected, one way or another. That is our only concern. So, again, if young Albert demonstrates

a further unwillingness to pay, we will return to you. Unfortunately, if we have to come back here and revisit this issue our approach may become somewhat less congenial. Because, and I'm sure you appreciate this, we don't need the bad public relations that occurs when these things drag on and on. Our clients begin to think our terms are negotiable when, of course, they are not."

Johnny draped his boss's coat over an outstretched arm and the two walked to the door. Johnny motioned to the bill on the counter with a grunt. He held the door for his boss and the two walked out in to the night. Mr. Martin stared at the floor. This was getting progressively worse and Andy was afraid that the Deli owner would be the next one in the hospital with a nervous breakdown or a heart attack. Without saying a word Andy left Mr. Martin's side and followed the two loan sharks out the door. The dark Lincoln was parked down the street and the two men had just stepped up to the car, Johnny had walked to the passenger side to open the door for Top Coat.

"Hey, wait a minute," Andy called as he hiked up his jeans and walked over as fast as he could. He kept a hand in his pocket so the pants wouldn't get any ideas about heading south. As he approached, Johnny saw that his hand was buried in his jeans pocket, and returned the gesture by putting his meaty paw inside his coat jacket and held it there, ready to match any heat that Andy might reveal. Andy wanted to hold up his hands and show that he wasn't packing, but he was more afraid of his pants falling to his ankles at the moment than he was of being shot. Top Coat stepped to the back of the car as Andy approached.

"Thanks," Andy said, trying to catch his breath and figure out what in the world he was doing out here on the dark side street with two men who had just threatened his neighbor.

"How can I help you?" Top Coat said, absent his usual charm.

"Listen," Andy began. "I don't agree with your tactics. But, I admit, I've never, you know, I..."

"You have no idea what we do," Top Coat finished his sentence for him and was becoming impatient.

"Right, well, yeah... Anyway. What if," he hesitated and then thought, why not, what's the worst thing that can happen, they shoot me? "What if I pay the bill, you know? Not for Albert, he's a scumbag. But for the Martin's... Would they be clear? Would you guys leave them alone?"

Top Coat straightened up at the thought, “My friend,” he said with a return of his suave charm, “when the note is paid in full, we disappear. That is how the process works. We really don’t care who pays or where the money comes from.”

“Do you have a number where I can call you in the morning? I’ve got to check some things and go to the bank,” Andy said.

Top Coat removed a glove and took a business card out of his wallet. “So, we will meet tomorrow morning?”

“Right. I’ll call you and we’ll meet. And I’ll pay the debt and this whole thing will go away, agreed?”

Top Coat smiled cautiously, “We are still going to do our research and locate the whereabouts of young Mr. Martin. Just in case your benevolence does not materialize.” He assured Andy.

“Whatever, just be expecting my call tomorrow morning. Around 10:00 am,” Andy said. Top Coat shrugged and nodded his head as if agreeable. Andy turned back toward the Deli and walked back with his hand in his pocket to hold up his drawers. Top Coat called after him.

“Pardon me, Mr. Generous,” he said. Andy turned, he felt like the Sheriff that was turning to face the showdown with the evil gunslinger. Top Coat smiled, “If you are planning to bring the authorities to our morning rendezvous, I would strongly advise against it.” Andy hadn’t thought of that, but now that the bad guy mentioned it, it sounded like a pretty good idea. It must have shown on his face.

“Because,” Top Coat continued, “Such a scenario would not bode well for your friend there, or his family... I’m certain you understand my meaning.”

“I’ll be coming alone and bringing the money,” Andy said. “I keep my word. It will be up to you to keep yours.”

Top Coat nodded slightly with a tilt of his head and watched as the heavy man turned and scurried back to the deli, his right hand still buried deep in his pants pocket.

Mr. Martin was still standing at the counter. “Andy, what am I going to do? The boy has no money. So these guys bust him up, so what? He deserves it? Maybe. But...” Mr. Martin was at a loss.

“Mr. Martin. I’m going to pay the debt,” Andy said directly.

“You? No. No way. I won’t have it.”

“I’m serious. I don’t want to see you hurt and I don’t want you to have to deal with this mess. You’re right; your nephew won’t pay them. They’ll find him and they’ll hurt him, or worse, and you’ll still be involved. I pay them and they go away.”

“I don’t know Andy, I couldn’t ask you...”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. No strings. It’s not a loan. I want to do it.”

Mr. Martin shook his head; his puffy grey eyes were moist. He looked at his watch, “My Maria. She is waiting.”

“I’ll drive you, I wanted to see her,” Andy said.

“My friend... Okay. You get the car, I will make dinner for us all.”

Andy smiled and left the deli. He felt like he had done some good for once in his life, but at this point it was just a commitment, he hadn’t really done anything yet. He was starving and hoped Mr. Martin was making something really good, “A lot of something really good,” he corrected himself.

Chapter 17

After waking up every hour on the hour since 3:00 am, he finally got up for good a few minutes after 8:00 am. A hundred scenarios had been sent forward for consideration; some involving the police, others requiring the stealthy bravado of Rance Broadback, and all of which, now that he was wide awake, seemed pretty stupid in real life. He would keep it simple; go to the bank and withdraw \$4000 dollars from his savings, which he would give to total strangers, in order to cover the debt of a bottom dwelling termite that he had never met. The real joy was knowing that the brainless twit would probably do something equally moronic before his next birthday. But Andy wasn't doing this for the sweaty punk in the red warm-up jacket. This gift was for Albert and Maria Martin (pronounced Marteen.) In the heart of a heartless city he had the chance to help some people that really needed it but would never ask. It felt pretty good, which was a new sensation for the self-absorbed guy from the sunken place.

He had time to download some thoughts before starting the mission, so he opened a new blog entry.

Andy's Weblog - November 8th

Epiphany

I always thought Epiphany was a religious term, something about

the three wise men returning home to tell their people about finding the Christ-child or some such tale. I see it on the calendar in the fine blue type every January sometime before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which, to me, is kind of the same thing.

Early this morning, as I tried in vain to get some sleep, I experienced an epiphany in a new way, new for me at least. I had an epiphany in the sense of discovering the reality or essential meaning of something. That is, it dawned on me that one of the situations I am going through right now, while uncomfortable and a little frightening, is part of the fabric of what life is supposed to be about. Specifically, I had an opportunity to step outside my personal space, that wonderful insulated comfort zone of my admittedly narcissistic life. And here's what I found...

Life might not be all about me. Ta-Dah... Is that a mind-blower, or what? Now, this might not be news to you Mother Theresa-types out there, but for a guy that spends most his day thinking about what a goof he is and the rest of the day thinking about what's for supper, this was big news. I was in a certain situation and an opportunity presented itself to help someone, and, without considering the highly stressful, uncomfortable, expensive cost to myself, I just stepped up to help. Weird and not my usual response-- trust me.

But what I discovered, after my mouth committed to something that my brain didn't approve ahead of time, was, that it felt really good. It was liberating, in a strange way, to put all my self indulgence aside for a moment and do something that would not benefit me in any way, shape or form - it was all for the other person.

Now, I don't know if I could do it everyday, as a matter of fact I'm freaking out at the prospect of actually going through it today, but I know this much; stepping up to help in a selfless way was one of the best feelings I've had in a long time. I think it was finally a "good choice" that really mattered.

Still a slow learner - Andy

As he considered the weight of what he was feeling, he pulled on his jacket and left the house for the bank. He wasn't sure why he was feeling good; he was about to give away a big chunk of his savings. "Rance Broadback put himself in harms way more than once to get you

that dough,” he thought. Then he thought about all the people who had purchased a book, they probably never thought about what happened to the twenty bucks after they plunked it down for the hard cover copy. They just wanted the story. They didn’t care that some of it would trickle down to the author who would use it to keep the Keebler Elves fat and sassy, or who would, on one occasion; use it to actually help a friend in need. The realization caused Andy to feel an uncomfortable level of responsibility to his readers, not just to provide a good story, but also to be a good steward. “That’s going a little too far,” he imagined. “They don’t care what I do with the money.” His conscience, in full dialogue now, countered, “Sure they don’t care, but when you do good things, you invite them to share in something that has more significance than another bag of Doritos.”

“This is too deep,” Andy said out loud as he stepped up to the door of his bank. “It just is what it is, don’t make something more out of it... I hate it when I do that,” he whispered.

He finished his transaction and stepped back out to the sidewalk, he pulled out the card he’d received from the scary Top Coat guy, and dialed the number on the card quickly, before he could talk himself out of it.

“Yeah?” came the gruff voice, answering on the third ring.

“Hi, uh, this is Andy. I, uh, is this Allied Financial? We’re supposed to meet about the, uh, the Marteen thing.” He sounded like a squirrel.

“The who?” Johnny wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. He covered the phone and spoke to his boss. “We s’pose to meet someone about a marten-thing?”

“Martin,” Andy said loudly, realizing No Neck didn’t recognize the pronunciation. “Albert Martin,” he said again.

“Do you mean Martin?” Johnny said into the receiver.

“Yes, Albert Martin,” Andy said. “Man this guy is thick,” he didn’t say.

“Oh, yeah, sure. You’re early. That’s good, right?”

“So, where do we do this?”

“We’re on Filbert, just off Hyde. Here’s the address,” Johnny gave Andy the numbers which, conveniently, were not printed on the card; giving Andy the idea that this was probably a pretty mobile operation. “Just come up the stairs, we’re on the second floor, can’t miss it.”

“It’ll be about twenty minutes,” Andy cautioned.

“Uh huh,” No Neck murmured and snapped the phone shut.

Andy took his car and parked around the block from the address. He hardly noticed the tantalizing scents of the freshly baked breads in the shop on the first floor as he focused nervously on his task.

Top Coat encouraged Andy to sit while his associate counted out forty crisp one hundred dollar bills. Their guest was somewhat surprised that the oaf could count that high, but he seemed to manage, licking his bulbous thumb and peeling off each bill until there were four neat little stacks. Top Coat just sat looking at Andy with that little smile that, to Andy, suggested, “I’m happy you’re paying off, but I would have rather slit the little drug dealers throat.” Andy tried not to tele-communicate what he was feeling, which was, “I’m not so sure you shouldn’t anyway.”

“It’s all here,” Johnny announced, placing the bills back in the bank envelope and retrieving a small bottle of hand sanitizer from his coat pocket. He squirted a puddle into one of his hands and, before he sat the little bottle down, noticed Andy was watching. So he offered their guest a squirt, “You want some? Money’s got germs. Lot’s of ‘em.” Andy shook his head and tried to pull his eyes away from the quirky oaf as the giant began lathering his mitts like a surgeon.

Top Coat leaned forward in his squeaky chair and opened the lone file folder on his desk. In it was one slip of adding machine tape stapled to a piece of copy paper. He made sort of a show of picking up “the contract” as he called it, and handed it to Andy.

“Can you confirm, my friend, that this is the contract that we reviewed last evening?”

Andy took the paper. It was the adding machine tape that showed the loan amount and the ungodly interest schedule. At the bottom was Albert Martin’s nervous signature. On the copy paper Albert had filled in a few blanks that included the Martin’s Deli and his own, former, address. Andy passed the “contract” across the desk.

Top Coat motioned for him to step behind the desk. Against the wall was a wastebasket with a portable paper shredder attached to the top. The shredder was plugged in below the adding machine, the only other electric appliance in the room, as far as Andy could see. Top Coat folded

the contract paper and adding tape in half so it would fit in the mouth of the cheap shredder. He pushed a button and the shredder proceeded to eat the tape and drop thin strips in to the empty can. Top Coat looked up with his patented grin and rubbed his hands together like he had just finished a good meal. "All done... It has been a pleasure doing business," he said without extending his hand.

"That's it?" Andy said. "No receipt or anything?"

"None needed," Top Coat assured him. "This is how we work. Our record system is very lean. You can go and assure your good friend that he is no longer under obligation."

"And the boy?"

"If he ever needs a loan, have him give us a call," Top Coat smiled, larger this time exposing small, sharp teeth, giving Andy a chill and causing goose-pimples to jump up on his arms and neck. He walked to the door and left without another word alternately rubbing his arms to kick-start some blood flow.

"If I never see those guys again it will be too soon," he thought as he descended the stairs. The smell of pastries and fresh bread caught his attention on the way out of the building and he bought a sourdough round a bear claw and a loaf of cheese bread. The cheese bread and half of the sourdough made it all the way home.

He stopped by Martin's before garaging the car to let Mr. Martin know that the deal was done. Mr. Martin promised to repay him somehow, which Andy deflected, saying he would have done the same thing for him if the situation had been reversed, which he would have, although, to Andy, that was just what people in the movies said in times like this. He left the Deli and drove through a greasy spoon diner called Tony's over on Lombard and circled back to his place with a to-go sack of fried goodness to go with what was left of the fresh bread. "Two steps forward, one step back," he admitted. "Time to work," he thought as he ascended his stairs.

Appalachian Malady - 6

Reversing the evenings geographical course, Broadback flew back to Knoxville, took 1-75 north to the proposed highway 66, drove west to I-65 and then north back to Louisville. He stopped at the airport and exchanged his rental car for a different color, a white one this time, in case anyone from the Rose Park area was looking him, which he didn't really expect, and arrived back at the 21-c a little after 8:30 am. He showered and got in to bed for a nap before his meeting/date with Dr. Sophia Garza. He couldn't help thinking that something had passed between them that was deeper than he would normally allow on a case. He would have to be extremely careful. "Think with your brain, Ran," he reminded himself as he set the alarm on his watch.

Dr. Garza spent part of the morning in her clinic examining the front legs of a horse that had ran at Churchill the previous day. The animal had a slight limp, which alerted its trainer to bring her to Dr. Garza immediately. These horses were worth their weight in gold and if a trainer allowed an injury to slip by on his watch, it would mean the quick end of a job. The doctor put a concoction of ointment on the leg where she noticed a slight swelling and then wrapped it gently with a bandage. She pet and scratched the horse playfully then gave her report to the trainer who took his charge back to the stable. Sophia then went out to one of the practice tracks where she was to meet her father and a horse manager and check the progress on a filly that had been under her care for the past few weeks. The horse looked to Dr. Garza as if she was nearly back to 100% and she signed off on the animal's health for the anxious and thankful manager. She had a quick coffee with her father, they rarely crossed paths during the course of a day, and made it back to her office by 10:00 am where her assistant had several messages waiting including one from James Rafferty.

"Rafferty." He answered on the first ring.

"James, you called," she said with her rich accent

that was unintentionally sensual.

"Sophia, yeah. I need you to come up to the track this afternoon."

"Uh," she began.

"Is there a problem?"

"Mm, no, of course not. What time?"

"Maybe 1:30, 2:00 o'clock, something like that. There's a filly I'd like you to see. Need a second opinion."

"I'll be there."

"Meet me down on the field level. 8th race on the card."

"Okay."

"Hey, you okay?" he said.

"Sure, fine. I'll see you in a few hours," she said and hung up the phone.

She stepped back in to the reception area of their small office near the paddock of one of the larger stables and spoke to her assistant. "I'm going to Churchill to meet Mr. Rafferty, I won't be back till late. If there are any needs call my cell or send them to my father." She checked her watch again and took off her lab coat and stethoscope and hung them both on the back of her door. She got her purse and keys from her desk drawer and left out the back. Her Acura MDX was parked in the gravel just outside her door. She opened the trunk lid and traded shoes, exchanging the well-worn Nikes she wore around the farm with a pair of Fendi Ballerina flats that she thought went well with her jeans. Her only other upgrade from her normal office attire was an heirloom pearl necklace that she draped over her head and tucked inside her red polo. She loosed her hair from the scrunchy that kept it out of her eyes and away from the horses, and shook it, letting it fall like strands of black silk down her back and shoulders. The rear tires of the MDX spit gravel as she nudged the accelerator more firmly than usual, excited about her lunch appointment with the handsome Spanish man she couldn't get out of her mind.

They met in the artsy lobby of the 21-c. Pena/

Broadback spotted her as she pulled in to the valet parking area near the entrance. She walked with a confident gait that was more business executive than runway model. Pena/Broadback was captivated by her exotic sophistication. She didn't look like a typical doctor, or a typical anything, as far as he could tell. She was different. Refreshingly different. And he hoped, with every fiber of his being, that she wasn't wrapped up in the puzzle he was slowly piecing together.

"Dr. Garza," he called, standing from his seat in one of the Queen Anne chairs that graced the elegant lobby. She turned and saw Michael Pena and smiled. She remembered correctly, he was classically handsome. Michael/Rance noticed her take a deep pleasant breath as she pivoted and came to him. Her smile eclipsed the light from lobby's 19th century Tiffany chandelier.

She extended her hand, "Mr. Pena," she said, the smile never leaving her face. He received her hand and drew her close, kissing her soft brown cheek.

"It's Michael," he reminded her.

The bitter stench of a cheap cigarette woke John Sanchez up just before dawn. He silently adjusted his body position to get a better view of the perimeter of his camp in order to spot whoever it was that was walking around out here this early in the morning. The next thing he saw was the light from two flashlights that were sweeping the forest floor in the pre-dawn light. They were an eighth mile away and headed his direction. If these were hunters, the cigarettes guaranteed failure. Sanchez adjusted a pine branch at the front of his lean-to and decided to let them come to him. As they neared his camp he could see in the afterglow of their lights that they were dressed in camo, much like he was, and were carrying weapons. But unlike his deer rifle, these two were packing fully automatic Bushmaster M4's, which made Sanchez think they were probably hunting a different kind of animal, one that might shoot back. The two eagle-eyed guards passed fifteen meters south of his camp and never even looked his way as they continued smoking and talking about the NASCAR championships.

Sanchez shimmied out of his lean-to and quietly followed the guards, careful to maintain separation and taking advantage of the dense foliage. Other than pausing to light another smoke, the two walked non-stop for ninety minutes. After covering a distance that John Sanchez determined was nearly three miles from his camp the men reached a fire road that blocked vehicle passage with a six inch steel beam that extended from side to side and was anchored to thick concrete standards. One of the guards shook the big chain and padlock that was wrapped around the gate and then leaned up against the big slab of concrete while his partner hopped up on the bar and sat, lighting another smoke. The two men were either waiting for something or taking a break. Sanchez pulled some cover around him, shielding him from view on all sides, and hunkered down to wait with them.

Tami Beatty was up with the sparrows, as her mother used to say, tapping away at the keyboard of her computer at quarter after five in the morning. Part of her wished she would have spent the night with Rance Broadback and woke up in the master suite of that big southern mansion they were talking about over dinner. But she knew it wasn't time for that, not right now anyway. And he knew it as well. Knowing that their feelings for one another were somewhat the same would have to be enough for now.

She began by researching Senator Phyllis Lecter; third term Senator from the Hoosier State, mother of three, married to a seed farmer, deep roots in the south... Ranking member of the Federal Transportation Committee, blah, blah, blah. Tami was scanning documents, briefs, news articles and anything she could find with a picture or a story. Mrs. Lecter had family in Kentucky, but as for anything remotely shady, Tami was striking out. The only thing anywhere near controversial was an amendment she stuck in to a bill that impacted the route of a new federal highway. It looked like, in the eleventh hour, she inserted a provision in to her own legislation that called for a road to be re-routed from its projected path. There was nothing particularly strange about

this, although re-routing the new interstate 66 was going to cost hundreds of millions more, since it had to be cut right through the protected forest land of the Appalachian range. And, changing the route effectively bypassed Indiana, her home state, diverting the freeway instead through the mountains of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, right through the pristine forests of Appalachia.

Tami reminisced about growing up in Kentucky and spending a summer or two at camp in the eastern part of the state. The rolling mountains of the Appalachian range were as beautiful as they were daunting. The majestic, undeveloped forests rivaled the plains of the Dakotas and Big Sky country out west in terms of sheer geography. It was sad to think of all the ancient hardwoods that would be destroyed, trees that were standing when Daniel Boone walked across the land. She thought about an angle for a story on destroying the natural heritage of the Appalachians, but guided her mind back to the task of finding out why Senator Hagin had killed himself, or, been murdered.

She looked up from the screen and considered the financial impact of a new interstate. "Cutting a federal highway through southern Indiana would bring in billions in development over the years. She's taking millions out of her own state economy," Tami thought. "That's more than just weird." Scanning further in to the issue, it appeared that Senator Lecter justified the change to her constituency with some kind of Farmland Protection Measure. Quoting her husband and a dozen or so other rural Indiana farmers, not all progress was good progress, and it was incumbent upon her and the people of the great state to protect their farming heritage from becoming another "asphalt corn field" like Central California. "That's fine," Beatty thought, "so why did she propose the highway come through her state in the first place?" She found a written transcript of Senator Lecter's defense of her amendment on the Senate floor where she partnered with Senator Hagin to "cross the political aisle with the goal of enhancing the economy of the depressed Appalachian region with The Road that Leads to Jobs."

"Okay," Tami said out loud, "politician-speak,

but not dastardly..." She closed Firefox and briefly thought about calling Rance, "Mmm, wait till you have something solid, sister," she murmured to herself.

"Michael," Sophia Garza began as the server delivered water and menus at a little restaurant a few blocks from Pena's hotel. "Thank you for agreeing to see me again."

"Are you kidding? You just beat me to the phone. As I said, you are all I've been thinking of."

"You are kind," she finally said, before sipping at the edge of her water glass. Silence passed between them as she pondered what prompted her to ask a stranger out to lunch. Michael/Rance studied her face like an art student might study the Mona Lisa. "What is it?" she finally said feeling his gaze like warm breath on her neck.

"You are a beautiful, surprising woman," he said.

"Thank you... I think."

He laughed, "Think about my weekend. I fly out to scout commercial property and spend a few days in a rental car. Boring. Typical business trip. Next thing I know I'm having drinks in a home that makes my fathers hacienda in Spain look like a rented shack. Then, as if that weren't enough, I am asked to lunch by a stunning Venezuelan doctor... You don't know me very well, Sophia Garza, but I assure you, my life is not this interesting."

The fact was that Michael Pena, the real Michael Pena, was a middle-aged homebody. He was the perfect cover for Rance Broadback mostly because he had no life. A high school friend of Rance, Michael did run a company for his Spanish father, and he did have a nice little niche running containers out of the Oakland California shipyard, and he also, conveniently, was approximately the same height and weight of his old football teammate. Rance ran in to Michael at a high school reunion and, after doing a thorough background check, made an appointment to see his old friend. Rance explained that he was a private investigator, usually

government work, nothing too spooky, but that once in a while his work required a different identity. The circles he ran in were much too sophisticated for him to acquire the identity of someone who was deceased, or create an identity, so he needed to assume the identity of a real person. Someone who, at a moments notice, could take a few weeks off from whatever they were doing, and take a vacation.

Michael was the perfect candidate. After the set of fabricated identification was complete, Michael knew that some day he might receive a phone call from Rance that triggered a rapid set of events. He would call his office, explain that he was taking a trip; he was not permitted to say the destination, only that he would touch base regularly. He was then to proceed, by car, to a cabin in the Mt. Shasta area that Rance owned and kept ready as a safe house, where he would stay until further notice. If he hadn't heard from Rance within two weeks it meant that something was wrong. Worst case scenario would be that Michael Pena would open a newspaper to find that Michael Pena had died, a scenario that, while unlikely, triggered a contingency plan which placed him in a federal protection program. It sounded exciting to Pena who was, at this very minute, cleaning his morning catch at the cabin in Lake Shasta.

Rance had several contingency identities, which were never used more than once, their rightful owners being generously compensated for the favor.

"Interesting?" Sophia asked.

"I work in an office, I live by myself, and my family is, for the most part, in Spain. I'm a loner. I rented the suite at Churchill because; I like nice things, yes, but also because I don't like crowds... I have no earthly idea what Mr. Rafferty might have thought he saw in me."

Sophia was visibly puzzled. "Do I disappoint you?" Pena/Broadback asked. Rance was trying to discover her motives as well as discover what she might know or suspect about her boss. Vulnerability could be a great tool, although he wasn't sure it would work on someone as self-assured as Dr. Sophia Garza.

"No. Not at all. I am curious, I guess. James is very intelligent. I would say, extremely intelligent. I

wouldn't be surprised if he knew something about you, maybe something you do not even realize, that drew him to you."

"That sounds a little intimidating," Pena/Broadback said, sounding surprised.

"I'm not kidding. James could have easily ran some kind of background check on you before you even met, in fact, I'll bet he did."

"Really..." Rance said and gave a little shiver suggesting he was playing out of his level. "I've never heard of such a thing," he said.

Sophia leaned in, she felt responsible to at least warn this colt about the pasture he was grazing in. "Michael, I'm curious, what is your business? James said something about freight, or shipping or something."

"That's basically it. I haul containers to and from the docks. It's a pretty simple operation."

"And you want to expand out here? Why?"

Michael/Rance explained the same logic to Sophia that he described in the smoking room. He figured if she was working him for information on their behalf, he would offer little more to the story than they already knew. "That highway will open up shipping lanes between Florida, Alabama and the Great Lakes. I know there are a ton of outfits that will want that business, but I want to tie up as much business as I can long before the project is ever completed."

"It's a long way from Oakland, California," she said.

"Our advantage is the water. See, with my fathers company running freighters back and forth to Europe, we have a built in advantage for companies that want to export." Rance was hesitant in dangling the hook in front of her in a way that was any more obvious, but he decided to take a chance and just give it a little tug. He said, "I guess if Mr. Rafferty had a product he wanted to export, or at the very least transport north and south across the new interstate, I might be a good contact. I don't know." He let that hang, studying Sophia's face for a tell. She nodded, her face straight and close to expressionless.

"I don't know why I am saying this, Michael, but..." she paused before adding, "be careful. Okay?"

His eyebrows narrowed and he tilted his head slightly, this was an open door. "Be careful?"

"They are smart and they don't always play by the rules, okay? I don't know much about Mr. Rafferty outside the farm, but I know he is very connected, both politically and in other ways."

"Other ways?" he inquired.

"I don't know-- it's just that some of the people that come to the farm are scary. They seem different somehow. Rafferty calls them "investors," she said. Her mind was honing in on something specific and it was written all over her caring face.

"What is it?" he asked, touching her wrist gently.

"A few months ago James asked me to escort a man to the farm from the Lexington airport. Similar situation, I said sure. But this guy is strange. Tall, thin, dark suit, dark glasses... Rafferty said he was a key investor. He was weird. I felt very uncomfortable around him. Williams, I think his name was. Anyway, this is the type of people, you know?"

Rance just nodded sympathetically, thinking, "Tall, thin, weird guy named Williams? Couldn't be..."

"And he came back again, too, to meet with the others. But I won't escort him anymore-- James knows that. He gave me the creeps."

"If it's the Williams I know," Rance thought to himself, "he gives me the creeps, too." He finally asked, "Who are these Investors?"

"Mostly the people you met at the party. There's Rafferty, Prate, this Williams guy, I guess. Uh, Senator Lecter, Welsh, and that devil, McCoy... Have you met him yet?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You would remember," she said.

"Hmm," Rance felt the need to change the direction of the conversation in order to keep her from pushing away. "I'll be careful. Thank you. You didn't have to tell me any of that."

"I know," she shook her head and smiled, "I just feel, I don't know..." she considered what she was thinking before speaking. "I just like you, I guess," she laughed at her admission, "Okay, I'll admit it, I

like you. I'm attracted to you."

"That's something else that never happens to me, Sophia, trust me. Is it my boyish charm?" Michael/Rance grinned and turned his head in a way that a model might when advertising a clean shave.

"That's it. That and the fact that most of the men I'm introduced to are nearly a foot shorter than me," she laughed referring to the jockeys around the farm, "I never get to wear my pumps out on dates." They both broke up over the image.

Andy stood from his desk and stretched his arms toward the ceiling, arching and groaning he could hear his back cracking like a bowl of Rice Krispies. "I should start a walking regimen," he said, and then chuckled out loud, picturing himself in spandex and a sweatband. It was a strange dynamic, though, that he had to admit about his body. When he did a little physical exercise, he felt great, he could just about feel the blood course happily through his veins. Then, when he was a sloth, which was far more often, he felt lousy and sick much of the time. "My body kind of acts like milk sitting in the refrigerator. If I'm using it, sloshing it around and pouring it, it stays pretty fresh. But if I let it sit there, it sours and becomes a stagnant science project," he thought. The unrelated idea of the refrigerator flipped a familiar switch and Andy walked to the kitchen to look in the big white box. He extracted a bottle of Gatorade and went to the living room window. The shades were open and Andy could feel the coldness of the glass as he drew near. The day had vanished while he was fastened to his office chair and the foggy mid-week evening had effectively chased everyone from the streets. It was 7:30 pm, but it felt like midnight.

He felt antsy, so he pulled on a sweater and windbreaker, a scarf and knit cap, and stepped out in to the brisk November air for a little walk. He thought about Debbie Williams as he walked. He considered walking all the way to the Daily Grind, where they would meet on Saturday morning, but reconsidered when blasted with a cold pacific ocean wind at the cross street. He adjusted his route and walked, instead, to the local Starbucks, which was about half full of people somewhat like himself. Locals who emerged after the commuters had gone for the day. People of the lofts,

apartments and condos tucked in and around the businesses of the city. Several of the twenty-something's clicked away on laptop computers working on graphic design, spreadsheets or the great American novel. Andy remembered working like this, plugging his old black Powerbook in to a wall socket at Pete's Coffee and tapping away, saving his work to floppy disk and lugging the eight pound rig back to his dorm room after three or four hours of inspiration. After receiving his grande mocha, he landed a well worn velvety green chair that wasn't all that different from the oversized set-up back at his place. It was a relaxing perch from which to think, listen, people-watch and spend part of an evening. This was therapy. He allowed his eyes to close and held the mug close to his chin, inhaling and enjoying the close of an unusual day.

Chapter 18

“**B**ig’n!”

“Hey Will.”

“Hey Andy, listen, it’s been about a week since we talked. Just thought I’d make a quick call and see how it’s going. Their pushing me for a draft or something, you know.”

“Yeah, I appreciate where you’re at. Look, the best I could do, right now, is send you a few chapters. I’d rather not though; it would be better if they can wait till the whole draft is complete. I’m sure you agree.”

“Oh, absolutely, absolutely. How far along, if you had to guess, is the story? Any ideas? Have you rounded the turn for the home stretch?”

“Funny you should use that image.”

“What?”

“Oh nothing, I’m just using horse racing as a back drop in the story.”

“So...”

“I should have a draft ready pretty soon, I guess. It’s coming a little faster than I expected.”

“Andrew Boyd, that is music to my ears.”

“No promises, you know. I’ve got till the end of the month.”

“Oh, absolutely. I know. But every day we come in under deadline

probably adds a year to my life. I know you don't feel petty feelings like stress, but your agent does, trust me."

"You're funny, Will. Look, I'll do my best. Talk to you later, huh?"

Andy took a quick shower and put his iBook in its carrying case and walked the eight blocks over to Starbucks. He decided a change of scenery might do him a little good. The writers he had spotted there last evening had given him a little inspiration. Friday mornings were always a little sparse, in terms of foot traffic heading toward downtown. It seemed like there were fewer people stepping off the buses, less portable 'full' signs sitting in front of the parking structures, and plenty of room to sit on the trolleys at every stop. Andy's theory was that people were working less. More people seemed to be taking Friday's off and some of those were even staying home to telecommute on Mondays as well, effectively making a three-day work week. Andy, on the other hand, worked seven days a week, and some days he even managed to get something accomplished.

Starbucks, as he had hoped, was quiet. He thought he recognized a few of the same people who had been here last night, tapping away on their laptops. He ordered a ceramic mug of coffee and an apple fritter and found a table for two that was vacant. As he settled in and allowed the sugar and caffeine to kick in, he opened a hot-spot connection and made a new blog entry.

Andy's Weblog - November 9th

Working through the Weirdness

Yesterday was surreal. As a matter of fact, the entire week has been odd. And the interesting thing is, that while my days and nights have felt like a ride on the big wooden roller coaster at the Boardwalk, the hours I've spent working have been doubly productive. I don't know why. I guess it's just working through the weirdness. I haven't always been able to do that. If my world tilted and spun even one degree out of kilter, I would implode. My life depends on routine and familiarity.

Maybe I'm maturing and becoming able to separate work from life. I doubt it... Andy

Instead of posting the blog, Andy just sat there and stared at it. The cursor at the end of the last sentence flashed like a metronome inviting him to daydream in perfect rhythm. He thought about his week. There had been some close calls at home in relation to his decision to loose weight. The depression and destructive thoughts had pushed him to do some impulsive, empty-headed things, throwing away all his food, for one. He shook his head as he thought about it. And the Martins, what was he thinking getting involved in that whole mess. He should have ordered his food to go, encouraged the old couple to call the police and kept his fat butt out of it. He still couldn't believe he actually met with those thugs and paid the debt for that scrawny looser nephew of the Martin's, he didn't care about that kid, and the kid sure didn't care about him. But, he had to admit, helping someone felt pretty good. It felt like a spigot was turned on releasing a cool flow of life in to his heart. Then there was his mother and Marg and that whole revival deal. Janice Boyd, religious? A Jesus freak? Double-weird.

His mom was the original independent woman; he couldn't imagine her following God. The images that conjured up in his mind were the stuff of nightmares. He had no idea where it might lead, if anywhere. He had to admit, though, that she seemed really happy and, more than that, at peace, which was a feeling her son had never experienced. The conflict in Andy's life was constant and exhausting. And the most unexpected thing about his mother's epiphany, or whatever it was, was that she wasn't trying to force it on him. He always thought that was the whole point of the religious game.

Then there was the whole thing with Debbie Williams, which had to be the strangest part of a really strange week. Had a woman; a pretty, articulate, intelligent young woman actually called him and invited him out for coffee? That one still had him flat-footed. "I'm still the same goon I was last week, nothing changed... She just doesn't know it yet," Andy assured himself with a sip of coffee that once Debbie Williams got a whiff of the real Andrew Boyd, big-time writer, and the novelty wore off, she would head for cover faster than a scared clown fish. He polished off the fritter and wiped his sticky hands. He thought for a moment about carrying

one of those disposable hand sanitizer bottles around like the big no-neck guy at Allied Financial. "That wasn't a bad idea," he thought.

Appalachian Malady - 7

"Beatty,"

"Hey Spin,"

"Hi. I didn't recognize the number, thought you might be a prank caller," she said playfully.

"No such luck. How's it coming?"

"Nothing worth writing about yet."

"Listen, this is moving into some dangerous territory. Do you want to keep playing, or are you ready to take your ball and go home."

"Are you kidding? If you've got another lead, sweetie, give."

"I'm serious."

"Let's have it."

"Look for a connection between Lecter and A.D. Ken Williams.

"What am I looking for?" she asked.

"Anything, really. Do they know each other, ever take meetings together, travel, anything that catches your attention."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Nope, gotta go. See you soon," Rance said and ended the call.

John Sanchez held cover, watching his perimeter and keeping an eye on the two deer hunter/armed guards, as they sat and smoked on and around the fire road gate. Another pair that strolled in from the opposite side of the gate eventually joined the two. Sanchez couldn't tell what they were saying from the distance of his post, but it looked like the first guys were razzing the others for being late or something. Other than smoking, one of the two in the second pair was holding a plastic coffee mug and wore a back pack along with his assault rifle. Fifteen minutes after the second pair of guards

arrived, the first of a convoy of eight trucks approached the gate from the west. It was a two-axle Freightliner day cab hauling an orange 20' container, the kind you might see stacked on a ocean freighter or riding two-up on a slow moving train that you cursed from behind a flashing railroad crossing. Coffee cup jumped on to the step on the truck by the driver's side window and said something to the driver while one of the other guards fussed with unlocking the gate. He removed the heavy chain and lock while the two other guards swung open the heavy bar which either needed lubrication or it was, in fact, really heavy. They pushed against it like oxen till it heaved open wide enough the rig to fit through. Coffee cup pulled a piece of paper and pen out of the back pack and walked around the container and cab, apparently checking numbers before tapping the door of the cab and signaling the driver through. The process was reenacted for each of the eight trucks.

After each truck had cleared the gate they proceeded east bound down the fire road, around a corner and out of sight. Sanchez could hear the whine of the big diesel motors for a few minutes and realized that, with the echo of these mountain canyons, he was probably just hearing where the trucks had been, rather than where they were. After the guards had secured the gate they appeared to make a little small talk before each pair split off and headed back the way they came, which, for John Sanchez, meant the two he had followed were going to be making their way directly back toward him.

He checked his cover, improved it with an extra fallen branch, and lay like a snake on the forest floor as they approached. As he watched them walk back up the hill, he projected their current path to bring them very close to his lair; in fact, the guard on the high side may actually step on him if he kept his path. The guards were smoking and talking, not really looking around much, making sure their footfalls were sound walking across the side of the leaf-covered mountain face. When they got within fifteen meters, John was certain that they would walk right over his position. With one hand he slowly lifted the sheath of his buck hunting knife and positioned his hand around the handle

for a quick strike. He didn't remove the knife for fear the reflection of the case hardened steel would draw attention. At the same time, with his other hand, he rummaged around the ground, quietly and slowly, until he felt the hard, round casing of an acorn.

The two guards were close enough now that he could hear their thick southern accents, probably ten meters away. Carefully, he moved his hand to the edge of cover and watched the eyes of the guards, when they appeared to be diverted, he flicked the acorn with his thumb and middle finger across and away from his hiding spot where it hit a tree and rolled down in to the leaves. It was enough sound, in the silence of the forest, to draw the attention of the guards who tensed up and drew their weapons, looking around and back down where they had come from. Sanchez realized his tactic might have been a mistake as the two rednecks froze in their positions and grew silent. Though young, these men were probably seasoned hunters and had the ability to blend in to these mountains and pounce like a lion on some unsuspecting animal.

"See anything?"

"Shut up!" The men looked around, focusing down the hill in the direction of the sound. They were too far away for Sanchez to get a drop on them, and they hadn't moved in the direction of the sound, as he had hoped, only froze in their tracks, which meant that they may continue the path after they were sure nothing was out there. He reached for another acorn and moved his hand back near the edge of cover.

Finally, after what, to John Sanchez, had been an eternal thirty seconds, the guard that had been walking right towards him, pivoted and walked down hill three or four meters. The other guard didn't move till the first one said, "C'mon." They stopped again at about ten meters, now fifteen meters south west of Sanchez, still very close, and froze again.

"It was probably just a snake."

"I hate snakes," the chain-smoking guard said behind his raised weapon. The other guard put his hand on the barrel and pushed it down.

"Don't be an ass. Buddy will skin you alive if you go shooting up the damn forest with that gun."

"Buddy ain't here."

"The sound carries. God you're an idiot. C'mon, it was nothing." The first guard turned and started back up the hill on an angle that would take him just past Sanchez as he made a V, back to his familiar path. Sanchez cursed himself for not moving further from the path, he should have expected the knuckleheads to return at some point. Now that they were both past him, he hoped that he didn't leave any clues on the path that would show them that they had been followed. "Rance should get trained spooks to do this job with him," he thought. "I'm out of my league." He wasn't, of course, Rance had recruited Sanchez precisely because of his particular intellect and skill set. Rance knew John would avoid violence if possible, that he was smarter than most of the people he would come in contact with, and, that if superior intellect didn't work, he would at least be resourceful enough to hold his own in a fight. This time his tactic worked, but it also revealed some bad planning on his part.

Sanchez slowly pivoted from his position of cover and watched the guards as they continued north toward his camp. The chain-smoking snake hater turned around regularly and walked a few steps backward, glancing back to where they had heard the noise. John stayed in cover until they were nearly out of sight and then made his way slowly behind them, straining to keep them in sight. He followed them for half a kilometer, making sure they were retracing their steps. Then he stopped, turned back, and carefully navigated his way to the fire road gate where the trucks had passed through. He scanned the rough gravel road in both directions from the locked gate, and then began walking west along the road. He decided to climb the northern face of the hill in case another convoy or scouts were on the road. From the higher perch he made slower progress, but was pretty well out of immediate visual range of someone driving a rig.

After a kilometer of walking, he retrieved his GPR unit and began scanning the forest floor. He began picking up a signal at the two-kilometer point. He marked the spot with a twig that he snapped into a right angle on the top and shoved in the ground marking

the southeastern corner of something underground. The signal stayed strong as he continued along the hill face. The forest was quiet for another fifty meters when he began hearing a murmur of voices. Sound could carry for miles down the valleys and hollers of the forest, but he was certain that he was heading in the direction of the sound. He climbed higher on the side of the hill and slowed his pace. The GPR unit was still flashing although the sound was off, so he didn't announce his presence to whatever party he was approaching. He whispered to himself, "I'm John Garcia, a contractor from California visiting my cousin in Tennessee. I'm hunting Turkey... Easy," he thought, "an idiot wandering around in a forest full of guys with automatic weapons, while hunting turkey - a turkey hunting turkey."

Andy looked up for the first time in over two hours; he had to allow his mind time to catch up with his eyes. His face was blank and a part of him was still in the tick infested Daniel Boone National Forest with John Garcia, aka John Sanchez. The itch of chiggers on his skin felt more real than the sights and smells of the San Francisco coffee bar he was sitting in. He slowly brought a cold cup of coffee to his lips, the bitter taste of which shocked him quickly back in to reality. "Grrrh," he shuddered. He clicked save on his document file and sat the computer down on a side table. Andy stood and hiked up his jeans before stepping to the quiet counter for a refill. Fifty cents later he was back in his chair sipping hot joe and wondering what was going to happen next in the story. He allowed his mind some time to re-boot while he enjoyed the atmosphere. When the mug was about half gone the story beckoned.

Sophia Garza entered the paddock just off the field at Churchill downs; from there she walked past the stables and along the fence till she reached the main track. James Rafferty was easy to spot in his white hat. The binoculars around his neck and cigar between his fingers made him look like an upscale reporter. Though he appeared to be standing alone, Sophia noticed several

body guards stationed around him at various intervals, "he is nothing if not paranoid," she thought. She had changed shoes after lunch and left the pearls in the car. She donned a windbreaker over her polo and pulled her hair back in to a ponytail and up through the top of a visor. With her oversized sunglasses she would have never passed for a top rate veterinarian as she sidled up to her boss. "What number we watching?" she asked.

Rafferty glanced over at her and then focused back on the starting gate. "You're late," he said. She didn't answer. "Number 4," he said.

After the race they walked over to the stable to check the horse up close. Sophia gave her opinion, which was strictly professional. Rafferty generally relied exclusively on his gut, and if he liked what he saw in the pasture or on the track he usually made a deal. In the occasional situation where he had a mixed opinion, he called in the doctor. With this animal, the mixed opinion had more to do with other things that were going on in his mind, than whether or not it was a quality horse. He patted the horse's withers and nodded absent mindedly as Sophia pointed out positive nuances in the horse's physique.

"Yeah, okay, good. Thanks," Rafferty nodded at the trainer who led the horse away and continued the cool-down. "Let's get back into the sun, huh?" he said and motioned for Sophia to follow him. They walked out from under the shaded stable and stood by a white, four rail fence near the entrance to the paddock.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"It's busy, I came as soon as I could."

"I called an hour ago, Jacy said you left this morning, right after we talked."

That left her a little cold. She hated sneaking around Rafferty, it seemed like he knew everything. "I left a little early, I guess."

"So..."

"I had lunch in Louisville," she admitted. His eyebrows rose a little which, to her, looked like a cagy father catching a child in a lie.

"I have a life, James," she announced.

He smiled and raised both hands in defense, "What? I didn't say anything."

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"The look that says I need to run everything by you. I can't always do that. I need..." He cut her off with an understanding, but stern, look.

"Sophia, we've gone over all of this. I trust you-- you know that. But as I have told you, there are a lot of people, even friends of ours, who would like nothing better than to see me fall hard. And they will use any and all means to accomplish that. I just don't want to see you get stuck in the middle of something. That's why I like to send someone with you, just to make sure you are safe," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She tensed under his touch in a way she hoped escaped his notice.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, looking at the dirt and rocks around her shoes. "It was Mr. Pena... We had lunch."

"There, was that so hard?" Rafferty smiled. "When did he call you, what did he say?"

"I called him. It was my idea."

"I see," Rafferty smiled, "Lucky man." She tightened her lips and shook her head. "Let me ask you this," he said, "Do you think Pena is on the level? I mean, I guess you must, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just trying to figure the guy out. He shows up one day and he says all the right things, and his story checks out..." Rafferty's voice faded, something was just out of reach. "I don't know, I guess I'm just a little paranoid," he smiled.

"He seems overwhelmed by all of this," she said honestly. She felt like advising her boss to leave Michael Pena alone, but she wanted him to be around, she could picture having a relationship with him. If Rafferty cut ties, she would probably never see Pena again.

"I didn't really get the feeling that he was overwhelmed at all," Rafferty challenged. "It almost seems like he's a step ahead of me, if anything. He didn't seem overwhelmed. Did he say something at lunch?"

"No, not really. He was surprised that you invited him to your house on the spur of the moment. He said

that kind of thing never happens to him," Sophia said, then she added her two cents, "I think he's just a regular guy, James. Just an honest, hard working man."

"Well he was sure in the right place at the right time, I'll give him that much." He realized that he needed to be careful around the young doctor. If she were falling for Pena she would defend him and try to protect him.

Sophia turned to face her boss squarely, looking up slightly, squinting against the cool fall sunlight, "Look James, I like him, okay? I want to see him again and I plan to. Now, if you are not all right with that, then we might have a problem."

James put both hands up in self defense and smiled, "Hey, relax, we're just talking here. And listen, for the record, I like the man too. I'm thinking of doing some business with him. So he might just be around more often, which, I'm guessing, would be okay with you, huh?" Rafferty felt like a co-father to Sophia, he loved her and her family as much as his own. He kept her just outside of his core business, which he was confident she knew nothing about, and trusted her and her father more than anyone else on the farm including his own wife. "Look, do you have a number handy? For Mr. Pena? I left his card at the ranch," Rafferty lied, but wanted to know how far she'd gone with Pena.

Sophia produced the cell phone number that Michael had given her expecting that it would wind up in the hands of Rafferty. Sophia turned and walked back to her car with a strut that was equal parts frustration that her life was forced to be such an open book and anger that she had no privacy. Rafferty watched her walk away wishing he were twenty years younger. He dialed Pena's cell phone before Sophia was out of view.

"Michael Pena," came the answer on the second ring.

"Michael. James Rafferty."

"Sir." Pena/Broadback said instinctively.

"I understand you had lunch with my veterinarian," he said.

"And a very pleasant one, thank you," Michael said, suggesting to the older man that he thought Rafferty may have set it up.

"Oh, I didn't have anything to do with it, that was all Sophia. I think she likes you."

"I'm flattered."

"Listen Michael, I wanted to run a few ideas by you, business stuff. Could you come over to the track?"

"Today?"

"Yeah, right now, soon as you can."

"I'll have to reschedule a few things, can you give me an hour?"

"I'll leave your name at Will Call, come on up to the suite," Rafferty said.

"I'll be there in an hour or so," Michael/Rance said and hung up the phone. He hoped Rafferty had decided to let him in to the business.

"Ken, I'm telling you, this wasn't a suicide. It was as professional as anything I've dealt with," Detective in Charge (DIC) Ron Kramer explained to his boss.

"Do you have anything hard that says murder?" Williams said, leaning back in his generous office chair and stretching his arms to the side. Ken Williams secretly thought of himself as Pat Riley, former coach of the Nicks. He would never admit it, but it was a running joke around the office. Same dark Gucci suits, same slicked back hair, same courtside demeanor around the office. To him the coach was the perfect model of leadership, from look to style, which he adopted the first business day after he was named Assistant Director. His act was as thin as the pencil-sized neck that stuck out of the top of his starched white shirt.

"Just a footnote on the autopsy. CSI tends to agree with me."

"So, give."

"Well, the doc says there would have been more blood at the surface of the mans face, due to the adrenaline and anxiety of, you know, putting a gun to your own head. You can't do that without some kind of reaction, he says. Extra blood flow. Adrenaline. So blood rushes to the cheeks and scalp immediately, sort of a

protective mechanism. But with Hagin, everything was perfectly normal, like he was eating a bowl of Cheerios or taking a leisurely stroll. M.E. says he couldn't have been that calm and, at the same time, take his own life."

"That's pretty thin." The A.D. in Charge of the D.C. Bureau field office only had a year of fieldwork when he was bumped inside to sit at a desk. After five years of kissing up and taking credit for things he knew little about, he wound up with his own command. For detectives, like Ron Kramer, A.D. Williams was like a zit on your ass, just something you wanted to avoid aggravating. Kramer didn't think Williams was smart enough to understand the implications of the murder of a Senator, but chain-of-command dictated that he brief his superior officer during the investigation.

"It was murder. From the looks of it, professional. Actually, it was even cleaner than a typical professional job. Maybe Dark Ops."

"That's insane," Williams blurted. "You jump over that fence and you'll have Homeland Security and the CIA down here so fast it will make your head spin."

"I don't want a pissing contest down here either, Ken, believe me. But this one is deep and dark, okay? We might need the help."

"Let me spell it out for you, Kramer. Do your damn job." A.D. Williams said in no uncertain terms. "You've got 24 hours to come up with something solid. Or you're off the case... A dark-op hit-- have you lost your mind? That designation doesn't even exist anymore, and if it did, you idiot, it certainly wouldn't be deployed against one of our own assets." Williams shook his head. "Twenty four hours, Kramer." The Assistant Director was adamant about wrapping this case up in-house.

"Glory hog," Kramer thought as he walked the long corridor back out to the main reception area and passed through the revolving door. In the spacious courtyard he took a seat at the edge of a fountain and weighed his options. Number one, he had nothing but a footnote in an autopsy. Whoever had killed Senator Hagin had made it look like a perfect suicide. It was open and shut, as long as you ignore the fact that none of

his acquaintances noticed any unusual behavior. Zero. The man demonstrated none of the classical signs that suggest he was thinking of punching out. His family seemed closer than most. His wife and kids had been supremely accommodating in the investigation. They were sure, certain beyond any doubt, that he would never take his own life. That was about all he had to go on--that and his gut, which was rarely mistaken. He needed fresh eyes. He scrolled through his cell phone database until he found a pair that he knew were 20-20.

"Jim? Ron Kramer."

"Hey Ron, what can I do for you?" Jim Tate said to his old boss.

"Got time for coffee?"

"Lou's downtown?"

"An hour?" Kramer asked.

"See you there."

Kramer stood as Jim Tate approached the small booth. There were two coffee's already poured and the one nearest Ron Kramer was surrounded by the liter of three empty sugar packets and two plastic creamer buckets. "I took the liberty," Kramer said.

Tate nodded and sat down after removing his topcoat and scanning the room, "So what's the latest, Chief?"

"It's the Hagin thing. He was hit."

"Well, that was your first thought..." Jim led.

Kramer nodded and leaned in to the table, he shielded his mouth from the rest of the patrons with his coffee mug, "Not just a hit, though. Too clean. I think it was one of our dark assets."

Tate didn't respond. Kramer's face was drained of emotion. He stirred his coffee blindly. Tate thought of the kid's game where they line dominos up, one behind the other, and then tip the first one, which creates the chain reaction. In this business, when the front domino is marked with the words "dark ops," one of two things would inevitably happen: Nothing, if you were lucky enough to be wrong. Or, the first domino would lead to another, a little higher up on the political food

chain. And that one would lead to another, and another. Each level was more dangerous than the last. Both men had known others who had lost careers and worse by trying to pin cases on this invisible brotherhood that had been officially disbanded after Bush number one.

"You have any idea who made the call?" Tate finally said. He wouldn't question Kramer's hunch. Kramer would never toss out a scenario like this unless every signal pointed there.

"Not yet. But the only thing controversial about the guy was that legislation he was pushing, Senate AP365."

"The drug legalization deal?"

"That Bill has people on both sides of the aisle up in arms. No less than six other Senators including the majority leader and the Speaker of the House tried to force him to back off, he just wouldn't do it."

"You think someone in the Senate..."

Kramer shook his head, looking down at his cup, "I don't think they have the collateral, really, to make that call. But someone in their pocket, yeah."

"Whew," Tate said, pushing his cup to the edge of the table for a warm-up as the server came by with the pot, "So, how can I help?"

"Sound board, for one. I think I just needed to walk through this out loud in front of a fresh set of ears to hear how it played."

"Well, as far as that goes, it sounds to me like you've got the scent."

"Then," Kramer continued, "I thought that if you had any connections, and I don't need to know, but if you do, you could run this up the pole. I trust you Jim, but this might make both of us targets."

"I understand," Tate said. "I can't promise anything," he told the detective, who was busy doctoring up his fresh Joe.

"Sure. But let's keep in touch, just the same. If anything were to happen to me, I would like to know there is someone out there who has a clue."

"Point taken," Tate said and tipped his cup to the senior officer.

Jim Tate left the diner after draining his second cup and called a number that he'd memorized for times like this. The call was picked up on the third ring.

"Yeah," Broadback said.

"Good time?"

"Any time is good for you, buddy. I'm in the car, so, yeah. What's up?"

"DIC says it was dark-ops. Got time to look in to it?"

"I'll make time. Thanks, Jim." Rance hung up the cell phone and returned it to his pocket. General Madden was the only one with access to the very small list of contractors who, like Rance Broadback, had been used for dark-op missions. But that designation was dead and buried. And Rance was certain that the General would never sanction a hit on an elected official. Not unless the politician was a double agent, or committing some act of treason - even then, that wasn't the General's style. The General would send someone like Rance in to create an ambush on the evildoer, get them to fall into their own trap. He wouldn't stoop to a lowbrow assassination. The old team would have balked at the order, anyway, having served their country in countless dangerous missions, patriotism ran high, and was required as a character trait. There was no room for an operative to have some kind of breakdown and become a liability. That was likely to happen when you began playing God and targeting your own people.

Rance talked himself out of calling the General. The old man wouldn't be involved, he was certain. That meant that the list, or part of it, had been compromised. Rance believed the names and numbers were securely locked in the head of General George Madden, but maybe he was wrong, maybe the old man had taken to writing things down. And maybe some of those names were intercepted. Maybe even his name.

It was another 10 minutes before he parked in the VIP section and walked to Will Call. The Rafferty Suite was just like any other, from the outside. Inside it

was similar to his house, palatial. A server escorted Rance through the dining room to the viewing area at the window where Mr. Rafferty was sitting with one other gentleman whom Rance recognized from a photo.

"Sir," the server said in an effort to gain Mr. Rafferty's attention.

"Yeah," he said, turning, "Hey, Michael, you made it. C'mon down here, I have someone I want you to meet." Pena/Broadback shook hands with James Rafferty and then with his guest.

"This is Bill McCoy, good friend of mine from the eastern part of the state."

"Mr. McCoy," Pena/Broadback said, nodding respectfully,

"Buddy, please, just Buddy."

"Actually, it is Sheriff Buddy McCoy," Rafferty corrected. "Buddy serves the rural county of Alta Loma, Kentucky, smack dab in the middle of the Daniel Boone National Forest. He is also the Chief Operations Officer with our little partnership."

"Well, it's an honor to meet you."

"And, Buddy, this is the young man I've been telling you about. Michael Pena. He owns a trucking company and is interested in expanding. His niche is intermodal, container movement. Very interesting business."

"I don't know how interesting it is," Michael/Rance demurred.

"Well, trust me, if you need something shipped, it is interesting." Rafferty said.

"I suppose so," Pena said.

"Listen, have a seat. Let's watch the next race." Rafferty said. Buddy offered Pena/Broadback one of his giant cigars, which Pena declined. From his searing, beady black eyes and tough chin to his square shoulders and firm grip, Rance knew that Buddy McCoy was more than a redneck Sheriff-- he was trouble. James sat and leaned forward in his chair, his binoculars in one hand and his race sheet in the other, while Buddy McCoy sat back and lit a cigar, putting his feet up on the rail.

Andy Boyd pulled himself away from the story. A glance at the menu bar of his computer told him two things; one, the battery on his iBook was about dead, having entered the dreaded ‘red-zone,’ and, two, he had written through lunch. He was a little self conscious about sitting in the coffee shop all morning, but an inspection of the dining room reminded him that he was not alone. So he repacked his laptop in to its case and stood to leave, first setting the bag down in his chair so he could get a good grip on the belt loops of his pants to pull them up in to walking position. He stopped at Martin’s on the way home to get a sandwich to go. He really didn’t want to stop and chat, he just needed some food for an evening of writing. Luckily, the Martin’s niece was working the store and Mr. Martin was nowhere to be seen.

“Mr. Martin at the hospital?” Andy asked, not knowing if the girl would recognize him or not even though they’d seen each other at least a dozen times. She looked at him like he had tulips growing out of his ears.

“Mr. Martin here?” he tried again.

“He’s upstairs, he just went up there with my cousin. You want me to get him?” she invited.

Andy thought about that for a second. He would like to chew a piece of the scrawny dope-head’s hide. On the other hand, he didn’t want to intrude in family business and he had a story to write which was getting interesting. The longer it sat percolating in his spacious cranium, the more likely it was that he would write it down wrong, or it would change. He didn’t want that, it was going too well. “No, I’ll just have a sandwich to go. Uh, make it a meatball marinara. Large,” he added. As she made the sandwich, Andy grew more certain that he didn’t want to jump back in to the middle of the Martin’s affairs, he had gone too far already, probably. He just wanted to get out of there and get back to his house. He tossed a ten-spot on the counter and told Martin’s niece to keep the change as he grabbed his bag and headed for the door. He wanted to not only get out of the deli but to get beyond visual contact as soon as his wide, flat feet could manage.

“Listen Uncle Albert, I’ve been thinking about what you said, uh, the other day at my place... And I, uh, I’m real sorry for everything, you

know?"

"Sorry doesn't really amount for much, does it?"

"I know," the young man looked at the ground. It was critical that he grovel properly in front of the old man in order to soften him up. "How's Aunt Maria? She's going to be okay, right?"

"Not that you really care," Mr. Martin said, arms folded across his chest. The old man's lips were pursed tightly scrunching his bushy mustache under his nose in a way that made his mouth all but disappear.

"Of course I care. That was a total accident. I would never hurt Aunt Maria."

"So you say. Your actions, however, speak differently... Did you call your father?" Mr. Martin had not told the boy or his father about the act of benevolence given to them by his good friend Andy Boyd. He would make certain that the boy was plenty sorry, first.

"Uh, yeah. Of course..."

"And?"

"What?"

"Is he going to help you? How are you going to get the money?"

"He, uh. No. He basically said he'd done all he was going to do for me this time. He said I'm on my own on this one."

"I see. And, have you contacted the men you borrowed from?"

"Hmmp," he grunted, "No way."

"Do you think they're just going to go away?"

"No, of course not. I'm a big boy, it's just that, well... That's why I came over."

"What?"

"I wanted to see if you'd loan me the dough. I'll pay it back."

"You mean you've been sitting in that apartment for two days... Two days while the interest on your loan grows at \$500 per day and that's the best you've come up with?" Mr. Martin was nearly yelling he was getting so agitated, "Come over here and borrow money from me? After all you've done? What are you thinking? My God, Albert!"

"Look, I don't have a choice, you know?" Albert was crying. "I screwed up, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I'm an asshole. All right? But what's done is done, right? And I've got to make this good or those guys are going to break my neck. I just know it. My friend says these guys play for keeps. You saw those guys, they're insane!"

“And yet you got in bed with them,” Mr. Martin said, not letting up on the wanna-be dealer. “Tell me, Albert, what happens after this? Huh? You pay these guys off, and you do your time in jail. What then? Have you thought about that?”

“Sure I have.”

“Well then?”

“Well what?”

“What are you going to do with your life? Is this how it’s going to be? Buying and selling drugs till you get shot or thrown in jail for life?”

“It’s not like that.”

“You know everything, don’t you?”

“Look, I came over here to apologize and to ask nicely, okay. Just say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, you know. You don’t have to rub my nose in everything like a damn dog.

“Sit down, Albert. I want to tell you a story,” Mr. Martin said.

Albert grudgingly pulled a maple chair with an orange and beige printed cushion away from the dinette and sat down. Mr. Martin stood leaning against the kitchen counter, his arms still folded across his chest. “I have a friend,” the old man began, “whom I have known for several years. He is not a dear friend, I don’t even know exactly where he lives, as a matter of fact. The truth is, I don’t know him nearly as well as I know you. But this week, as this friend watched what was happening in our home and to our family, he came close to my side,” Mr. Martin’s eyes were welling with moisture, doubly so as he saw the boy didn’t care. Albert just wanted the old man to get it out of his system and give him the money, or tell him no, just do something.

“He came close to my side to help. Did he have to? Did someone hold a gun to his head? No. He is just a friend. And he tells me, ‘Mr. Martin, this is what friends do.’ And do you know what he does, Albert?” Mr. Martin hated to waste this act of kindness on a kid who could care less, he was crying now, tears running down his face and onto his apron. He took a dishtowel that was draped over the sink and wiped his eyes and puffy red cheeks. He cleared his throat and went on, “Do you know what this friend does? He comes to me and says, ‘Albert Martin, I will pay the debt,’” Mr. Martin stared hard at the boy, watching for a reaction. It took a minute to register.

“Wait a minute,” Albert said, “this guy did what?”

“He paid your debt.”

“But he doesn’t even know me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“But, why would he...”

“Because he cares for your Aunt Maria and I.”

“So, did he do it? Am I off the hook? What’s the deal?”

“You are such a child, Albert. All you can think about is yourself while someone you don’t even know has saved your life.”

“Hey, I appreciate it, I really do, but it’s not like the end of my problems or something. I’m still looking at time.”

“And you will be a man and face it, pay for what you’ve done.”

“So, this guy. Do I owe him now? Did he just buy the paper, or what?”

“You owe him all right. And you should pay him back. But he said it was a gift. He told me you should be paying the doctor bills and paying to fix up what you broke in our home.”

“I know, I know,” Albert said.

“Some day you’ll understand all this, Albert, and when you do, I hope you show the respect that is due. You should go now.”

Albert looked at his uncle, whose face was still red with disappointment, and left the apartment without another word.

Mr. Martin waited a few minutes to regain composure, and then followed the boy back down in to the deli. Albert was gone but Mr. Martin’s niece had a message.

“That big guy that’s always hanging around came in to see you,” she said. “He just got his food to go, said to tell you he’d stopped by.”

“Did you see which way he went?” he asked. She shrugged with a look that said, ‘not my department.’

Andy ate his sandwich on the sofa and watched the light grey afternoon turn in to a dark grey evening. He thought about what Mr. Martin might have been saying to the boy but whatever it was didn’t really matter. Andy had done what he needed to do; the rest was between the man and his nephew.

Chapter 19

There were two choices of things to do on Friday night. Andy could either sit in his house anticipating every word in the conversation he would have with Debbie Williams the following morning, visualize every moment he would be with her and play through the experience a thousand different ways. An exercise that, while entertaining to an introverted loner, was really pointless as the real thing always turned out completely different than he envisioned. Or, he could work. Since the deadline was looming and he would be happily missing an entire morning, he thought it best to get some more writing done tonight, adding to a very productive day. He launched the Broadback story and trolled around, fishing for the next scene.

Appalachian Malady - 8

"Intermodal, huh?" Buddy McCoy said with a big puff of thick white smoke that floated toward the plate glass window overlooking the track where it's progress was halted and flattened by the invisible barrier.

"Mmhm," Pena/Broadback replied.

"We run a few trucks," Buddy said, still not making eye contact.

"Is that right," Pena/Broadback said politely but without interest.

"I've got a little fleet of Freightliner day cabs we use for distribution," Buddy said.

"Small world," Pena said. The nonchalant response finally pulled McCoy's beady eyes away from the track. He stared at Pena straight-faced for a moment before his face broke in to a slight grin.

"Small world. I get it," he said. "Funny... You know anything about this region? The Appalachians?"

"Not really, no."

"We're poor country. Coalmines have played out or been shut down by Uncle Sam and there's no work. It's bad. It's all about creating jobs down there. Jobs."

"I understand that, believe me."

Buddy turned again and looked at Pena. The grizzled face of the Sheriff reminded Rance of a pissed-off Tommy Lee Jones, a man with only one expression. Rance got a mental image of a McCoy For Sheriff poster. Matching this face with just about any slogan other than "What are you lookin' at?" just didn't quite work. Rance hoped his own face didn't betray the fun he was having at the expense of the Sheriff's homely mug.

Rafferty through his hands up and cursed at the end of the race. His horse came in third and while he still won more than he bet, he was never satisfied. He turned to his guests and promptly started his meeting. "Now then, Michael, Buddy runs a few trucks himself," he began.

Michael/Rance nodded, "The Sheriff was just mentioning that."

"I was thinking that with your expertise you might be able to help us out. We'd like to expand."

"I'm not sure about my timing for entering the market, but I would certainly consider any ideas," Michael/Rance said.

"My problem," McCoy injected, "is the state lines. I'm fine going in to Indiana; we've got a relationship up there. But limited routes really hinder distribution. And now we've got this beautiful highway being cut through our damn back yard."

"And then there's the whole export market," Rafferty added.

"Oh yeah," McCoy said, "We get our containers in to the Great Lakes and up to Canada, or over to Europe, and we're golden. It's the future," he said, rolling the cigar around emotionless lips.

"Well, that's what we do, as you know... But, if you don't have permits, I don't know... Why don't you just get your own permits?"

"That doesn't really work for us," Rafferty said.

"Being a small, rural outfit, like we are, we just sort of fly under the radar. It works fine for the local stuff," McCoy added.

"Well, I can get the permits, but I'd have to run my own containers. I don't do that without certain safeguards. That is my name painted on the side, after all." Pena/Broadback said.

"What are we talking about?"

"Well, I've got to know what you're shipping. I've got to see it, touch it. I've got to know that what I am transporting is in no way illegal or in violation of any federal transportation statutes. We play by the rules."

"Well of course," Rafferty smiled, "that goes without saying." Rafferty stood and walked over to the dining area where he pulled a box off a shelf and returned to his seat. "Here, have a cracker," he said, and handed the sealed box to Michael/Rance.

"Oh, no thanks."

"No, try one, really," he shook the box.

Michael took the box and opened the lid. He reached in and grabbed a few crackers and pulled them out. He ate two and took a drink of the water that had been served. "Okay, what's your point," he said.

"The crackers. That's our product," he smiled. "We make six or seven kinds. Pretty good, huh?"

"Crackers?"

Rafferty continued, "Problem is, volume is the name of the game in this business and we can't compete with the big guys due to distribution. It's all totally legit. Just a small town operation providing jobs by making crackers. It's a way of giving back, and we

could do so much more - with your help."

The philanthropy angle wasn't something Rance expected, but he was growing to appreciate his adversary's intelligence. He inspected another cracker closely before eating several, feigning interest.

"I'm just spitballing here," Rafferty continued, knowing exactly that this is where he'd been headed the whole time, "But, Michael, what if we brought you in as an investor, showed you the operation, and started small, you know, just regional, maybe a dozen containers. Then, when I-66 is operational, bam, we're running loads like a commercial laundry. That way you have some time to get up to speed and we can all warm up to the relationship. Down the road we all get a big pay day."

"Right now we cover seven markets in Kentucky and Indiana; Louisville, Lexington, Bowling Green, Paducah, Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and Bloomington." McCoy said. "From there jobbers distribute the product. We add a dozen interstate licensed trailers and now we're looking at whole containers in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Nashville..." The edges of McCoy's mouth curled upward in a sneaky grin turning his eyes into black slits above weathered cheeks.

"Now, if we're talking about an exclusive national logistics agreement, I'm real interested," Michael/Rance said.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking," Rafferty confirmed. "Buddy, you want to show Mr. Pena the operation, introduce him to some of the wonderful people of Rose Park, Kentucky?"

McCoy nodded and blew three smoke rings to entertain himself.

Rafferty sat back in his chair and studied the light blue Kentucky sky; he had a satisfied smirk that Rance couldn't wait to wipe off. Michael/Rance and Buddy arranged to meet the following day in Rose Park.

"Harvey's on 289, can't miss it," McCoy said.

Michael/Rance shook hands with the men and left the suite.

"You sure he'll play ball?" McCoy said after Pena had gone.

"He's just like us, Buddy. Only younger. He's

hungry. He'll absolutely play ball. Now," Rafferty leaned in, changing the subject, "tell me about the other night."

"I've got a bunch of half-dead guards, that's what happened. And a few others that are busted up bad enough to be off the clock for a long time. Their stories don't quite jibe, but the gist of it is they followed a car full of guys around town for a while, then, when they stopped them, up past the mine, another car load showed up and knocked the shit out of my men.

"How many?"

"Five, eight, ten. I have no idea. And Wade is in the hospital breathing through a tube, he's no help."

"We're they looking for the garden? They didn't find anything, did they?"

"Boy's said they never stopped, so no, I don't think so... I added some perimeter guards, though, and people are parking up by the shop, so the place looks deserted. I think we're all right."

"And you have no idea who was snooping around?"

"I think it was just locals from up the road wanting to score some pot. They were more prepared for the scuffle than my guys, unfortunately. But it won't happen that way again, I'll guaran-damn-ty it." McCoy said.

Phyllis Lecter's personal assistant was a young man by the name of Steven Tan. He'd been carrying her bags the whole time she'd been in Washington. A Georgetown pre-law graduate, Tan was known as a sweet, single guy who guarded Lecter's time like a bulldog. Tami Beatty had an ex-roommate who clerked in the same building as Lecter's office and knew Tan as an acquaintance on the elevator and at the Starbucks two doors down. Tami reached out to her old roomy to see if she could catch his routine. She did and reported back to Tami. The next morning, Tami Beatty stepped in to the line at Starbucks right behind Steven Tan. He ordered a blended coffee and she ordered a regular drip so she could get it fast. She stood at the door and waited as he picked up his drink and walked passed her out on to the

sidewalk. She stepped out behind him, took a few quick steps and jammed a heel in to the sidewalk, breaking her shoe and sending her sprawling to the ground, spilling her coffee, purse and pride. Steven turned as he heard her and saw her fall, coffee splashing at his feet.

"My God, are you alright?" he quickly sat his coffee and briefcase on the ground and came to her aid. "Did you trip?"

Tears welled in Tami's eyes, she fell on purpose, but it still hurt. Her right knee was scratched and throbbing, skin was peeled from the palm of her hand. "My shoe broke," she whimpered. Tan helped her to her feet, she was wearing one pump and holding the other, the heel of which had dislodged from the sole.

"Are you alright?" he said again.

"I guess, thanks. I'm just a mess, now," she tried to gather herself, straightening her dress and blouse.

"Can I get you another coffee?" he offered.

"No, I..." She held the broken pump and looked around at the buildings through watery eyes, "I've got to fix this, I don't have time to go back home."

"Uh," he considered what he had in his desk at the office. He thought there might be a small hammer and some picture hanging nails, and probably some tape. "I might have something, yeah... Can you walk okay? I, uh, I work right over there," he pointed to the State Building.

"I think so," she said, taking off her other shoe, she limped barefoot at his side.

They took the elevator to the seventh floor where Tan unlocked the door to the outer office of Senator Phyllis Lecter. He held it open for Tami Beatty who stepped inside.

"You work for Senator Lecter?"

"I'm her personal assistant," he said with pride.

"Awesome," she replied, limping toward his desk.

"There's a restroom right over there if you, uh, want to wash up. You should wash that knee," he said.

"Thanks," she said, smiling. When Tami returned Steven was sitting behind his desk working on the heel of her shoe.

"I don't know if this is going to work," he said. He had straightened the small nails that originally held the heel in place and squeezed some glue in the gap before hammering the heel back flush with the sole. He took a hair dryer from a lower desk drawer and plugged it in, blowing hot air on the shoe to dry the glue. "It's not mine," he smiled. "Senator keeps it in my desk for emergencies."

His desk was simply clad with a pen set, and flat screen computer monitor. The credenza behind the desk had an in-box and an out-box, both neatly organized. Steven sat the shoe on the desk so the glue would continue to set and invited Tami to sit down for a few minutes till it was nice and dry.

"That was a nasty fall," he said. "I'm glad you weren't hurt any worse."

"I'm kind of a klutz anyway, but a broken shoe just isn't fair," she smiled.

He opened his soft-sided bag and extracted a hand full of file folders and a desktop Daytimer.

"That's old school," Tami smiled, looking at the Daytimer.

"I know," it's the way she likes it. "I guess she had an early Palm and the battery died or something and she lost a bunch of information. Now she insists that everything is written down," he mused. "She'll call me at all hours asking about this or that. I have to keep it with me at all times." He liked sharing a little inside scoop.

"If you're on a date or out with friends?"

"At all times," he laughed at the picture. "It can be a little awkward." They both chuckled at the image. "I think it's ready, such as it is," he said, picking up the shoe.

"I can't thank you enough," Tami said. "I don't know what I would have done, really."

"I'm just glad you're all right."

"Listen, I'm usually not this forward, but... Can I buy you a coffee or something, to say thanks?" she said.

"Well, uh, that's not necessary, really."

"I want to-- please?"

"I guess, sure." Steven Tan wasn't used to being

asked out. He didn't really even know any single girls; his last date was the week after the last election, almost two years ago.

"I'm off on Saturday," she offered.

"Do you know Curious Georgetown?"

"Love it."

"How about 8:00 am?"

"It's a date," she said, taking her shoe and slipping it back on. "Ahh, much better."

"Be careful with that, it could break again. Probably will."

"I'll retire these after work today." She shook his hand, "You're a life saver Steven Tan."

He smiled as she left the office, walking gingerly on her newly refurbished heel and sore knee. He thought about her long after the door had closed. The reporter would have to wait a while to get a look at the date book, but there were plenty of other things to do in the meantime.

Andy glanced at the clock; it was 11:30 pm. He smiled, realizing that his own coffee date had influenced the story. "An innocent manifestation of the subconscious," he allowed. He saved his work and ran cold water over his face for a long time. It felt good to be back in his world again after spending most of the day in another. As anxious as he was about meeting Debbie Williams again, the story had drained his brain and he passed into a dreamless sleep seconds after hitting the pillow.

His 70's rock station blasted from the bedside Wave radio at 8:00 am, waking Andy from a coma with Freddie Mercury shouting, "We will rock you," at around 100 decibels. Andy levitated momentarily, gasping for air as his eyelids snapped open as if spring-loaded. He turned down the volume as soon as he could focus on what had just happened and discern the source of the rampage. He sat on the side of the bed after he caught his breath as his head spun. The room was silent save Freddie, still screaming, but turned down to a whisper on the volume dial.

'You got mud on yo' face - You big disgrace

Kickin' your can all over the place

Singin' We will we will rock you - We will we will rock you'

“Great. Of all the songs you could have played this morning...” Andy said to the ceiling; as if God had commanded that he be awakened by Queen. He stood and scratched his head on the way to the shower while the stomps and claps of the anthem pounded against his skull.

The Daily Grind was pure San Francisco. There was incense and beads and rock-art posters advertising unsigned bands and hole-in-the-wall clubs. None of the furniture matched and most of it had been hand painted with colors that would be at home on a Velvet Elvis. There was a mirror ball, lava lamps and assorted candles burning all hours of the day. Andy sat in a purple velvet Queen Anne chair and draped his coat over a leopard print chair of similar vintage. Debbie arrived a few minutes before 8:00 am, her eyes lit up after they adjusted and gave her a sense of the bohemian spirit of the place.

Andy extended his hand to welcome her and she stepped through it, “I’m really more of a hugger,” she said, catching him totally off guard. She reached around him and leaned against his chest, her hair tickling the underside of his chin. The embrace was brief but the smell of her freshly washed hair and light perfume sent a chill up his spine and made him forget where he was. It was disarming.

“Good morning!” she said, stepping away and shedding her jacket. “I’m so glad this worked out for you, I know you’re busy.”

Andy was still reeling from the hug, but gathered his thoughts as best he could to say something. “No, uh, I... I’m really glad you called. I, uh, I love having a reason to come here.”

“It is unique,” she acknowledged, looking around again. Just over Andy’s head was a bright acrylic painting of the nativity, only with wild animals surrounding Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. She pointed to the orange wall behind him and he turned to look.

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my,” he said.

“I love it. So...” she turned her attention to the menu whiteboard across the room, “what’s good?”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her as she studied the menu, biting her bottom lip gently and squinting just enough to make her nose wrinkle, drawing her lips into a subconscious smile and exposing a single dimple.

He was smitten.

“Cappuccino,” she finally announced. “A big one.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be right back.” Andy left her at the seats to retrieve the drinks. He could feel the hair on his forearms standing nervously underneath his shirt and his he could hear his pulse. He would have a decaf.

Debbie watched him from her seat. He was a gentle giant. She liked him immediately. He was intelligent, witty, honest and pure hearted. She could tell that Andy Boyd was one of those rare finds in a human being. The kind of guy that you can talk to. A guy that would be there for you. The type of person that will stay awake with you when you are scared or hold you when you are tired. She also knew that, if left up to him, they would have never spoken again after dinner at his mother’s house. Chivalry might not be dead, but in the twenty first century, a girl had to know when to speak up. The thought caused her to shrug and quietly forgive herself for being a little forward.

He brought back the coffee and sat her mug down on a three-legged mahogany table that sat between the wild chairs. The mismatched cup and saucer chattered as his nerves threatened again to explode. He managed to keep from spilling any and took his own seat carefully. Andy just smiled, certain that words would fail him if he tried to speak. She noticed and picked up her cup. She brought it to her chin and drank in the aroma, “Mmm, this is wonderful. This is a great place. I can’t believe I’ve never been here.”

“There’s no place quite like it. Well, maybe there is, but some of the real bohemian dives over closer to Haight are a little scary,” he smiled.

“I believe that,” she said. Her eyes were like light blue saucers, taking everything in, both amazed and interested, her brown ‘teachers cut’ hair laid softly against her head with a few dozen strands sticking out like rebels that refused to go quietly. He couldn’t remember anyone so beautiful or so charming. His heart slowed down enough that he was fairly certain he could compose a sentence.

“So why teaching?”

“Mmm, why teaching?” she smiled, sipping against the top of the mug. “Well, I always wanted to write. I keep a journal and wrote some poetry in high school and, I’ve always enjoyed the language-- the words

and textures and voice. I just love it... Anyway, bottom line, as someone once said-- ‘those who can, do. While those who can’t, teach.’” She smiled and raised her eyebrows and coffee cup with a shrug.

“I don’t believe that for a minute,” he said.

“You don’t believe the time-tested adage?” she grinned.

“Hm-mm,” he shook his head. “Teaching the language is the hard part. Everyone has a story. Writing it down in a compelling, well-spoken way is where the magic is. You’ve got to learn that, it requires a teacher.”

“And for you?” she said.

“Me? I’m the poster-boy. I had a teacher in high school that believed in me. She pushed me to unlock that little room in my mind where the stories are and then she helped mold them in to something legible after they were out of my head and onto a piece of paper. A good teacher helps make the connection between the writers voice and the readers ear.”

“That’s good,” she said.

“I just made that up,” he smiled. “You’re easy to talk to.”

“I’m glad we met,” she said, leaning forward on to the arm of her chair making Andy feel like the most important person in the world. They talked for an hour about school and her classes and about her life in the Midwest and growing up on a farm. They talked about Andy’s mother and her sense of humor and her strength, about how she raised him in the unforgiving environment of the City and always fought for him. They talked about his mother’s new faith and Debbie tried to explain the dynamic of what happened in her own heart when she had the same experience.

“I was a junior in college, just twenty years old, and I knew everything, right?”

Andy nodded, remembering the days.

“I was a long way from home and way over my head with credit hours in a huge school. I was depressed and home sick and I wanted to quit and go home and just wait tables or something. I was starting my in-school internship, going out to a local middle school three afternoons a week and I realized that I didn’t even like kids that age, and I’m like, ‘What in the world am I doing,’ you know?” she paused for a sip and to shake the memories out of her head.

“So, long story short, I got up one Sunday morning and went to church. I figured, I need answers, I need direction. What better place to go.”

Andy shrugged and she said, “I know, kind of silly, when I think back. But we had gone to church back home when I was younger, a big imposing Lutheran church built out of stone in the 1800’s. All the Dutch farmers went, kind of part of the lifestyle. Anyway, I hadn’t been for years, so I thought, why not, at least it would be something familiar. Anyway, the first time was okay. But I tell you, after a few weeks I began to feel such a peace in my heart. I actually felt like God was hugging me, I know that sounds crazy... But, in a sense, I felt like He was just loving me and validating the path I’d chosen.”

“Anyway, I made it through school and moved out here and, pretty much from that season of discovery, if you will, back in my junior year, I have felt called to teach high schoolers. I believe God gave me a mission, so to speak. Yeah, teaching high school is my mission,” she said, raising her cup in a kind of toast, and smiling again, this time a large one that pushed her cheeks up, forcing her eyes into little dark lines with a twinkle beneath the surface. The light hitting her rosey cheeks shined like the morning sun.

“That’s amazing, really,” Andy said. He couldn’t resist her passion. She was so honest and confident in her faith, so sure of God’s voice, not questioning His existence or His nature, just believing. He never met anyone like this. “And, you think that is what my mom found?”

“I just know what I experienced, and, she sounds a lot like I did.” Debbie smiled, recounting the days. “I just felt free, like I could fly. The school work flowed, everything seemed to fit. Even the hard times, as weird as that is... My mother died during my senior year of college...”

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“But, it was strange, like I was equipped, somehow. I got to be with her for a few weeks and I talked to her about God’s love. She had gone to church her whole life but never knew the peace of Christ. When she opened up her life to God’s love and forgiveness it was like she began to glow. Not literally, but, she just had peace. I don’t know how else to explain it. And when she passed it was, I don’t know, it was difficult for all of us, don’t get me wrong, but it was okay at the same time, because she seemed ready to go. If that makes any sense.”

He smiled, “I don’t know if it makes sense or not, to tell you the truth. I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose my mother. I really can’t. I think it would be the end of the world.”

“I know. It felt exactly like that. I guess, for me, Christ brought balance to the experience. Weird, huh?”

“You are pretty amazing,” he said without holding back.

“And getting kind of hungry,” she said with another award winning grin. She hoped she hadn’t gotten over-spiritual with her new friend. She didn’t want to scare him.

“Got time for lunch,” he said, hoping against hope.

“I do if you do.”

They walked out on to the sidewalk, it was a brisk fall day and the streets were quiet. Leaves from neighborhood trees scratched across the sidewalk fluttering about in gold and red and brown. Andy knew of a little Italian mom & pop restaurant around the corner from the Daily Grind and they walked there, talking as they went like two old friends. When they finally parted company at 2:45 pm, Andy watched her drive away then sat quietly in the privacy of his own car for several minutes trying to get his head around what had transpired between them. “It was only coffee,” he assured himself. “Just coffee and lunch... With the most amazing woman I’ve ever met,” he said to the dashboard with a tired sigh and drove back to his house.

He decided to make the call as soon as he caught his breath at the top of the stairs. He tried to talk himself out of it but he knew the rest of the evening would be spent wishing he would have if he didn’t. So he did.

“Hello,” Janice Boyd said in her official Human Resources voice. He caught her at work.

“Hi mom.”

“Andy, to what do I owe the courtesy?”

“Just taking a break, wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“I’m good. You?”

“Fine. Hey mom, can I ask you a question without you reading a bunch of stuff into it?”

“Probably not,” she said.

“Well, at least you’re honest, right?”

“I’ll try, what is it?”

“Are you going to the same church as Marg’s niece? Uh,

Debbie.”

“I am, why?”

“Oh, nothing. I just wondered... We met for coffee this morning.”

“Really?”

“You know, she wants me to speak to her class and all,” he said.

“Sure.”

“Anyway, I, uh,... What time does church start over there?” he asked.

“10:00 am,” she said, biting the side of her lip gently to contain her excitement.

“Hmm, okay. Uh, hey, do you think it would be all right if I came, you know, to church with you?”

“Oh Andy, that would be fine. I would love that.”

“I don’t know where it is, but...”

“Why don’t you pick me up at 9:30 am, we’ll ride together.”

“Okay, Mom. Uh, thanks.” He hung up knowing his mother would be making a mountain out of this molehill. But he couldn’t worry about that. He was glad he asked, although he kind of surprised himself. He was one of those guys who couldn’t articulate his personal belief system, but he was pretty certain it didn’t line up with Christianity or any other organized religion. He didn’t want to be hypocritical, but he sure wanted an excuse to see Debbie again.

He opened a weblog and decided to off-load some feelings.

Andy’s Weblog - November 10th

Things Change, Maybe

I woke up this morning to Freddie Mercury singing the story of my life in the 7th and 8th grade: “You got mud on your face, you big disgrace, kicking your can all over the place...” And that’s how it was, every day. If it wasn’t one kid it was another. I was one of those kids that are, for some reason, a bully magnet.

Lately I’ve been having some issues that stem from those days, problems with self-image and the perception that I’m a loser, which I am. On the other hand, I’ve had a few positive things happen lately that suggest, maybe, things are changing, or, about to change for me. That feels really good. I’m rambling, I know. But I’ve been hiding behind the lockers

*for a long time; it would be nice to step out of the shadows for good.
Is that sunlight I see? - Andy*

Saturday had slipped away. He still couldn't concentrate so he sat on his couch and quietly nursed a can of soda while he watched the evening shadow grow up and overtake the building across the street. Freddie Mercury had gone. All that was here was Andy and the lovely image of Debbie Williams sitting in her turtleneck sweater sipping a cappuccino. He closed his eyes and savored the picture. He finally convinced himself that if he was going to take the morning off to visit the Holy Grail, or whatever, that he better get some work done tonight. The Monty Python image knocked him off track for a few minutes, but he eventually found his way back to the mess he was creating in Appalachia.

Appalachian Malady -

John Sanchez was certain, based on the signal of his GPR unit, that he was walking on a limestone shelf under which was some kind of cavern, itself reinforced, probably with steel. He saw an old building below him just off the fire road. It was one of those backyard metal storage units that had been converted in to a little guard shack. The door was open and he could see a man inside with his feet on the desk, asleep. He quietly moved passed the shack and continued along the face of the hill. He could hear voices and music growing louder as he moved slowly in the direction of the sound. Sneaking around people with automatic weapons was probably not in his job description, and he considered turning around. "A couple rounds from those canons could ruin your whole day," he whispered to the woods.

The road turned back to the right, curling behind the hill John was carefully walking across. He changed his route and climbed up the hill instead of walking on around. The grade was steep and he had to carefully plant

each footfall to prevent slipping down in a landslide of wet leaves. As he slowly crested the hill he noticed a thin, metal wire stretched across his path about two feet off the ground. He approached it cautiously and looked from side to side to determine its purpose. It appeared to be a hot wire, the kind they use to keep horses or cows from rubbing against the wooden rails of a pasture fence. But this one was too low, and there were no flags to alert people to its presence. John wondered if it could be the framework for some kind of shield that, if it were breached, would activate an alarm. He walked slowly along the edge of the line for fifty feet north until he came to a power translator that was used to extend the range of farm fences. When he was comfortable that that was all it was, he gingerly stepped over the wire and proceeded to the top of the hill. As he reached the summit, he went to his knees and began crawling forward slowly as he could now hear the melody of the country music that was playing just ahead of him. He thought briefly that "Boot Scootin' Boogy" was what he should be doing in the other direction, but he kept going anyway.

He crept to the edge of the hill, which turned out to be a sheer cliff fifty feet from the valley floor, where the fire road came to an end at a guarded entrance in to the mountain. There were three pick ups and an old Celica parked on the side of the fire road and six men, dressed in camo, carrying similar automatic weapons to those he'd seen earlier. He could barely see the door to the cave entry from where he was positioned and carefully shimmied back and over to the south for a better view. He noticed another guard standing by himself at the closed overhead door, smoking with one boot propped against the door. John thought that if the guards moved in pairs, then there was one guy missing, who was either out using the can, or patrolling the area. To the side of the overhead door was an entry door, a heavy metal one that was painted a rusty camo-green and had a small glass with wire mesh window in the middle about the size of a family picture. After his smoke, the guard who was on his own stepped over to the metal door and pushed a red button and pressed his face against the small window, looking inside. The

button was connected to a buzzer that sputtered loud enough for John to hear it clearly, and in a few seconds there was a click and the guard pulled the door open and disappeared inside. After what must have been a shift change, the six guards lurking around the tailgate split up. Two left in the truck they had been leaning against, backing out and driving out the way John had come in. He heard them lay on the horn when they reached the little shack, no doubt scaring the beans out of the sleeping guard. The four men left in the parking area shouldered their weapons and split into pairs, walking to separate edges of the gravel lot, and from there they disappeared into the forest on foot patrol.

John Sanchez was 110% certain that he should head back the way he came, but instead, he lay quietly on the top of the hill, surveying what appeared to be an entrance to a mine. He wished the door would open, giving him a view of the inside, or at least, that the smoking guard would come out with his partner, if that's where the partner had gone. He wondered. The question was soon answered as John heard the air gasp from between a footfall of damp leaves and the sound of a round being chambered behind his head. He rolled over slowly to see the nervous face of a man in his early twenties, bearing down on him through the site of a deer rifle, "Well," John thought, "at least it's not an assault gun. This one will only leave one hole."

"The hell'r you doing?" the kid said.

"Hunting," John said, slowly raising his hands.

"The hell you are," the young man glanced over the hill, looking, no doubt, for support from his partner.

John noted the lofty vocabulary. "Well, what are you doing out here?" John countered.

"Shut up. Git up," the kid motioned with the gun barrel. He should have taken a break with his partner, but the guy stunk and he liked the time alone. Besides, reinforcements were just a whistle away. As John crouched to stand the young man let go of the trigger momentarily to bring his fingers to his mouth to whistle. It gave Sanchez just enough time to draw his Buck from his ankle holster and lunge upward, shoving the blade deeply in to the guards belly just as he sucked in a deep breath which was cut well short, sending him to the ground in

a gasping heap. Sanchez carefully removed the rifle from his hands and sat it aside. He checked for a pulse and found one that was slowing down rapidly as blood ran from the guard's belly and mouth.

"Sorry," he whispered to the kid, and covered him with leaves. He moved back to the edge of the hill to see if they had drawn any attention. All was still quiet. He didn't know how long he had till the other guards made their way up here, so he hurriedly pulled the satellite phone out of the backpack and called Rance. He got voice mail.

"Hey, Found a fire road and the south eastern edge of some kind of cavern, probably the back of the mine. Road leads to a guarded entrance, here are the coordinates. I'm headed back to camp. Hope to see you soon. Out." The last part was the God's honest truth; he hoped to see Rance soon. He'd quickly gotten over his head in this one. This was the first time he'd been forced to defend himself to this extent, and it was nauseating. John made his way back to the hot wire, stepped over it and picked his way over five kilometers back to his camp. He was exhausted. He pulled a bottle of Gatorade out of the trunk of the ATV and slumped down against a tree. He was shaking as he replayed the scene with the guard, trying to convince himself there was no alternative, hoping the kid made it. Somehow. Like they used to say in the Army, he was out of his pay-grade. But he had done his part. Time to get out of here and call in the Cavalry.

He closed his eyes for a moment and could feel the energy returning to his tired limbs from the distribution of electrolytes. Out of the silence his eyes were startled open by the sound of footsteps. He instinctively reached for the buck knife strapped to his ankle.

"We was wondering when you'd be comin' back," the voice said. John turned to see one of the guards from before. He stepped out from behind a tree where he had been hiding in plain sight. John hadn't seen him and inhaled deeply before doing anything else, "There it was," he scolded himself quietly, "the stink of cigarettes."

The second guard stepped out from behind a tree

behind John and lit up his smoke. "He hasn't let me smoke for three hours, waiting fer you to come back, dammit."

"What are you boys doing?" Sanchez stammered.

"We was going to ask you the same thing," the taller one said. They were both carrying their weapons low and their fingers were on the trigger. One wrong move and Sanchez knew he was toast. They seemed nervous. John didn't know about the mishap that had befallen six of their co-workers when they decided to pick on the guy in the SUV. As far as they knew, this could be the guy.

"Hunting. What else," he chuckled. "I wouldn't want to be out here with all these ticks and chiggers for any other reason, I guarantee it."

"U-huh," the taller guard said and spit. "J'ou know this is private property back here?"

"It's not posted," Sanchez said.

"Yeah it is, right over there, b'hind that tree," the guard said, jerking his head slightly to the side. Sanchez looked that way. No sign.

The second guard approached. "So, what're ya hunt'n?" he squatted down by Sanchez and opened his backpack.

"Turkey," he said.

"Yeah? Any luck?" the smoker asked.

"Not yet."

"No? Let's hear yer call," the guard said. Sanchez thought fast, He was smarter than these guys, but not when it came to the woods. He gave his best turkey imitation and cooed it up on the end for effect.

"Now that's yer problem, see... You can't call turkey fer shit. Where you from?" The guard had beady little eyes and probably hadn't shaved in a month. He had freckles and red hair that hung out of his green camo ball cap and over his ears.

"California," Sanchez said.

The other guard had made his way over to the Quadrunner and the rest of Sanchez' gear. "Pretty nice little gun," he said to no one in particular. He checked the site and smelt the barrel. "Never been fired, though."

"What's this?" the smoking guard said, removing

the GPR unit from the backpack.

"Look, if I'm trespassing, you guys just say the word and I'm out of here, the last thing I need is trouble, you know?"

"Relax, we just want to know who's out here on our land, that's all," the taller guard assured him and jerked his head toward his partner, "What's that there?"

"It's an ultrasonic caller. I've been trying it out. That's why my turkey call is no good, I just use this thing. Here." John took the GPR unit from the guard and stood to his feet. He flipped on the power switch and the red and green led's sparked to life then settled down.

"I don't hear nothing," smoking guard said.

"Of course not, it's ultrasonic. You and I can't hear it, but the birds can. It's supposed to draw them like flies."

"Well, from the looks-a yer catch, it don't seem like it works all that well, Bud," boss guard said and chuckled revealing a mouthful of tobacco stained teeth. He stopped short and spit another stream of brown juice. "Listen, yer gonna have to come with us."

"What, no way," Sanchez protested. "You're not police, you can't arrest me."

The taller guard nodded and the smoking guard stood up, "'Fraid so, Bud. It's our property and yer doing a whole bunch of stuff that ain't right; hunting alone, new gun that's never been fired. Your a little s'picious, to be honest."

"Look, if there's some fine, or something, why don't we just handle it right here, with cash, you know. And I'll be on my way."

"This ain't Tijuana, Ace, we don't do it that-a way out here," smoking guard said and cold-cocked Sanchez across the back of the head with the butt of his rifle knocking John into the tree he'd been leaning against. He struggled to keep his feet.

"Let's go," the taller guard said to Sanchez. "Get his stuff," he motioned to the smoker. They zip-tied his hands behind his back and walked about a kilometer back to their truck where they had John sit on the tailgate while they bound his ankles the same way and found his

knife sheath. "Hello," the redheaded guard said to himself, unstrapping the knife after John's legs were secure. He removed it from the sheath and looked at it. Unlike the gun, the knife had seen action. The guard looked at Sanchez without saying a word, and returned the knife to it's sheath and put the works in his front jeans pocket. "You won't be need'n this. Reckon?"

With a series of zip-ties they cuffed his arms and legs to the bed of the truck. There would be no escaping, or falling out of the bed for that matter. They'd secured him like a fresh kill. The ride across the fire roads took half an hour. The way it seemed to John, they had made a wide circle of about 8 or 9 miles before catching the highway south for another 1/8th of a mile or so.

When they finally came to a stop he saw the closed chain-link gates of the Cedar Ridge Coal Mine. It looked deserted. The truck eased up to the gate and one of the guards pulled a walkie-talkie out of the glove box and radioed ahead. In a few minutes a golf cart carrying two more guards crested the hill behind the gates and approached. The passenger got out and unlocked the old gates and let the truck enter before closing and locking them again. The golf cart pulled out ahead and led the truck back up the hill in front of the mine.

Had he been one of the redneck guards, Sanchez thought, he would have put a mask over the prisoners face so he couldn't see where he was being taken. A stupid mistake, he thought at first, but then realized that it didn't matter if you saw where you were going if they didn't plan for you to leave. "Great," he whispered to the air. Picturing the scene from an aerial view he realized the cave entrance he'd found would be the eastern edge of this mine entrance, approximately three miles south east of this point.

They pulled the truck into a cavernous building and pulled against an interior wall where they parked. The guards exited the truck and checked the security of the prisoner's restraints. "Now you stay right here, huh?" smoking guard said and laughed at his joke.

"Funny man," Sanchez said out-loud, which rubbed the nervous guard the wrong way. He pivoted and punched Sanchez in the mouth, loosening two teeth and cutting

his lip. The guard thought that if this was one of the guys that caused all the problems the other night; he wanted to get a few licks in before Buddy showed up. After that it would be lights out.

The guard checked his knuckles and shook his hand. He walked away while John gritted his teeth against the pain, "Note to self: keep your comments to yourself, wiseass," he mumbled.

Andy straightened up and read the last few paragraphs. He didn't want to leave poor John Sanchez there, strapped to the bed of that old Chevy. "Hang in there Sanchez," he said, "I've got to go to the can." He saved his work and put the iBook to sleep. He lied to Sanchez; he wasn't coming back, not tonight anyway. But he couldn't bring himself to break the bad news to one of his heroes.

Chapter 20

Sunday morning Andy woke up happy because he remembered both to set his alarm clock and, to set it quieter than the morning before. He rolled over and silenced the radio. He lay in bed with mixed emotions. On the one hand, he was excited to see Debbie again. He'd been thinking about little else since they finished lunch and he watched her drive away from the curb. On the other hand, he hadn't been in a church since his father's funeral, and that was more of a funeral home chapel. He had built up so much Bay Area animosity against Christianity that it was difficult for him to consider attending a service. It felt anti-liberal, or unprogressive, if that's even a word. Like he was stepping back in time to an age of puritan morals where guilt ruled with an iron fist. And while that's what his mind told him, it seemed the exact opposite of the goodness that he had found in Debbie, and the change that was taking place in his own mother.

He wasn't that interested in the whole religious deal, personally. He just wanted to see Debbie again. And find out if he was delusional or if she was as precious as he imagined. Andy showered and stopped by Starbucks before heading to South San Francisco, he ordered a coffee with a double-shot, to which he added some cream and sugar. "Nothings going to sneak up on me this morning," he smiled and stirred the caustic brew.

The church, Peninsula Chapel, was in Palo Alto near the Stanford campus. It was an old building, grey stone and stained glass, originally constructed in 1899 for the First Presbyterian Church. When the Jesus Movement of the 70's reached the Bay Area, the Presbyterian's got saved all over again and started attracting college students, eventually changing the name and mission of the church. No longer Presbyterian, they were just Christian. Marg made sure Andy was sufficiently briefed while they sat waiting for the service to begin.

It wasn't crowded, but there were a lot more normal looking people in the room than Andy anticipated. He expected to see all the loonies that spent their days waving bible signs on street corners and driving around in bumper-sticker-laden clunkers. These people, instead, looked just like him, only, to his eyes at least, thinner. Debbie walked down the aisle and spotted her aunt and Janice in the pew and her eyes lit up when she saw Andy.

"Wow, what a surprise," she said, leaning down and giving him a hug, then squeezing by and hugging his mother. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I'm full of... surprises," he finally said, nervously. "Can you sit down?"

"No, not yet," she frowned, "I'm singing in the choir this morning. Save me a seat, though." She squeezed his shoulder and hurried back up the aisle. Andy watched her go and wondered why someone so perfect would give a loser like him the time of day. She was an angel. He tried to memorize the feel of her touch on his shoulder.

The band was pretty good and most of the people in the room were singing along with words projected onto a screen against the front wall. Andy didn't know the songs, but his eyes were, for the most part, trained on Debbie Williams, not on the overhead screen. The choir did an old hymn he recognized from somewhere and it was curiously beautiful for him to hear his mother singing along in a soft, sweet voice he recognized from his childhood bedside. "*Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.*"

The choir finished and filed off the stage and took seats in the audience, Debbie stepped into the other end of the pew and wound up

sitting by her aunt. Their eyes met as she did and she smiled and shrugged. The preacher, a man about Andy's age, stood up next and adjusted the band leaders music stand down to his level and tightened it before placing his Bible on it. He was short and stocky with a neck that would defy the top button of a collared shirt. One of those necks that, if you ever did get your shirt buttoned, your face would turn red to the point of explosion. Andy could relate. He hated that feeling. But this preacher didn't wear a tie; he was dressed in a sweater and khakis, just like Andy. And he didn't shout. He just talked and read verses from the Bible and explained what they might mean in the lives of the people in the room. Very personal. The service ended with a song and an invitation for people to come down front for prayer if they desired and a handful of people from various places in the auditorium responded while the rest quietly began filing out of the room.

Andy, Janice and Marg stood in the small courtyard and waited for Debbie to join them. "I never expected us to be standing here, mom," he said.

"I know what you mean," she said. "But I regret that, I really do. I wish I'd found this thirty years ago."

"I wouldn't beat myself up about it, you've had a pretty good life," he said.

"Oh, I know, no complaints. But this is so much better, I just think of all I've missed."

"Well you'll just have to make up for lost time then," he smiled and gave her a squeeze.

"I'm so glad you came, thank you," she whispered as they hugged.

"Me, too," he said.

Debbie joined them and apologized for making them wait, "Hey, can I borrow you for a minute? I'd like to introduce you to some people."

"Well, I..." Andy began, but she had already tucked her arm under his and was leading him away from the ladies.

"It'll just take a minute," she smiled. They approached the front door where the pastor was shaking hands with people as they exited the chapel. Debbie waited for an opportunity and said, "Pastor John, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Debbie, hi" he said. Pastor John and Debbie were about the same

height and he was just as stumpy up close as he was from back in the pews. He gave Debbie a hug and said, “Absolutely.”

“This is my friend Andy Boyd. Andy, Pastor John,” she said.

“Nice to meet you Andy, welcome,” he said, extending his hand.

“Thanks, it was nice.”

“Andy Boyd-- Hey, you’re not Andrew Boyd, the writer, are you?”

“That’s what my agent keeps telling me,” Andy said. “But I wouldn’t say that too loud around here.”

“No way, I’m a big fan.”

“Serious?”

“I’ve got all the hard covers. Debbie, why didn’t you tell me you knew this guy?”

“We just met, recently.”

“Well, it’s an honor, Andy, really. Listen, can I get you to sign my books sometime?”

“Sure, I’d be happy too.”

“Listen, Pastor John, I know you’re busy, but I just wanted to introduce you two,” Debbie said.

“Well thanks, really. And Andy, wow. Nice to meet you. Come back sometime, huh?”

“I will, thanks. Thanks a lot.” Debbie and Andy stepped away and joined another small group of friends that she wanted to introduce him to. They didn’t recognize him as a writer, and she didn’t volunteer the information. But he felt equally accepted. The whole experience assaulted his preconceptions. He had to keep some walls up or he would find himself really liking this church thing.

After lunch Andy and Debbie made plans to meet Tuesday evening for dinner. Andy’s mother saw the sparkle in her son’s eyes on the drive home, but didn’t say anything out loud; she decided to pray for him instead, thanking God for beginning to work in his life.

Andy sat on his couch for a long time after he got back to his place in the city. He thought about Debbie Williams. And he thought about his life. He scanned through any memories that he could find that

would help him understand how he got to this point. He was a mess of emotional garbage, a lazy sloth, a loner who didn't believe in much of anything, especially himself. He wondered if he would be able to have a real relationship, if that's what this became. He wondered if he was too selfish, to introverted. He wondered if, given the chance, he would even be able to perform sexually. He was too old for these feelings, he needed to slow down and keep the girl at arms length. He needed to push her away and see if she really liked him or just liked the idea of knowing a writer. His mind was a blur of conflicting thoughts. He closed his eyes in an attempt to silence the barrage of emotion, and fell asleep.

He woke up and looked at the clock. It had only been thirty minutes, but he felt a lot better. He needed to work in order to prevent the process from beginning again. He took a bottle of water from the pantry and walked straight to his computer. Scanning the last entry in the Broadback story, he just started typing where he left off.

Appalachian Malady - 9

Pena/Broadback met Sophia Garza at a diner in Versailles for a quick breakfast before the two started the long drive to Rose Park. All she knew about the Rafferty's cracker business was that, according to James, it was a way to provide a few jobs in the little mining town and it made the group feel like they were doing some big service for humanity.

"James know you're coming with me today?" Michael/Rance asked.

She looked at him with the "I'm a big girl" look he'd seen before in Tami Beatty's eyes, and said nothing.

"Ooh, soft spot?"

"Let's just say it is a challenge sometimes."

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry."

"I'm sure I only see one side of James, and it is probably the better side. But even so, I am not the fifteen year old from South America anymore. My father and I can do pretty well on our own."

"Have you ever talked to your dad about setting

up your own business? You and your father?"

She nodded, "Si, but my father is more of a simple man. He likes the security and routine of working for James. I don't think he would ever leave."

"What about you? What do you want?"

"I don't know. To be honest, meeting you has been..." she searched for the right words as the countryside changed from four rail fences and palatial estates to general stores and hard woods. "It's opened my eyes," she finally said.

"Sophia, I..." Rance/Michael began.

"No, I don't mean us, particularly, although I've thought about it," she allowed with a subtle smile. "But, I mean more what you represent. Here you are living free, living life, looking for opportunities, it's exciting."

"Like I told you, my life is not usually like this," he said.

She turned in the seat and looked deeply at his strong, handsome profile, "Somehow I don't believe that is entirely true."

Silence passed between them as they began winding through the north edge of the forest. It was a beautiful day for a drive and other than a few slow moving tractors; the trip to Rose Park was uneventful. The mini-mart/diner where they were to meet Sheriff McCoy was the same one Pena/Broadback had passed the previous weekend where he picked up the redneck convoy. There were two vehicles parked outside this noon, an old Oldsmobile and a brown and white Sheriff's Impala. They pulled past the gas pumps and parked alongside the Olds. McCoy saw Sophia and rose from his seat at one of the old diner tables, leaving his coffee and a cigarette in the ashtray, and stepped outside the door.

"Well, well," he said with his stone-faced grin, "Dr. Garza. What a surprise."

"Sheriff," she said.

"I hope it's okay," Michael/Rance said, "I needed some help finding the place."

"Sure you did," the Sheriff deadpanned. "C'mon, we'll take my car." Michael held the back door open for Sophia and he sat in the front with the Sheriff. They turned right out of the gravel lot and eased through

town on 289 north toward Henryville.

"Hope we didn't keep you waiting," Pena said, actually hoping that he had.

"Me? No. I'm just pulling in to town myself. Spent the night back in Louisville," McCoy said. He drove the streets like the king of the world, waving and nodding at his subjects. "Before we set up the company Rose Park was turning into a ghost town," he said. "Now we employ about half the town and people are living pretty good." Five blocks later they were winding through the densely wooded national forest.

"Doesn't seem like the most ideal place for a company," Pena/Broadback said.

"That's exactly why we're doing it. No national corporation in their right mind would move here. Hell, we can't even get a McDonalds for crissake. So if we wanted to save the town, we had to do it ourselves."

"Very noble," Pena said and could almost feel McCoy's grip tighten on the steering wheel. "This man would like nothing more than to belt me in the chops right now," Rance thought. "I think I'm growing on him." He smiled slightly at the thought. The impala pulled in to the seemingly deserted entrance to the Cedar Ridge Mine. The massive gates were loosely chained and locked with a heavy padlock. McCoy removed his radio microphone and punched a channel on the receiver.

"Yeah?" a voice came across.

"Yeah, open up," he said. A golf cart carrying two people crested the gravel hill in front of the Sheriff's car and the man in the passenger seat hopped out to unlock the gate, he swung it open wide and the Sheriff sped past leaving the cart in a cloud of dust. Sophia could hear the men cuss as they tore past. The Sheriff pulled up to an old metal warehouse that looked to be about 20' by 80', army green with a rusted white roof. There were a few windows on the side and one metal door. A sign screwed to the metal siding by the door read, "Alta Loma Distribution."

"So this is it?" Michael said.

"This is the office, we'll take a cart over to the plant," the Sheriff said.

The men in the gold cart pulled back up to the building and hopped off the cart, coated with dust,

they were not amused by the Sheriff's driving.

"Jesus, Buddy," the driver said.

"I'm taking the cart to the plant," McCoy announced. "Going to show these two how we make crackers," he grinned again, or it seemed like a grin, with his face you couldn't tell.

Sophia and Michael boarded the 4-seater cart and McCoy got behind the wheel, scattering gravel as he pulled away from the green office building. "That's the entrance to the old mine, yonder," he said, pointing to his left as the cart sped by a fenced-off area blocking a 20' roll-up door that standing against the side of the mountain.

"Mine played out and Uncle Sam shut'er down. We're making the best of it though," McCoy said as he rounded the hill and pulled up to a side entrance. Pointing two hundred yards past where he parked, he noted a couple pickups and a set of three loading doors. "Down there's the loading docks. All the rest of the magic happens in here."

He opened the door for his guests and led them into a cavernous room, part of the old Coal Mine that had been retrofitted with equipment for a food-grade processing facility. The room was like an airplane hanger with a low ceiling. It was empty except for an old truck that was parked fifty meters away in front of an interior wall and a row of doors. There was a man leaning against the hood. Rance didn't recognize him, but the cocky stance was familiar. Buddy diverted the group to their right, opening the door to the first room on the tour, which was a small reception area. The deserted little office led to the mixing and baking room. Here about seven workers in white aprons, hairnets and masks worked assembly line style machines, which were spinning and whirring and producing perfect little baked crackers. Their gun-toting tour guide informed them that it took about seven minutes for the white flour to make it's way through the line from start to finished product. Buddy grabbed a few fresh crackers off the end of the line as they were hustled forward

through an opening in the wall and into the next room. He handed a few to Michael and Sophia. "This is step one," he said over the noise of the machinery.

The trio walked through a swinging metal door into a packaging complex where the crackers were being mechanically separated and inserted into plastic sleeves, sealed, and wedged with colorful cardboard boxes during the final step. The process was overseen by two attentive workers standing on either side of the stainless steel line who watched for broken crackers, bad seals, or anything out of the ordinary, which they would extricate from the line with the precision of doing the same task for a long time.

"Step two," McCoy said over the noise, waving his hand for them to follow. Passing through a set of swinging doors, the next room had four workers folding corrugated boxes and loading in boxes of crackers, twenty-four per carton. The workers would load a pallet, pull it from the room with a motorized pallet jack and load another. The pallets were shrink wrapped and taken by fork life to a staging area. By this time the threesome was approaching the loading area and Buddy McCoy decided to cut the walking tour short.

"At this point we stage the pallets, then, we fill a container and ship them out. We ship about two containers a week depending on the time of year," he said.

"So that's it, then?" Michael/Rance said.

"That's about it," McCoy said. "All we need now is distribution."

"Honestly, it doesn't seem like half the town is working here. Is this really the extent of the operation?"

"We run three shifts, so, yeah, by the end of the day, about half the town has a job out here in one way or another."

"It looks like a big mine," Michael/Rance said, stepping away from Sophia's side to open an unmarked door. It was locked. "This place is cavernous, what are you doing with the rest of it?"

"Room to grow, Mr. Pena. And if we go international with your fathers ships, we'll have more crackers baking in this old mine than you could shake a stick at."

"Let me ask you this," Michael/Rance said. "Why did you put the plant in here? Why not out in the open, in that old warehouse even? Better light, better ventilation."

"Tax shelter. Feds give annual funding for retrofitting the old mine... We get paid coming and going." The thought almost brought forth a real smile that time as McCoy extended his hand toward an exit door, "If there's nothing else, my little tour is pretty much over."

"I'd like to see more of the mine," Michael/Rance said as they stepped back into the sunlight.

"Most of it's all shut down and restricted. I even post guards. It's all mandated by the feds. We can retrofit the mine, but we have to make sure the areas that haven't been upgraded are tightly secured from the public. Don't want any accidents. I'm sure you understand," Buddy said without much concern as to whether Pena understood or not.

"I see. Oh well, huh?" Pena shrugged. The Sheriff drove Pena and the doctor back to Harvey's to retrieve their car. Michael/Rance was careful to mentally note each nuance of the mine. The number of cars, trucks, people, weapons—he mentally logged them all. This was a fruitful trip, on several levels.

"Thank you, Sheriff. This was educational," Michael/Rance said, extending his hand. McCoy returned his and tipped his hat to Dr. Garza. Michael opened the door for Sophia and they headed south out of the gravel lot. Buddy watched them for a moment before his face turned cold and he headed back to the mine.

"That was interesting," Pena/Broadback said as he and Sophia started south on 289.

"I suppose," Sophia said.

"He had all the right answers, I'll give him that."

"It felt like the whole thing was staged for us," she said.

"You got that feeling, too?" he said, glancing over at his co-pilot. "Why would a little operation

like that attract the attention of a high profile guy like your boss?"

"And the Senator... I've heard her take credit for routing the new highway through this area, in reference to this business. They sure made it sound like it was a little bigger deal than this. It's kind of embarrassing, I think," Sophia said. "What are you going to do?"

Michael/Rance thought about that one. He knew what he was going to do, but how much to let her in on was another question. He decided that it was still too early in the game to include his new friend. "I guess, when it comes right down to it, business is business, right? If they want to pay me to haul a container of crackers to Chicago, well, that's what I do, right?" he said, as if thinking out loud.

Sophia was hoping that he would say more. That he would confirm her uneasiness and tell her that something didn't smell right. She would have thought more of him for doing that. As it was, maybe Michael Pena was just another businessman, just another "Investor."

McCoy scheduled tour had sidetracked him from his real business, which was still waiting for him at the mine. He radioed ahead so the gate would be open, and drove all the way back to the loading docks. He entered the staging area entering a open drive door and sped across the inner cavern to the wall of offices, in front of which was the old pickup Rance noticed earlier and the skinny redheaded kid with an assault rifle. He stood aside as Buddy dismounted. McCoy thumbed through his keys and shoved one in the door. He stared at the kid while he did and the kid felt the need to apologize for something. McCoy entered the door without a word, and slammed it shut behind him. It was a smaller room. This one may have been used for training or maybe as a break room in the days when coal had been the product of Cedar Ridge. There was a metal conference table and eight or ten metal folding chairs. The bank of fluorescent lights buzzed and hummed producing a light that would give a person a permanent headache unless they got out in to the sunshine once in a while. John Garcia/Sanchez was

cuffed to a chair, his hands behind his back, his ankles zip-tied to the front legs of the chair. There was no blindfold and no tape across his mouth. Screaming in this cavern would be pointless.

"Well, well," McCoy began as he approached Garcia/Sanchez and sat on the edge of the table. "Trespassing. Hunting alone. Using an electronic turkey call that is actually a mobile Ground Penetrating Radar unit..." Sanchez eyes widened just enough for the Sheriff to notice. "Oh yeah, sorry. Did you think we were just a bunch of illiterate Moonshiners out here, son? Now, who are you?"

"Like I told the other guys..." His sentence was cut off by a backhand slap to the face that brought the calloused knuckles of the Sheriff to bear on John's cheek, nearly knocking him off the chair.

"I'm not those other guys, son. I'm the law. I'm Sheriff William McCoy, and I asked you a question."

"John Garcia," Sanchez said, he could feel the swelling starting to pull his right eye closed.

"Mr. Garcia, what were you looking for in my woods?"

"Hunting. I was..." Another vicious slap connected to the side of John's face crashing in to the side of his mouth, slamming his teeth together, and knocking him to the floor with a grunt.

"Did I mention the GPR unit, son? We both know you weren't hunting." Buddy straightened John's chair, slamming him back upright. "Want to try that answer again?"

"Prospecting," Sanchez said on the fly, "I was... I'm a geologist."

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Garcia. Were you a part of a little ass-kicking that went on a few nights ago out on north 289?"

Sanchez looked blankly at the man, he honestly had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm sorry, I..."

"So you're just a hunter-slash-geologist who happens to be prospecting within the radius of my mine. Wandering around in the hills with a sophisticated piece of radar equipment... I see. My bad, as they say, right?" McCoy straightened up.

"Yeah, I just..." Garcia/Sanchez only got part of

his explanation out when without notice, McCoy drew back and hit him in the face with a crashing right hand, smashing his nose and sending him sprawling down to the floor where his head bounded on the concrete surface, knocking him unconscious.

"I don't believe you, son." McCoy said. And left the room.

"You stay right here, understand? I'll be back in an while," he told the redheaded guard and got in his car. The Sheriff jerked the car into reverse and slammed the accelerator to the floor, he cranked the wheel tightly, spinning the car around on the concrete floor, and sped back toward the loading dock with a fury. He drove to Harvey's, calming down along the way, and ordered a sandwich and a coffee. He sat in his car to eat and dialed a private number.

"Rafferty."

"We've got a problem."

"Pena? The tour?"

"No, that was a slam dunk. He brought Sophia, by the way, did you know that?" Rafferty didn't respond. "Anyway, a couple of guards patrolling the eastern perimeter picked up a guy snooping around."

"Snooping around?"

"He had a Ground Penetrating Radar unit. Sophisticated stuff. I've never seen anything like this."

"Who the hell is he? Is he connected with the other night?"

"ID says John Garcia, contractor out of California. He won't give me anything else, yet."

"Find out who he's working for. I'll call Lecter. This is not good, Buddy" Rafferty slammed the phone down and rubbed his brow.

McCoy clicked his own phone shut and finished his sandwich as anger began to build. He didn't like intruders. He drove two blocks to his office for a nap. He woke up as the sun was going down and splashed some water on his face then returned to the mine. He filled a bucket with water from the loading dock and brought

it, along with a framing hammer from his trunk, into the "interview room" with him. Garcia/Sanchez was still passed out on the floor; a mixture of blood and spittle was pooled under his face.

McCoy sat the hammer down and dumped the five-gallon bucket on Garcia's face where it splashed him to consciousness, nearly drowning him. He gasped for dry air. McCoy grabbed Garcia/Sanchez by the front of the shirt and jerked him back upright. He turned the chair away from the table and retrieved the hammer.

"We're going to play a little game, you and I. In this game, for each wrong answer something gets smashed. Could be a hand, could be a kneecap, or, it could be a skull. Sound fun?" McCoy said. Garcia/Sanchez was barely conscious. He was pretty tough, but this redneck Sheriff was evil. "The first question is an easy one. Who are you working for? Now, think real hard before you answer, because if I say 'wrong answer,' I'm going to drive your left knee in to next Wednesday. Understand?"

From across the room, a cell phone began to chirp in Garcia's backpack. McCoy raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch, indicating, if his stone face could exhibit expression, surprise. He stood and retrieved the backpack, unzipping it and extracting the cell phone as he was walking back to Sanchez.

"Sounds like mommies calling to see if you're bringing home supper." McCoy checked the number. It was a Kentucky area code. He clicked the 'answer' button and held the phone to Garcia's ear.

Rance made it back to the hotel at 6:00 pm. He got to his room and checked messages on the trac-phone he'd bought to communicate with Sanchez. There was a message-- John had found something. He left the coordinates of 86.25 longitude by 36.73 latitude.

He dialed the cell number of the trac-phone he had given John, after four rings it connected.

"Yeah," Sanchez said weakly.

"John?" Rance said.

"Mmm," he cleared the blood and saliva from his

mouth and throat. "Sorry, I got lost," he said.

"What? John, are you alright?"

"Yeah, uh, I'll be home in a couple of days."

"Where are you?" Rance said. The phone clicked off. Sanchez had been captured. A few seconds later the phone rang, it was Sanchez.

Rance picked up, altering his voice, "Yeah?" There was silence on the other end. The caller was trying to identify the voice, trace the number, and figure out who was calling John Garcia. Rance broke the phone and destroyed the components and then sat at the edge of the plush hotel bed and closed his eyes. He needed to start the end game. John's life was in jeopardy.

— Chapter 21 —

Sunday afternoon gave way to the evening and Andy realized that he hadn't eaten. He could feel a headache coming on. He saved his work and gobbled down a couple Excedrin from a bottle he kept in the second desk drawer before running cold water over his face and head in the bathroom. Toweling off, he began to feel a little better, but he needed to eat. He rummaged through the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator until he came up with a suitable cookie sheet concoction of nachos with cheese, jalapeno's and olives which he stuck under the broiler for a few minutes to make a mouth watering brown and gooey treat. With an oven mitt, he extracted the feast from the broiler and carried it and two cans of Diet Coke over to his sofa where he placed the works on his makeshift coffee table and popped the top of a can.

Alone with his thoughts he felt like the guy with the little "good angel" and little "bad angel" sitting on either shoulder, the one trying to encourage him to do good, the other encouraging him to indulge. The only difference was that in his life the angels didn't just stay on his shoulders whispering in to his ears. They crawled in his brain and held shouting matches and sometimes accosted one another within the confines of his skull. Mixed emotions were all he knew. "But, what if?" were the three words that each little angel screamed at him incessantly.

"You are almost done with your book, good job!"

"But what if they don't like it?"

"You are having dinner with Debbie Williams on Tuesday, fantastic!"

"But what if you make a fool of yourself and she walks out?"

"You're a loser!"

"But what if you change?" Andy considered buying a television just so the angels would have something else to do.

"That might be very relaxing."

"But what if you never get any work done?"

"Grrh." He wanted to call Debbie, or maybe Mr. Martin. He needed to talk to someone. The only person he ever called was his mother but there were some things he couldn't talk about with her. Not because she wouldn't understand, just because he had a hard time revealing his humanness around her. He didn't want to scare her, or disappoint her. Telling her how he felt much of the time might send her to an early grave. Or to a convent. The closest he came to talking with her, or anyone, really, was his blog. He didn't allow comments so he didn't really know if anyone paid much attention. Will Heard said it was a great sales tool, but Andy just looked at it as therapy. He figured if people could read his blog and still wanted to buy his books, then they might be even more screwed up than he was. He decided to write an entry before signing off for the night.

Andy's Weblog - November 11th

Surprise Endings

I'm a sucker for surprise endings. I love them in books and movies, although my books don't seem to be as surprising as I would like. But in real life, especially real life as an adult, there are rarely surprise endings. At least for me there aren't. With a few exceptions, my life has been as predictable as rain is wet. If I aim at a target, I miss it the first three times. If I start a diet, I will gain three pounds in the first week. It is as predictable as Steinbrenner's reaction to a twenty game losing streak - fire the manager.

Today, though, I got a glimpse of some people, lots of them actually, for whom surprise endings are a way of life. I went to church today. I know,

I know, I've been less than kind to the creatures who steal away in to the windowless buildings to hold their secret rituals every Sunday morning, but what can I tell you, I went. And it was surprising. It was nice. I kind of hate to admit that, being a card carrying resident of the left coast, but there it is. And what really caught me off guard was how much more normal these people seem, as compared to myself. Which is really disconcerting. I always thought they were the loonies and now that I've seen them up close I realize that the odd one may have been me all along. Well, part of that is no surprise, I guess.

As you know, I'm not one to get my hopes up, I can hardly raise my hands for more than a few minutes, and so elevating hope is out of the question. But I think there might be something to this whole faith thing. I'm not counting on it, but my life could use a surprise ending.

Mr. Predictable - Andy

Andy worked late and didn't notice the 'pm' change to 'am' on his computer clock. Rance Broadback was beginning his end game and Andy was transcribing the story as fast as his fans would one day be burning through the printed pages. At this point in the story he didn't feel like a writer, so much, as the first reader. And as such, he felt responsible to get it right so future readers, those who would have to trust his version of the events, would be able to see and feel and smell the action as it occurred. It was a responsibility that he didn't think about in the first edit, at this point it was all he could do to keep up with the action.

Appalachian Malady - 10

"Rafferty."

"Mr. Rafferty, Michael Pena," Pena/Broadback said.

"Hey, is this my new partner?" Rafferty said. The complication in Rose Park was not about to cool his lust for getting this deal done with the naive Spaniard. If he could get the kid to believe his containers were actually hauling crackers around the country instead

of brightly colored snack boxes full of hydroponically grown, grade A marijuana, it would be the coup of the century. He'd cast the bait, now he was just waiting for the strike.

"Well, we just got back. I wanted to give you a quick call."

"Yeah, we." I understand Sophia went with you."

"What can I say? She could do better and I could do worse, right?"

"You got that right. So, what do you think? We got a deal?"

"I'm pretty close. I've got to admit that I expected something quite a bit larger in scale," Michael/Rance said.

"You leave production up to me, my young friend. We can make as much as you can haul, I guarantee that."

"Listen, we haven't talked money yet," Michael/Rance said.

"Money is not a problem," Rafferty said.

"Not for you, but I may keep this off the books for a while. Do you have any creative arrangements with any of the other investors?"

"I might be able to set something up. What are you thinking about?" Rafferty offered.

"Ever made any deposits off shore? In the Cayman Islands, maybe?"

"See," Rafferty said, "I knew we spoke the same language, ha!"

"What bank do you use, if I can ask."

"We use the Bank of Austria. Very discreet."

"I know the company. Perfect." Michael/Rance lied. "Oh, and James, I have one more request."

"Name it," Rafferty said, trying to contain himself.

"I want to meet all the investors, on site, to ink the distribution deal. I want to know who I'm working with."

"You've already met most of them, at my place the other night."

"Even so, I want everyone there, in one room, when I sign on."

"I can probably put that together at my place in

Versailles."

"No. At Alta Loma Distribution."

"That's not going to happen, Michael."

"Why not?"

"Too far out of the way. These people are busy making the world go round. They can't just drop everything and drive out to Rose Park. For crissake! That's why they're called Investors, they're silent partners, Jesus."

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Then I'm not your man," Pena/Broadback announced. If Rafferty was as hot for this deal as he thought he was, and Rance was pretty sure he saw the dollar signs in his eyes each time they talked, he would make this happen. If not, he would find another way.

"My god, Michael. Be reasonable. These are private people."

"If this deal is as big as you and McCoy say it is, then the Investors stand to reap big-time profits from this, and they're going to be paying me a handsome fee to handle the distribution. I need to see the whites of their eyes the same as they need to see mine."

"Give me a day to work it out," Rafferty said.

"And James, my equipment can be on site 24 hours after the ink dries.

"Now that sounds pretty good," Rafferty said.

"I've got to fly home to make some arrangements, but I'm coming right back. Call the cell if you come up with a time for the meet."

"Yeah, later Michael." Rafferty disconnected the call. He was a few phone calls away from being the biggest distributor of Marijuana in the world, and it would be taking place right under the noses of the federal government, in fact, they were building him his own damn road to use for distribution. "Life is good," he smiled, and then leaned forward to make some phone calls.

"I don't care who the hell he is, he's an equal partner and I want him there."

"I'll do what I can James, but things are pretty tense around here," Senator Lecter said.

"Dammit, Phyllis. This is what we've all been waiting for. If the skinny prick blows this for the rest of us I'll ruin him, do you understand?"

"He won't like being threatened, James."

"Just remind him who helped him get that friggin' position in the first place, not to mention that off shore account, and who's been making deposit's in to it for the past two years, huh?" Rafferty slammed the phone. "Politics!" he screamed, "grrah!"

"Steven, thanks for meeting this morning," Tami Beatty said. The Curious George coffee bar was about half full. Professors and their wives out for a walk and a coffee on a beautiful fall morning, students writing endless research papers and individuals holding meetings with the Washington Post, Times, or even actual people.

"No, the pleasure is mine. How is your knee by the way?" Tan asked.

"Better, thanks to you. I used to fall like that all the time, had calluses built up on my knees from skating as a little girl. But boy, a few years and a few pounds later and I tell you. Falling like that hurts," she said. They ordered coffee drinks and sat in comfortable chairs by the window.

Steven was amazed to be asked out by this gorgeous woman who was probably five or six years older than he was. "It's only coffee," he kept reminding himself.

"So, you've been with the Senator for a long time," Tami began.

"Pretty much since I graduated, yeah. It's been good, I mean, she takes care of me pretty well," he said.

"You going to follow her to the West Wing?"

"You think she's got a chance?" he said.

"That's what I'm hearing," Tami said.

"I don't know, I might. But that's a whole new game, you know. I mean, I don't have much of a life as it is." he smiled at the thought.

Tami laughed, "Those people are totally 24/7, I know some of them." Steven raised his eyebrows and looked out the window, sipping his coffee, wishing some friends could see him right now.

"Can I ask you a hypothetical question, Steven?"

"I don't know, what?" his smile didn't leave, but he was growing cautious.

Tami leaned in and folded her hands, resting them around her coffee mug. "If you were to find out that your boss was involved in illegal activity, what would you do?"

"What the hell?" he said, drawing back and looking quickly around the room.

"Sorry, that came across a little harsh," she frowned.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm glad you asked, can't be too careful, right?" Tami produced her Post I.D and her driver's license. "I'm a reporter for the Post."

"Oh, God," Steven said and looked at the ceiling.

"Hey, don't worry about it. You are totally in the clear, we're just talking, just having coffee, you know? It's the Senator. She may be involved in some illegal activity."

Steven stood to his feet, "I don't have any idea what you are talking about, but I assure you that neither I, or..." Tami cut him off by holding out both hands and pushing them toward the table in an effort to settle him down.

"Steven," she whispered, "being an accomplice to a federal offense is very serious, I'm sure you know that, as a pre-law grad." He slowly sat back down, on the edge of his seat as if for a quick escape if needed.

"What is she being accused of?" he asked calmly.

"Nothing, yet. Maybe nothing ever. I just need you to help me with a little information," Tami said.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you need. And I assure you that I have done nothing and have no knowledge of illegal activity in our office."

"Of course. All I need right now is information I'm pretty sure you have. I'm looking for any appointment

activity between the Senator and other government officials, specifically CIA, FBI or Homeland Security."

"That's it?"

She raised her eyebrows, "I told you it would be easy." Tami's smile melted his heart again.

Slowly, reluctantly, Steven reached in to his pack and produced the Daytimer desk journal. He flipped through it quickly; he knew every entry by heart but wanted to confirm his thinking before saying anything.

"She's met with A.D. Williams several times in the past month," as he said that his phone rang with a unique chirp. Steven's life flashed briefly before his eyes as he felt like he was just caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "It's the Senator," he said, glancing at the number on the digital caller id, his eyes wide and his face as white as a sheet. "My God!" he whispered, looking around the restaurant.

"Be calm, it's just a coincidence, trust me" Tami said, trying to settle her young new friend. She was certain now that he was a good guy and whatever it was the Senator was up to, it was outside the scope of his knowledge.

"Senator Lecter?" he said.

"Steven. I've got to meet with A.D. Williams. Immediately. Today. Have him come to the office. And book me in to Lexington tomorrow. Actually, I may fly with A.D. Williams, so hold that for now. Stay close to the phone. Call me back with a time to expect him." The phone clicked off and Steven was stunned speechless.

"What did she say? Steven?" Tami saw absolute fear in the young man's eyes. She reached across and held his hand. "Listen," she whispered, "Whatever she's up to, you're not involved, okay? You can be the hero here. Just help me out."

"She wants me to set a meeting with the Assistant Director immediately. And she is flying, maybe with him, to Lexington tomorrow. That's totally off schedule."

"Okay, listen," Tami said. "Just do your job, okay? Just like any other day, right? We can talk later, but that may be all I need, and trust me, you are totally in the clear, okay?"

"But, I thought, maybe..." he started, and she knew exactly where he was going. She cut him off short.

"Steven, when this is all over we'll go on a real date, okay? I'm serious. Right now we both have jobs to do." Tami smiled and he returned his own.

"Okay," he closed his eyes briefly and nodded. "I understand." She reached across the table and touched his hand, then stood and walked out onto the sidewalk and, before long, out of his view.

The unexpected light of a new day crept in to the office window without warning. Andy stretched and straightened his back in the chair and twisted the blinds open. It was morning. The deep blue glow of the city had become a pale grey. The disembodied brightness of the city lights was exposed to show the light posts and buildings where they were permanently affixed. Andy closed his eyes to gather his bearings. He didn't work all night very often, he usually had to shut down his computer late in the evening to save the story from becoming a rambling blither of nonsense. But last night had been magical. The story had poured from the little room in his mind, through his muscles and nerves and out of his fingertips like an African river, flooding the dry plains and bringing life to the region. He didn't know if it was any good, he just knew what he had seen, and the experience of writing it down had been exhilarating.

He saved his work and took a long shower. Donning only a pair of gym shorts, he pulled the cover down on his bed and lay down. Sleep came fast, deep and devoid of dreams. He awoke at noon with the appetite of one who had put in an honest days work, which, he suspected he had. Andy stepped in to the kitchen after getting dressed and realized he hadn't cleaned up his nacho incident from the previous evening. This drove him from the kitchen and down the front steps to find solace at a place that did the dishes for you, Martin's Deli. The Monday lunch crowd was in the restaurant and Mr. Martin and his niece were busy making sandwiches and scooping salad and soup into bowls for their hungry patrons. Andy got in line with the masses and was pleased that he might have helped the Martin's avoid some kind of real problems with the loan sharks.

The little deli might have been forced to close, the Martin's may have had to move, someone may have gotten hurt, even worse than Mrs. Martin already had. Instead, he was standing in line on, what would

appear to everyone else, to be a normal day at the little German/Italian neighborhood deli. “Strange how things work,” he thought to himself.

“Andy, hey! How you doing?” Mr. Martin said. The old man pointed at him and said, “Italian Special, am I right?”

“Okay, sure,” Andy smiled in reply. Mr. Martin sailed in to action like a sushi chef in a room full of fresh fish, cutting, chopping and blending ingredients in search of perfection. He brought the sandwich back to the counter and called Andy, who had taken a seat by the window. Andy came back up to the counter with a bag of Doritos and a bottle of Snapple. He laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter and Mr. Martin picked it up and gave it back.

“You’re money is not needed here anymore,” he announced.

“Hey, don’t do that. Look at me,” Andy laughed, “That would be a financial disaster for the deli.”

“I’m not kidding, I talked it over with Maria. You eat free from now on.”

“No, sorry, I can’t do that. If you won’t ring it in, I’ll leave it as a tip. But I’m paying. What we did was between friends, this is your business and I want to keep you in business for a long time,” Andy said firmly.

Slowly the old man gave in, “Okay,” he said, “But if you ever need anything, you know, anything...” Mr. Martin flattened his lips under his bushy mustache and nodded, “I do it, okay?”

Andy smiled and agreed. “Sounds like a plan.” He took his food back to his seat and enjoyed every bite. During a break in the flow, Mr. Martin came in to the dining room to bus a few tables and he sat down for a moment with Andy.

“How is Maria? I’m sorry I haven’t been over to see her.”

“She is good. She is coming home soon.”

“Hey, that’s great news... She must be recovering fast, then.”

“I say it is the good food I have been bringing in. Better than the food from the hospital, ja?”

“I am certain of it,” Andy agreed.

“I tell you, I don’t know how we’re going to get her upstairs. Very slowly, ja?” Mr. Martin laughed, “Maybe we make a bed in the store room.” Where they slept was the least of his worries, he wanted his wife home. Mr. Martin already looked physically better at the prospect of having her

home soon.

“So, are you going to throw a party for her, kind of like Oktoberfest?”

“Hey, that’s a great idea! We’ll invite the friends and make food, bring out the good German beer, ja?” He slapped Andy on the shoulder, “You got to come, okay?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Andy finished the meal and headed back to his house. He opened his Internet browser and did a search for handicapped stair climbers. He found half a dozen vendors. He located one in the Marina district that had a product that had a metal rail, to which a chair was secured and, with the push of a button, it slowly went up or down the span of the stairwell. “Man, that is exactly what she is going to need,” Andy thought. He got the range of prices and availability and arranged for installation on the next day. He printed a brochure and walked it back over to the Deli. The lunch rush was over and Mr. Martin was sitting at a table opposite the saloon doors taking a break.

“Hey, Andy, you hungry already?”

“No, maybe in an hour or two,” he laughed. “No, I wanted to show you something.” He brought the flyer to the table and sat down by his friend. “What do you think about this? It hooks up to your stairs and Mrs. Martin just sits down and enjoys the ride. This way you wouldn’t have to toss her up on your shoulders and carry her up,” Andy said.

“Hey, now this is nice. How much are these things?”

“They’re not that much, really. So listen, I’m getting you one for the Welcome Home Party, okay?” Andy said.

“No, you can’t do that. You have helped us out too much already.”

“I want to, really. I’ve got some savings and I would really like to do this. I won’t be able to sleep wondering if you’ve made it up the stairs or not. And this is selfish, if Mrs. Martin can come downstairs, maybe she will make the Italian Special for me...”

The old man shook his head and looked at the paper. “It is really nice,” he said quietly, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just let the guys in tomorrow morning when they come to install it.”

Mr. Martin laughed, “My God, Andy. Tomorrow?” Mr. Martin stood and stretched out his arms, Andy stood as well and the old man

nearly squeezed the life out of him with a bone crushing German bear hug. “We keep it as a surprise for Maria, ja?”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Andy said and left the Deli for the second time in an hour. He smiled all the way home. As he crossed the street with the green light Simon and Garfunkel sang, “*God bless you, please, Mrs. Robinson, heaven holds a place for those who pray. Hey, hey, hey...*” It was the only line that came, but it repeated itself a dozen times till Andy was singing along, adding three more “hey’s” at the end along with a guitar part that only sounded like the original while still in his head, in public, it sounded like, “*Duh-doonle-do-dune-doo.*”

Chapter 22

Andy, Simon, Garfunkel and Mrs. Robinson went to the office to work on the story. Andy scanned a few paragraphs from the writing frenzy of the previous night, and took off from there.

Appalachian Malady - 11

"Ran, God. I'm glad you called," Tami said from her car, picking up the phone on the second ring.

"Great minds think alike, as they say," he said calmly. "So, you got something cooking?"

"I'll say. Good tip on Williams, by the way. Sounds like Lecter is in the sheets with him, big time. I guess they're both headed to Kentucky tomorrow for some meeting. They've been meeting quite a bit the last couple of months."

"That'll do," he said. "You about ready to write a story, Spin?"

"Does that mean this is about over?"

"I can almost hear the fat lady," Rance said. "Gotta go."

"Jim Tate."

"Hey Bud, 'bout ready to play some ball?"

"Been waiting for the call, Rance, we've got nothing up here."

"Okay, here's the deal, and timing's critical on this, huh?"

"Shoot."

"I believe A.D. Williams ordered the hit. No way to pin that on him at this point, it's just a hunch. But leave that one alone for now, okay?"

"Got it."

"Next, Lecter and Williams are the D.C. links. They're working with James Rafferty, William Prate, Sheriff Buddy McCoy and John Welsh, an accountant in Lexington. They call themselves "Investors." They own equal shares in a company called Alta Loma Distribution in Rose Park, Ky. They run the whole deal out of the old Cedar Ridge Mine a few miles north of town on Hwy. 289. The company makes crackers... I'm meeting with all the investors tomorrow. I don't have a time yet, but I'll give you plenty of heads up. I think that's when the cavalry charges in, so be ready for that, I'll fill you in on the details. Keep it to yourself for now. With me?"

"Wait a minute. Crackers?" Jim said.

"That's the story. The mine is huge, heavy with guards, and lots of automatic weapons. I think they're smuggling the pot out of the area in cracker boxes. That's just a hunch at this point. I think they've retrofitted the mine to be an underground hydroponic marijuana farm."

"No way."

"And, through tax incentives and what not, I think the feds are inadvertently financing the whole thing."

"Ran, this is too far out there... Is there anything I can do on this end?" Tate said.

"The Investors use the Bank of Austria in the Caymans. I'm thinking you'll find accounts there for Lecter and Williams, probably the rest of them, too. Locate them and get ready to freeze them. But its just information gathering at this point. Don't move on any of this till you hear from me."

"What did you do, take the week off?" Jim said in jest.

"Yeah, you know, just laying out by the pool. Be ready, huh?"

"Be careful out there."

"Always," Rance said, and disconnected the line.

Appalachian Malady - 12

Rance Broadback was an expert at chess. His forte was patience. He would wait until his adversary had tipped his strategic direction before engaging his own offensive. He wanted to drive or fly immediately to Rose Park and find John Sanchez. His friend sounded hurt, and he wouldn't put it past these people, based on what happened to Senator Hagin, to kill him and bury him in a forest hollow. But he had to believe that John could hang in there for one more night. Rance forced himself to eat a light dinner and close his eyes. The puzzle was coming together but would require a few parts to move in to place that he had little control over. He could only wait.

At 10:30 pm his cell phone rang, it was James Rafferty.

"Pena," Michael/Rance answered.

"We're all set. Damn this is going to be a hassle. You realize that, don't you?"

"It's your company, Jim. You pull the plug and I go away. There are plenty of truck drivers out there to haul your crackers."

"No. Look, I'll have a car pick you up there at the hotel at 10:00 am. The meeting's set for 3:00 pm. everyone will be there."

"I'll drive myself, if that's all right. 3:00 pm's fine, though. At The Alta Loma Distribution office?"

"Right. But listen, everyone would sure rather just meet at my place, much simpler all the way around."

"Thanks for humoring me, then. I need to do it this way for my own peace of mind."

"You realize that there is a lot on the line here..." Rafferty said. It wasn't a threat, exactly, but he made it clear that there would be much expected in return for the accommodation.

"I will not disappoint you, Mr. Rafferty," Pena/Broadback said in a way that let the older man know he understood what was between the lines.

"I'm glad you understand," Rafferty said. "See you tomorrow afternoon, then."

"I'll be there a little before three," Michael/Rance said, and hung up the phone.

"Tate."

"Hey Jim, Any luck?"

"Rance, God. The Austrian Bank links all of them."

"Great, listen. It's all going down tomorrow at the Cedar Ridge Mine just outside Rose Park. I need you to be ready to hit that mine like your invading Baghdad, okay? Timing on this is everything. The meeting is scheduled for 3:00 pm at the Cedar Ridge Mine. There is a fire road and an exit drive door at the following coordinates: 86.25 longitude by 36.73 latitude. Be ready to move some units in from that direction. Have the rest of the troops come in the front door and by chopper. There's no way to sneak up on the place and the whole town is wired in, so if any feds are lurking around early the game is over, got it?"

"Okay. We hit the place when?"

"3:15 pm est. exactly, not a second earlier or later. Jim, have a squad secure the vehicles so the dignitaries can't escape. Everyone should be in combat gear and ready for a fire fight."

"Will you be around?"

"If I am try not to shoot me, huh? Listen, I've got a couple of reporters who might wander by to document the whole thing for you. They won't be there till after you've got things under control."

"You promise somebody a story?"

"Not is so many words, but you know how it goes, everybody has to make a living."

"Okay, I guess I've got some work to do," Tate said.

"If I don't see you tomorrow, we'll meet for racquetball down the road, okay."

"Deal."

Rance hesitated making the next call, because it breached protocol from every angle and could be the piece of this elaborate puzzle that blew up in his face. But he knew it was a critical piece. He dialed the phone.

"Madden." The voice was sharp.

"Secure line?"

"Hold." Ten seconds passed as General Madden pushed a button on a small plastic black receiver in his lower desk drawer. After it chirped to life and gave him a solid line of green lights he came back to the phone. "Secure," he announced.

"Sir, sorry for the interruption," Rance began.

"How can I help you?" The General asked, not mentioning a name, although he knew exactly who was calling.

"There's a complication, sir. I need your help. Timing is critical."

"Go on."

"I believe A.D. Williams has obtained your Contractor List."

"That's impossible," the General said.

"Maybe so, sir. My own position may be compromised."

"What do I need to do?" the General asked.

"Tomorrow morning sometime, A.D. Williams will leave the office for the day. At 15:15, his office needs to be sealed, his computer unplugged, and his assistant relieved of duty and placed in temporary custody." "You can't just waltz in to the FBI and shut down the Assistant Director's office."

"That's why I'm making this call, sir. You're the only person who could pull it off."

"I'll have to inform the Director."

"You work it however you need to on that end, just don't move before 3:15 pm."

"Okay, why 15:15?"

"If it happens before that, the op will be exposed. I need him to believe he is safe."

"And what has he done?"

"I believe he ordered the hit on Senator Hagin and is intimately involved in the operation I am investigating."

"I thought this might percolate to the top," the General said.

"Fortunately, I believe this is as high as it goes."

"15:15 tomorrow."

"You won't have any other interruptions from me, sir."

"Not a problem. Come home safe, huh?" Madden hung up the phone and considered his options. He didn't normally become personally involved in operations any more. He had led his share and was now more than content calling the plays from the booth. But Rance was right; he was the only one that could ambush the AD. The Director would need to be involved, but past that, it would be a stealth operation. The fact was that Madden was certain that Williams didn't have the Contractor list. The legend that it was held securely in the mind of General George Madden was true, he didn't have it written down. He knew every name and number and he never shared the information with another soul. It was not only his creed-- it was his livelihood. If he were out of the picture, the Contractors would no longer be available, and that possibility provided him with a wide swath of power inside the beltway among those at the highest levels of government. He wasn't one of the Joint Chief's but they all had his number memorized in case they needed help. And he, like his short list of Contractors, was very well compensated.

"The love of money is the root of all evil," he reminded himself as he considered how to handle A.D. Williams. Williams had approached Madden about hiring a contractor for an off-the-books job. Madden explained to the young bureau executive that he had no idea what he was talking about. "I haven't been in that game for a long time," Madden remembered saying. Funny how your memory improves when someone deposits a million dollars in to an offshore account in your name. He regretted doing it, but he had given Williams one name, not one of his contractors, they would never conduct an operation

against an American Senator. The name he provided was that of a Russian freelancer that Madden had flipped during the cold war that was currently supplying muscle and information to the highest bidder. It was this chimp, which could be somewhat easily dispatched, that Madden had given to Williams.

The question was, would Williams give up him up to save his own hide. The General was pretty certain that the weak man would. Madden had to believe, at that level, that it would be Williams unsteady word against the impeccable record of the General. He called the Director to arrange a morning meeting. Next he arranged a wire transfer of his ill-gotten money from the bank in the Cayman Islands to an account in Sweden where he regularly padded his nest. He closed the account at the Bank of Austria and instructed the manager of international banking to delete his name from the account records. He was assured that they would, when in fact, account records were permanent.

"Hey Ran," Tami said"

"Just checking in. How's your story coming?"

"Lot's of loose ends, but, you know, these things take time."

"You'll get it. Hey, got a question for you."

"Sounds like more work..."

"Well, I can always call my girl at the Times..." he laughed.

"Bum. What do you have?"

"I was wondering if you and maybe your Kentucky reporter friend might like a front row seat to a little party that's being thrown tomorrow."

"I'm listening," she said, moving to the edge of her office chair.

"I think all those loose ends might tie up rather nicely," he said. Rance proceeded to give Tami Beatty the details of where to go and what to expect. He stressed the need for accuracy in her timing of arrival and told her to be very careful and very discreet.

Tuesday morning Andy was up and showered by 8:00 am. He was standing at the blinds watching for the installation truck that wasn't supposed to begin till 9:00 am. He decided to walk for coffee since and bring some back for Mr. Martin. This was much more fun than paying the scummy nephews debt. This felt like something that was really going to help his friends get back to their normal life. And, subconsciously, Andy knew that would help him maintain his normal life. He sat down for a coffee and a toasted bagel slathered with cream cheese out of a little plastic carton. It was Light cream cheese, so he used two. Then he bought two coffees' to go and walked back to the Deli. The installation truck had parked in the back alley and three men were already at work taking measurements and constructing the metal rail upon which the chair would climb. Mr. Martin was in the alley watching in amazement. Andy brought the coffee and stood alongside his friend.

"Here you go," he said.

"Oh, Andy, thanks. My God, would you look at all this? How does this thing work, anyway?"

"I don't know, really."

"It looks like she will fall right out of the thing," Mr. Martin said. The crew laughed and said it was as simple and foolproof as could be. In two hours they had the rail set and were attaching the chair. It was a neat little contraption that sat, at the lower level, on the ground like any other chair. Mrs. Martin would just walk over to it, or roll over in a wheelchair, fold down the seat, and sit down. There was a large plate on which to set your feet and a seat belt. After she was secure, the installer demonstrated, "You just push the up arrow, and there you go." The men watched as the little chair began a straight path up the stairwell, parallel with the stairs. It came to rest on the top and pivoted locking in to place in a way that would allow Mrs. Martin to step off and enter the apartment, well away from the top step. Inside of two hours they were ready for a weighted test run. One of the workers sent the chair down again and they asked Mr. Martin if he would take it for a spin.

"Hey, I could get used to this," he called as the chair quietly ascended the stairs and pivoted into its finished position. He pushed the down arrow and returned to the bottom, shaking his head with delight. "Now this is going to be perfect, I'm telling you. Perfect!" He shook

the hands of the installers and told them to come back for the party the following night. "My Maria, she'll want to thank you, and we've got some pretty good German beer to serve, am I right, Andy?"

Andy nodded and thanked the installers. He checked his watch. He had plenty of time, but he did want to do a little work today before his dinner date. He excused himself from Mr. Martin who was still admiring the new construction, and returned to the house. He ate a light lunch and sat down to rejoin the story.

Appalachian Malady - 13

The clear blue sky and crisp air of a beautiful fall morning greeted Pena/Broadback as he checked out of the hotel at 9:00 am. He returned his rental car to an off-site office that he'd found in the phone directory and walked to a nearby car lot where he strolled to the back of the service department and hot-wired a late model pickup that was probably a trade-in vehicle. He eased out of the lot through the front entrance, waving to the salesmen who were standing around waiting for business. At 11:00 am he was half way to Somerset and placed a call to a number he had called twice this week.

"Hello?"

"Sophia, Michael," he said.

"Hello Michael, I miss you," she admitted.

"And I, you," he said, and meant.

"Listen, I'm almost done here in the area, we're wrapping up our contract this afternoon."

"I know, very exciting," she said. James had told her in passing earlier in the morning that Pena was joining the team and that she could expect to see a lot more of him in the future.

"Well, I was just thinking, I'm going to take a few days off after today, you know, just to get ready for the new business, and all. And, I was wondering, maybe, if you would like to join me, you know, meet me somewhere." Rance/Michael was acting innocent enough, but he really did want to see her again.

"Michael, I don't know..." she began.

"I know it's short notice, it's okay if you can't..."

"It's just..."

"I understand, believe me," he said.

"No, I want to, uh. We're will I meet you?"

"At the county airport in Knoxville, Tennessee, I have a plane waiting. 5:00 pm."

"Knoxville? I'll have to leave here by 2:00 pm? That's only three hours."

"It's up to you. I know it's the spur of the moment, but I'd really like to see you again, just the two of us."

"I'll try to be there," she said.

"I really hope you can make it. I really do." he said, and disconnected the line. He drove in silence stopping only for gas. He hoped that Sophia would figure out a way to make it. It would guarantee that she was out of harms way, and was an ironclad alibi for him if Rafferty found out about it. Rafferty would expect a relationship with Sophia would only make the deal more appealing to Pena, even though Rance didn't expect that she would inform her boss of her weekend plan, unless she was forced to.

A convoy of SUV's departed the Rafferty farm at 1:30 pm with passengers Prate, Welsh and Rafferty who were meeting the Senator and Assistant Director at the Lexington Airport and caravanning on to Rose Park for a short meeting. Sophia didn't know why they needed multiple vehicles and most of the farm security personnel, but she had a plan of her own to conduct and the less people around the farm, the better.

Rance grabbed a backpack of special gear he'd picked up at a surplus store and drove as fast as possible to Alta Loma County. He found the coordinates that Sanchez called out and located the southern fire road and gate. He checked his watch. He had an hour and fifteen minutes until the meeting began, and an hour and a half before Jim Tate stormed the mine with God knows how much manpower. But if he knew Jim, he knew it would be plenty. The motto of the DEA was always; if five can

do the job, then send twenty.

He stowed the pickup in the brush 100 meters outside the gate and took off on foot just off the road. He was normally a seven-minute miler, but with his good friends life on the line and a group of Investors to meet, his clip was more like 6:15 on the gravel fire road.

The first guard shack he saw was on the road a few kilometers from the gate. He slowed his pace and observed the small metal building as he approached, still just off the road, walking steadily. There were two guard's playing cards in the shack. Rance stepped in to the shack with a smile. "Good morning men," he said, startling them. They both jumped up from their seats and reached for their guns. They were much too slow to save their lives as they were dispatched by two lethal thrusts of his knife. Rance propped their limp bodies back up to the table and continued down the road.

Rance paused and took cover as he reached three kilometers. He checked his mobile GPS and took note of the coordinates. He was close. Staying off the road he continued, at a slower pace, down the fire road and began walking slowly as he came to a blind, right hand turn. He edged to the corner, behind a sizable boulder and looked. There was the drive door, hewn in to the side of a shear cliff. There was a gravel parking area and a few vehicles parked along the perimeter. One truck was the site of a cigarette break for several guards who were smoking and playing country music. One of the four of them broke away and went over to the metal walking entrance door and pushed a red button. He peered through the door and it clicked, unlocking it for entrance. He disappeared inside.

It was about fifty meters across the gravel lot, so Rance chose to back up around the corner, cross the road and climb the hill on the other side, circling around the guards. He approached the front of the truck as two guards sat on the tailgate and another leaned against a Celica that was parked next to the pickup. The windows were down in the truck and Toby Keith was singing about being an American Soldier, Rance couldn't shake the suspicion that these losers probably

fashioned themselves as American soldiers, something that couldn't have been further from the truth. He walked calmly to the Celica side of the truck and startled the guards, first the one on the car and then the other two. Rance left them lying in their own blood with three swift, almost elegant strokes of his Buck and pulled them all back in the bushes and tossed their guns in the woods. He turned off the ignition switch and pulled the NASCAR 24 key ring, pocketing the set for later, and walked calmly toward the entry door. He pushed the button like he owned the place and waited to be buzzed in. The small guard room on the inside of the door was open and the guard was sitting with his feet up making his way through a package of Twinkies. He didn't recognize Rance and jumped to his feet, Rance stepped in to the office and struck the man in the neck with a chop that severed his windpipe. He eased the gasping guard back into his chair and leaned him over on the desk for a long nap.

Staying close to the wall, Rance made his way across the staging area-- the room was enormous. There were shrink-wrapped pallets stacked floor to ceiling on huge metal shelves like you might see at a warehouse store. He stepped behind one of the pallets and cut through the plastic into a carton. He pulled a box of crackers out of a carton, Cheesy Wheat's, "Yummy," Rance whispered, pulling open the box top and sliding out the contents, a sealed 12 ounce bag of little brown crackers coated with a mixture of salt and cheese flavored powder.

Rance looked around wondering if he had misread everything. Quickly, he cut a big swatch out of the palletized plastic and removed an entire carton of Cheesy Wheat's. He tore in to the tops of three random boxes. All crackers. He stood up and started to sweat. He needed to think like Rafferty, think like that devil McCoy. They were smart, but not that smart. What had they done? He studied the pallet, four cartons high by four wide. He squinted, his brain too pumped at the moment for grade school math. If the outer layer of cartons were all crackers, that would still leave, "What? Twelve interior cartons?" he thought. He ripped the shrink-wrap and silently lifted three more cartons

from the exterior wall of the pallet. He reached across and pulled a carton from the center, quickly opening it and extracting a box of Cheesy Wheat's to test the theory. Opening the seal he dumped the contents, a vacuum-sealed brick of dark green marijuana. Jackpot.

He looked around the storeroom and realized there must be ten thousand cartons stacked in here, each with twelve boxes of marijuana-brick 'crackers'. Rance dropped the box back into the carton and ran across the room, escaping notice from the forklift drivers who were unarmed and could care less who was running through their warehouse. He stopped behind the last row of pallets and looked across at a long grey wall that extended the length of the warehouse. There were two large drive doors, both closed and one entry door that was guarded by two men who appeared to be more alert than those he had met so far.

It was a thirty-meter distance that he couldn't span on foot without being easily spotted as an intruder, so Rance retraced his steps and scanned a few aisles till he saw a forklift driving the opposite way down an aisle. He ran up to the unit from behind and confiscated it from the driver by way of a crashing blow to the back of the neck. It rendered the driver unconscious as he never knew what hit him. The forklift sputtered as the driver's foot fell limp and Rance pulled the man off the seat and laid him between a stack of boxes. He got on the forklift and headed straight for the guarded door, keeping the fork at a just the right height so they couldn't see who was driving. As Rance approached the door the guards became a little nervous and one stepped out toward the lift and held his arm out motioning Rance to stop.

Rance pulled the lift to a stop and, with his head down, hopped out of the lift and into the face of the guard who didn't expect to feel the cold steel of Rance's blade as it was thrust in to his stomach and up under his ribs. Rance helped him down to the floor, hiding the weapon, "What's wrong, hey, come help him!" he cried. The other guard took two steps and saw a flash of steel as Rance removed the blade. The guard stopped and swung his weapon around. Rance lunged and slid across the concrete, taking the guard down by the

legs before he could discharge a round and quickly pivoted to the top of him before he could react and swiped the knife across his throat. "Sorry, no time for pleasantries," he whispered.

The door was locked so Rance shoved the blade of the buck knife in to the edge of the lock mechanism and pried the door open. He opened it an inch to be certain there were no guards on the backside. Instead, he found the mother lode.

Behind the grey door was the largest room he had seen thus far. It was roughly the size of a football field. It was lined with row after row of raised planting beds with growing lights and hydroponic watering systems. It looked like a forest of marijuana. The plants were at various stages of growth, there were a few people tending the plants, people in white lab coats with clip boards, walking around writing down numbers and checking leaves. Others were gardening, carefully tilling, primping and caring for the plants. This was an operation the proportion of which Rance had never dreamed.

He quickly exited the door he had come in and tossed the bodies of both guards on the empty pallet on the forks of the lift. He continued through the warehouse in a westerly direction until he found a good place to stash the forklift and it's passengers. He continued by foot. He checked his watch. It was 2:15 pm., he needed to find John Sanchez and get out of there, if that was even possible at this point. He passed through a door, still heading southwest, figuring he would eventually reach the docks and an area that was more likely to be populated. He entered the loading/staging area and noted that there were a few guards walking around, but the one thing that had remained the same since he was last here was the old truck that was standing on the far side of the room in front of a row of offices. There was no way to make a discreet approach, so Rance stayed close to the wall and walked slowly, he didn't really blend in, but his step was quiet and the two young men were more interested in their conversation than in actually guarding the door. He stepped behind the first guard, stealthily, and grabbed him from behind twisting his neck quickly one way, and then snapping it back

the other violently, making an audible popping sound. His partner turned toward the sound and Rance pounced, dropping the guard with a lethal blow to the throat. Rance put both bodies in the truck and turned on the radio. "Enjoy," he said quietly.

The door was locked and Rance had no idea but that there were dozens more weapon wielding rednecks just inside the door. But he pried it open with his knife nonetheless and stepped in like he owned the place. The fluorescent lights in the room illuminated the slumped body of John Sanchez, sitting in a metal chair with his face on the table resting in a pool of his own blood and vomit. He was cuffed to the chair, hand and foot, and unconscious. Rance ran to him, "Cavalry's here buddy," he whispered. He checked his partners' pulse and found hope in the slow but regular beat. Sanchez stirred to life, recognizing his friend.

"How'd you find me?" he moaned.

"Follow the rednecks," Rance said. He quickly picked the cuffs with his knife and cut the zip ties. "Can you walk?"

"I'll try. Maniac Sheriff busted me in the knee," John said. He attempted to stand. Searing pain shot through his body with a jolt, he nearly passed out, instead, he convulsed, hurling a string of bloody bile on to the table. John gritted his teeth against the pain and slumped back in the chair.

"Take the weight off that leg and hold on to my shoulder," Rance said and grabbed John around the waist. "Let's get out of here." He felt his friends body tense for the pull, then John let out a sigh and slumped backward. "What? John?"

"Well. Mr. Pena..." Sheriff McCoy said as he shut the door behind himself. Rance lowered John Sanchez back into the chair and stood slowly. Buddy McCoy had come to check on his prisoner, maybe extract a little more information out of him before the big meeting. He stood with arms crossed, the heavy framing hammer in his right hand. His head was tilted slightly, pleased with himself, his beady black eyes and rattlesnake grin full of playful rage. "You had us all going, there, didn't you? Going to dupe all the rednecks and, what? Take over the operation? Do you think you're that smart? Do

you think you're that tough?"

"Buddy, I don't know what you're talking about," Rance said, trying to buy some time so he could get in a better strike position. He was behind the heavy table a good eight feet from McCoy who held a hammer, a holstered Colt 45, and, most importantly, had some room to maneuver.

"Son, I just drove up from the back door. I saw the broken pallet. I saw what was left of my guards!" He raised his voice momentarily and grit his teeth, mindlessly adjusting and tightening his grip on the hammer.

He was right handed; he would have to do something with that hammer before he went for the gun. He'd either throw it at Pena/Broadback, or trade hands, or something. That would be Rance's only opportunity before John and he were target practice.

"So, Mr. Pena," Buddy said, settling himself down to a boil, "What do you think of my little operation?" Buddy was going to kill them. He decided that as soon as he opened the door. But his ego was hungry. The brilliant hydroponic growing system had been his idea. There were so few people who knew about it. And no one he could brag to. He wanted someone to tell him how great it was. "Well?" he smirked.

"Honestly, Buddy," Rance said, now smiling, "It's amazing. I can't wait till it's all mine."

McCoy's smirk turned into a frown and his black eyes disappeared into a wrinkled squint. Without a word he dropped the hammer to the concrete floor where it bounced between the table and the wall and, in the same motion reached for his gun. Instantly, Rance dove blindly over the table in the direction of the hammer, grabbed the handle with his left hand and rolled to his back. His eyes trained on McCoy a split second before the Sheriff had his gun up. McCoy pivoted, bringing the weapon from right to left as Rance flung the framing hammer striking the Sheriff between the left eye and the temple with the force of a Roger Clemens fastball, making a dull cracking sound and burying the two wide steel claws two inches into McCoy's skull. The Sheriff convulsed, dropped the Colt and collapsed against the wall.

Without a word Broadback jumped to his feet and kicked the gun to the far end of the room. He found McCoy's keys and returned to Sanchez. "Let's try this again."

The two men exited out the only door-- all was still quiet. Rance helped Sanchez into the passenger seat and he took the Sheriff's place in the driver's position, complete with the hard-brimmed, Smokey the Bear hat. "Let's get out of Dodge," he said, throwing the cruiser into reverse.

Andy tore himself away from the story. He was tempted to call Debbie and reschedule. As bad as he wanted to see her, he was in the heat of the climax and intoxicated with the narrative. They had reservations at Izzy's for 6:00 pm. It was only a mile or two from his house. He could stop now and walk, or type a little longer and drive. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with the palms of his hands. He clicked 'save' and made a good choice.

Chapter 23

The evening air was brisk and fresh and the walk was invigorating. He arrived a few minutes early and waited outside for her. As she pulled by their eyes met and he motioned her in to the valet parking area for simplicity. He gave a five to the valet and held the ticket for Debbie.

She was beautiful. She was wearing a tender purple Amethyst on a silver chain and matching ear rings that offset the deep brown in her hair but paled in comparison to the life twinkling in her big blue eyes and her bright, generous smile. She was wearing grey slacks and jacket over an ivory rayon button up blouse. Andy couldn't remember seeing anyone so beautiful in his life.

He automatically extended his hand, but again, she stepped through and hugged him. "I'm a hugger, remember?" she said.

"I don't know how I could forget," he said. "Debbie, I don't know the right thing to say right here, but, may I tell you that you look beautiful?"

She smiled at his careful simplicity, "You may," she said with a slight curtsy.

"Okay. Then, Debbie," he grinned at the chance to say it again, "you look really beautiful this evening."

"Thank you, and you look quite dashing yourself," she added.

Andy was wearing black. He thought it was usually the safest attire for him in public. People said it was “slimming” and when he spilled food on himself, which he regularly did, it wouldn’t show as bad as on lighter colors. He resisted explaining his logic, although he was tempted to in order to fill up empty gaps between talking.

“Shall we go in?” She smiled, jarring him back in to the present.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Yeah, let’s go in, I think they have a table ready for us.” He gave his name to the hostess who invited the couple to follow her in to the restaurant. Andy walked behind Debbie and couldn’t help but notice the light, floral scent of her perfume and realized that he was usually in a near trance at this point with the scent of char broiled steak as it wafted through the building. “I like the perfume better, well, just as good,” he thought. They sat and instinctively glanced at the menus that the hostess provided.

“I’ve never been here,” Debbie said.

“Me either, although I’ve heard it’s great.”

“Me, too.”

Andy couldn’t concentrate on the menu; he would just pick something simple when the time came. He was so excited to be out on an actual date, if that’s what this was, and he was pretty sure it was. “So, what do you think?”

“A friend at school told me to try the filet, so I guess that’s what it will be. She said it’s so tender you could cut it with a fork.”

“I’ve always heard that, but I’ve never tried it.”

“Its just hyperbole, isn’t it? Like ‘I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.’”

“I bet you’re right, but we should try it, that way we’d be able to say for sure.”

“Deal,” she laughed. After they’d ordered and received their drinks, Debbie studied her little silver pot of hot tea, dipping the tea bag in the water allowing it to steep.

“Can I tell you something? In all honesty?” Andy said.

“Sure, absolutely,” Debbie said, looking up at him.

He looked at her big light blue eyes and honest face and felt safe. “I’ve never been out on a real date before,” he admitted.

“Is this a real date?” she asked.

“To me it is,” he said.

“My turn, then,” she said, piercing his face with her lovely stare. “I have never been out on a date someone as interesting and sweet as you.”

“That can’t be true,” he said quickly.

“It’s true,” she said. “I’m a pretty conservative, quiet person in general. I’m not out there looking for a relationship, necessarily. I don’t do this with any regularity.”

“So your dance card isn’t booked for two years like I expected?”

“What’s a dance card,” she laughed.

“So, why me? Why come out to dinner with a goof like me?” he said.

“I don’t know, Andy. I see something in you that I really respect, I guess. It’s just honesty, or vulnerability, or something. I don’t know, like I say, I just like it. I’m drawn to it.”

He nodded his head in silence. He didn’t know what to make of that assessment, honest and vulnerable. “Is that good?” he thought but didn’t say.

They enjoyed their filet mignon and baked potatoes. Neither was able, without making a squishy mess, to cut their meat with a fork. But they had a lot of fun trying.

“So what did you think about our church?” she asked after the server brought a fresh pot of hot water and a new tea bag as well as a coffee for Andy.

He looked in the black liquid searching for a simple answer. “I liked it. I know that’s trite, but, I... I didn’t expect to like it, you know? I was completely emotionally prepared to dislike the experience. I came to share something that my mother felt strongly about, because she’s always done that for me, and I came because I wanted to see you again. But I didn’t come to enjoy the service. That was a surprise. A bonus.”

“There’s that honesty thing I told you I was drawn to,” she said. “What did you like about it, or, what were you prepared to hate?”

“Well, I was prepared to hate the pretense, the end of the world, turn or burn, stuff. I was ready for all of that. But it didn’t happen. What I liked was looking around and seeing people that appeared to be just as mixed up and dopey as me. And I saw them smiling and happy and honestly expressing their hearts in worship to a God that none of us has ever seen. That’s what surprised me.”

“That people with problems can also be people at peace with God and with themselves?”

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe that’s it.”

Debbie shrugged and nodded. “I’ll tell you, that’s how I feel a lot of the time. Like I have problems and issues that I’ll never be able to fix, but over and above that reality, there is the reality of a personal God who has lovingly crafted me to be in relationship with Him and to be at peace with myself and with the world... That reality kind of trumps all the yucky feelings.”

“All the time?”

“No. I wish. But, as I keep walking with Christ, I’d say I have more peace and less conflict in my life, in that sense.”

He smiled, “Less conflict. That would be nice. Sometimes it seems like conflict should be my middle name.”

She nodded.

“Take this week,” he shook his head, “If we had the time...”

“What? What was it?”

“Ah, it’s a long story,” he said.

“Hey, time is something we have,” she smiled.

“Well, uh, okay... Well, My neighbor, the owner of the little deli where I eat all the time, received a package in the mail, only it wasn’t for him, it was for his nephew who has the same name, Albert. The nephew sent the package there figuring he would pick it up later that day. So, anyway, the uncle opens it and what does he find? A kilo of marijuana.”

“No way,” Debbie said, and Andy just nodded.

“So I’m over there and he calls me up to his apartment and shows me the stuff and asks me what he should do. Well I don’t know, you know? Should he call the police, should he flush it down the toilet, give it to the nephew, what?” Debbie’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Andy continued, “And then, the kid goes berserk and tears the house apart and pushes his uncle, you know, and shoves his aunt out of the way and she goes falling down a flight of stairs! This little old woman! And the kid runs away. I mean he’s a drug dealing little chump, right? Debbie’s mouth fell unconsciously open as she shakes her head, glued to every word.

“Now the police come and the whole thing, and the lady, Mrs. Martin is in a coma, you know, she’s knocked totally out. And her hip is

cracked, or dislocated or something. It's all just totally surreal." While they are at the hospital the kid breaks in to the apartment again, to find the stuff! This time he finds it. So a police cruiser is driving by and they see how the place has been broken in to so they find Mr. Martin at the hospital and I drove him home, and the officer is like, 'Do you know who did this,' and Mr. Martin just told him the whole story. He is livid. He might have strangled the kid right then..." Andy paused for a drink of water.

"So, anyway, the police go over and arrest the chump and confiscate the drugs, right? End of story. But then, these sleazy loan sharks show up at the Deli and want to know where the kid is. I guess he borrowed money from them at this outrageous interest, right? It's like, what else could happen to these folks. Well, the uncle tells them the kid is in jail or something. And they basically say, 'Okay, then you have to pay it.'"

"No way. Pay for the kids loan?" she said, hungering for the rest of the story.

"I know-- that's what I thought. But these guys are totally threatening, you know? So Mr. Martin finds the kid and says, you know, you've got to pay these guys. And the kid just blows it off. He was going to pay them back with the drug money, but now that the deal blew up, he just doesn't care... So, who knows, they come break his legs and then go after the Martins. And they have enough problems, you know, with Mrs. Martin in the hospital and Mr. Martin dealing with all this crap. I mean..."

"So what happened?"

"I just figured, shoot, you know, I've got the money, and I just paid it for them. It was selfish, probably, because I just didn't want my world to change. I really like them; I don't want them to move back to Germany or something, you know? So the whole thing sort of works out, the kid is still looking at time, but geez, that was his choice, right? The point is all this is happening all around us, all the time, it's like, I don't know..."

Debbie nodded and smiled that special smile that pushes her round cheeks up into her eyes, squishing them in to little blue slits. She reached across the table and covered one of his hands with both of hers. "That's amazing."

"Wild week," he said.

"I see what you mean about the whole, conflict thing."

"Would you like to meet them? The Martin's?"

"Wow. Yeah, I'd love to."

“Mrs. Martin is coming home tomorrow and they’re inviting a few people over. I don’t know if you drink beer, but he always brings out the best German beer for his little parties, they’re legendary in our neighborhood.”

“Andy, what an amazing life you have!”

“Trust me, usually most of the turmoil is in here,” he pointed to his head. This was the strangest week of all time. Culminating in tonight.” He spread his arms in disbelief, “Here I am sitting at dinner with a wonderful woman, talking and laughing like we’ve known each other for years. I could get used to this!” He said. “This is not the kind of thing that happens to a reclusive, depressed, introverted professional dieter, I’ll tell you that,” he laughed.

Debbie smiled and shook her head, “I think you are a pretty special man, Andy Boyd... I’m glad we met.”

Andy paid the bill and left a generous tip for the servers who graciously left them alone for an extra long time on a busy night. He covered her valet tab and held the door for her when the car pulled up to the curb. This time he opened his arms for a hug and she stepped in and put her head against his chest and held him for a long moment. He gently put his nose against her hair and inhaled deeply, memorizing the scent. Finally, Debbie pulled back and reached up on her tiptoes, kissing him softly and tenderly on the cheek. “Thank you for a wonderful evening,” she whispered. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Andy tried to talk, but couldn’t. He’d been pecked on the cheek over the years at parties and events, but never really kissed. Not like that. He managed to shut the door of the car and avoid having his toes run over by inches. He watched her drive away with his hand pressed to his cheek, subconsciously feeling the touch of her lips. He walked home in a daze, stopping at Starbucks for another coffee to keep his hands warm.

Wednesday morning Andy was up again at 8:00 am. He couldn’t wait for the evening party, but he was also closing in on the end of the Rance Broadback novel and knew that it would do his heart and mind good to get to the end of that project by the end of the day. He showered and opened his computer to post his morning blog.

Andy's Weblog - November 14th

Less of Me

I don't know exactly what is happening to me, but I think I have a clue after last night. This month began with a grandiose commitment on my part to make good decisions about what I would eat with the goal being to lose the extra weight that I've been carrying around since Jr. High School. Well, if you've followed these blog entries, you know that the effort has not had the greatest of results. Not only have I gained several pounds, I have vacillated between mood swings as broad as the side of a barn. I've had thoughts of suicide, chucked the contents of my kitchen in the dumpster, gone without food, binged on too much food. I've felt alternately crappy and hopeless and fine and pretty good, all month long.

And I've finally learned something. I think.

I was talking to a new friend and it began to dawn on me that the more I do for other people, the less I think of myself. The more of others that I put in my life, the less of me I have to contend with.

Now, if there is less of me, does that make me lighter? Well, in terms of mass and gravity and the whole physics side of things, no. But it sure seems to lighten the burden of being me.

Becoming bearable - Andy

Appalachian Malady - 14

The drive through the warehouse was uneventful. Rance had the sheriff's hat tilted so that his face was partially covered as he drove through and waved to a few forklift drivers and guards. He turned left out of the drive doors and headed down the fire road to where he'd stashed the 'borrowed' pickup. He pulled the cruiser up to the gate and opened the trunk. He extracted a big set of bolt cutters from the Sheriff's emergency gear and cut the chain that held the heavy gate fast. It took all the strength he had left to muscle the rusty steel bar open. He pulled through, leaving the way open for the feds, and stashed the Sheriff's car up off the road. "I've got a few loose ends to tie up back at the

mine. Will you be okay right here for an hour or so? You probably shouldn't stay in the car, in case anyone happens to see it."

"I'll shimmy up the hill a ways. Take your time, I'll be right here." John forced out a painful smile.

Rance sped away and then eased back on the throttle as he approached the gate of the Cedar Ridge Mine. It had taken half an hour to make the loop back around to the front of the mine. The guards were waiting for him; he was the last to arrive. They let him in and locked the gate behind him. He drove up to the warehouse and parked in front of the line of dark SUV's.

The Investors were assembled in the smaller warehouse Sheriff McCoy had parked in front of and described as the 'office' when Michael/Rance and Sophia had arrived for their tour. A guard opened the outer door for Pena/Broadback and he stepped into an open room with furnishings similar to those in the room where he and Sheriff McCoy had recently parted company. "They must have pulled in as I was pulling out. Close." Rance said to himself.

"Michael," Rafferty said, uneasily. "You had us a little worried, there."

"Michael checked his watch. I'm a truck driver, James, I'm always right on time," he laughed and Rafferty joined him. "It's just now 3:00 pm. did I miss the start time?"

"No," the Senator volunteered as her nerves simmered down, "I suppose we were just a bit early. Anxious to get this started." She smiled and shook hands with the new investor. "I think you know every one here," she said.

Pena shook hands with John Welsh and William Prate. "Good to see you gentlemen again," he said.

Rafferty stepped forward, "I don't think you've met Mr. Williams, Michael... Mr. Williams, Michael Pena." Williams was wearing a dark suit and dark glasses. Rance wondered if the Senior FBI ace would recognize him from their only prior meeting. Rance would have known him anywhere.

"Nice to meet you, sir," Michael said. His greeting was met with a subtle nod and a weak handshake. Williams

thought for a moment that the Spaniard looked familiar, but he was too self-conscious about his own mystique to be as keen as he should have been.

"Now then, let's get down to business, shall we?" Rafferty said. Michael/Rance checked his watch; it was 3:05 pm.

"Where's Sheriff McCoy? Rance asked. "Isn't he a full partner, or Investor?"

"Yes, uh, well..." Rafferty looked around the room. The consensus feeling among the group was that Buddy McCoy was the weak link. A necessary evil that they allowed to be a partner for two reasons: one, because the whole operation had been his idea, though it had grown far beyond his simple means and intelligence. And, two, he was married to the Senators cousin, which, unfortunately, made him difficult to discard.

"He's a big boy, James. We all knew the time of the meeting," Senator Lecter said.

"He lives here, for crissake. The rest of us traveled from God knows where," Welsh added.

"So, I suppose we can fill the Sheriff in on the details at a later date. Everyone in agreement on that?" Rafferty said and looked around the room. He didn't expect Michael to mind, he should be smart enough to know that the room was filled with the key players.

Rance checked the time again; in eight minutes the feds would be blasting in here with the force of an invasion. "I've briefed the Investors on the arrangement we are making with Pena Logistics for the interstate transportation of all products from Alta Loma Distribution." Rafferty said. "As we discussed, we will begin with a group of twelve tractors and twenty four containers and twenty four container trailers. Isn't that right, Michael?"

"Yes, and let me say how excited I am to be working with you. I asked Mr. Rafferty to allow me the latitude to call you all together today to sign this contract because, by all appearances, this is an arrangement that may have far-reaching, very lucrative consequences for us all. I like to know whom I am working with. I expect that you want to know who I am as well. Now, I would expect that you have run background checks and what-not, but I wanted you to see me, in the flesh so

you know exactly who you are making a contract with."

"Sounds good to me, Michael," William Prate said. "I'm tired of doing all my buying and selling over the Internet. It's nice to actually meet someone face to face and do business man to man, like the old days. Pardon me Senator, you know what I mean." She nodded in approval.

Rafferty knew both the impatience and the inconvenienced schedules of the out of town investors so he pulled out the contract that Prate had prepared for the occasion.

"Let's get to what we are all here for, shall we?" Rafferty said smiling like the cat that got the biggest mouse. He walked around the table to Michael's chair and set the paper down in front of him along with a Monte Blanc fountain pen. "Michael, this is a standard contract, if you'd like to read over it you'll notice that it provides either party the ability to canceling at any time, with a standard thirty day written notice."

"Excellent," Michael/Rance said. He adjusted the page on the table in front of him and picked up the pen. He smiled at the group and reached into his jacket pocket. "I don't know about the rest of you, but when I hit forty..." he smiled. Heads around the room nodded and smiled.

"The first thing to go is your eyesight," Welsh chuckled. "But trust me, there are other things that don't work so well after a while, either." Prate and Rafferty laughed at that one. Michael frowned as he checked the rest of his pockets for his reading glasses.

"I'm sorry, I must have left them in my truck," he said, standing from his seat with a sigh. Williams took a deep breath and tilted his head, frustrated that he was called away from Washington for this rookie display. He pulled out his phone to call his office. Senator Lecter folded her hands and looked at the table impatiently. "I'll just be a second," Michael/Rance said, hustling to the door, leaving the quiet table. He shut it behind himself and glanced at his watch, 3:12 pm. He could hear the moan of helicopters in the distance. The sound was getting louder. There was still only one guard at the door, but there were about a dozen

milling around the parking lot. Rance glanced at the guard and smiled, "Forgot something in the truck," he shrugged.

He jogged to the front vehicle and got in the cab. He twisted two wires together and started the truck again, shifting into drive and easing away from the line of Escalades. When he was twenty meters past the warehouse door, he hit the gas, heading east toward the loading docks and the fire road. Rafferty saw the shadow pass by the window and assumed McCoy had arrived. He went to the door to bark at the Sheriff for his tardiness, Rafferty's puppets were growing restless around the table. He opened the door just in time to see a vehicle disappear behind the loading docks, but there was still no brown and white impala. He looked back at the door guard.

"New guy," the guard said. "Had to go get something." Rafferty brought a hand to his head, combing his thick hair back with his fingers.

"What's going on?" Rafferty thought. "Where's he going?" He looked back into the room and saw the key players gathered like ducks on a pond-- "He set us up," was the last thing that flashed into Rafferty's mind before a series of three Blackhawk's lunged over the tree line and landed in the parking lot, Army Rangers disembarking like bees from a hive. Rafferty instinctively stepped backward into the office and shut the door.

Rance skidded to a stop by the guard shack and abandon the truck, deciding to run the balance of the distance to the heavy gate outside where he had left John Sanchez in the patrol car. He sprinted to the crest of the hill and ran. He heard the familiar whine of helicopters swoop down behind him just above the tree line, three Blackhawk's. He stopped long enough to look up and see them charge in, loaded to the teeth and full of combat ready Rangers. Three camo-green Hummers with blue patrol lights came barreling up the fire road and roared passed his position leaving a cloud of dust. He rightly assumed several more hit the front gate at

the same moment.

Appalachian Malady - 15

The Blackhawk's touched down, scattered from the front of the mine to the loading docks. Simultaneously, two more Hummers rammed through the front gate, sending the unsuspecting guards diving for cover. One guard recovered and fired at the SUV's as they crested the hill in front of the mine.

From inside the warehouse, the Investors heard the noise of the Blackhawks and jumped to their feet as Rafferty slammed the door shut behind him, his face was white, it was happening too fast. "It's a damn set up!" he screamed.

Williams instinctively leaped toward Welsh, the closest person to him and jerked his arm behind his back, pulling his 38 and sticking it in to the small of his back. "Don't move," Williams yelled, "You're under arrest."

"Hey, let go, what they hell?" Welsh screamed. Rafferty grabbed Senator Lecters arm and started running through the warehouse to the back exit where eight Rangers coming the opposite direction met them.

Rafferty pulled his own weapon and put it against the Senator's head. "Get out of the way, boys. Move now, or I'll shoot her, I really will," he said. The Rangers formed a 1/4 circle around Rafferty, their guns trained on both parties.

"Sir," one of the Rangers said, "We can't let you passed. If you shoot her, your body will hit the floor before hers does, only it will have a lot more holes in it. I guarantee it... Now put the gun on the floor."

Reluctantly, Rafferty dropped the gun.

Senator Lecter started in on the Rangers, "Well, I'm glad you got here when you did. I was afraid for my life back there..."

"Sorry, Ma'am, but you are under arrest," a Ranger told Ms. Lecter and pulled her hands behind her back securing them with a zip tie.

When Tate and Kramer made it into the room in the second wave, four Rangers were in a standoff with A.D.

Williams. "Kramer, Thank God. I've got them all. You won't believe what I found. C'mon, help me out."

"Sorry Boss, put the weapon down before the Rangers relieve you of your head," DIC Kramer said.

"What? There's been some kind of mistake, I'm on a sting operation, here."

"Sure you are," Tate said.

Each of the Investors was rounded up and brought outside where the bodies of several guards littered the gravel parking area. Rangers were everywhere, securing the campus.

As Tate and Kramer led the handcuffed group to awaiting federal SUV's, Tami Beatty and her friend from the Lexington Herald drove up in a rented Taurus and slammed the car in to park. They jumped out snapping digital images and asking questions. Two rangers stepped in front of them and cut them off. The soldier's adrenaline was flowing and they nearly snapped the reporter's arm jerking it behind her back. Tate saw what was happening and quickly intervened.

"They're with me, soldiers," he said, smiling at the reporters whom he viewed as somewhat of a nuisance. "You must have some highly placed friends," Tate said to the reporters.

"Right place, right time," Tami said.

"Mhmm," Tate smiled, "Just leave your cell phones in your pockets, huh?"

The investors were all placed in vehicles and kept under guard while the warehouses and mine were searched. It took ten minutes for the teams to work their way back to the staging room, the warehouse and the hydroponic garden. When Jim Tate stepped into the growing cavern and realized the kind of bust that they were making, he radioed outside and asked for the reporters to be escorted to his location. A Ranger brought them in a golf cart that was setting by the entrance to Alta Loma Distribution warehouse. Tami's digital camera was nearly hot to the touch after she finished shooting.

Rance jogged past the open gate and the place he'd stashed the car. Sanchez saw him and gingerly began scooting down the hill. Rance met him half way and helped him to the car.

"Man, did you see the Fed's sweep through here?"

"The big guns, huh? Did you see the Black Hawks?" Rance said and turned right on 289, north toward Henryville.

"Heard 'em... What the hell? Did you start World War three back there, or what?"

Rance just shook his head. He turned south at 563 and cut across the hills where the Appalachians become the Blue Ridge range. He drove to the airport in Knoxville and parked Buddy's Impala in the long-term lot. He helped John to a seat outside the lobby of the quiet little county airport and went inside to make sure his rental Cessna was ready for air. In twenty minutes the craft was ready and Sanchez was buckled in the copilot's seat. In evening air was quiet and the sun was being pulled below the golden western skyline. He walked back to the front of the airport to look for a familiar car. He waited five minutes then sighed and turned to leave.

As the glass door fell shut behind him he heard a car horn. He turned to see an Acura SUV being driven by the prettiest girl he'd seen all day. He took a deep breath and smiled. He followed her car as she parked. She hopped out and ran around to meet him, he had the clammy odor of dried sweat and his clothes were stained and tattered. But he was still what she had been dreaming about for the past week. She hugged him and he lifted her off her feet.

"I'm glad you came," he said.

"I can't believe I did it," she said.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," Michael said, as he carried her bags to the plane.

"Dr. Sophia Garza, this is my good friend John Sanchez," Rance said. John managed a smile. Johns riding with us, he got banged up a little.

"A little?" John said. "Compared to what?"

"I can take a look at you," Sophia said, "I'm a doctor."

"Awesome," John sighed.

"She's a Veterinarian, John, just what you need!" Rance said. They all got a kick out of that as Rance taxied to the end of the runway.

Appalachian Malady - 17

Rance and Sophia woke late after a long night of travel, making sure John Sanchez was taken care of at the hospital back in Georgetown, Rance booked a bed and breakfast on the water at Virginia Beach where they drove in his f-150, arriving in the middle of the night. They stirred awake to the sound of waves breaking on the shoreline. It was a cloudy, overcast, perfect morning. Sophia turned on the television while Michael/Rance was in the shower. When he came out, clad in his jeans with no shirt or shoes, she was sitting on the edge of the bed in shock.

"Sophia? What is it?" he asked.

The television showed still images of James Rafferty, FBI Assistant Director Ken Williams, Indiana Senator Phyllis Lecter, William Prate and John Welsh, being taken into custody and photo's of the giant underground marijuana forest that had been seized. She was speechless. The News anchor provided a context to the still photography, "At about 3:15 pm yesterday, the DEA swept through the little mountain community of Rose Park, Kentucky and made the single largest marijuana bust in the history of the United States... In what is being called the Appalachian Malady, DEA officials say that a literal forest of the crop was being grown in hydroponic raised beds deep within the recesses of the abandoned Cedar Ridge Coal Mine north of Rose Park. DEA spokesman, Jim Tate told CNN that the combination of finding the drugs and, finding all the principle players in the cartel in the same place, was more than they could have hoped for."

Finally, Sophia gathered her composure enough to ask, "Michael, weren't you supposed to be... there?"

He shrugged, "Doesn't look like the kind of people I would have wanted to be in business with anyway, how about you?" he smiled at her and gave her a kiss on the top of the head. He sat down beside her as breaking

news came on the screen. "This just in, General George Madden, long time consultant to the joint chiefs, was taken in to custody today and charged with accessory to murder in the death of Senator Lewis Hagin, Senator from the Bluegrass State of Kentucky. Also arrested in connection with the murder were Assistant Director of the FBI, Ken Williams and Senator Phyllis Lecter of Indiana shown here being taken in to custody by the investigator in charge of the Hagin investigation, Ron Kramer. Williams and Lecter have also been indicted on additional counts in relation to the Appalachian Malady drug seizure."

That one stopped Rance cold. He immediately found his cell phone and dialed Jim Tate.

"Tate."

"Buddy, what gives?"

"Big night. Thanks to you."

"What's with Madden?"

"He closed an account two days ago at the bank you pointed us to. One million dollars."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. But Williams is talking like a parrot. According to him he bought a name from Madden. He's trying to pin the tail on anyone but himself... You okay?"

"Did he give a name? I need to talk to Madden."

"It's going to take a while to sort through it all, Ran. Take a few days off. Give me a call when you get back in town, huh?"

"Okay. Hey, good work yesterday. And kudos' to Kramer," Rance said.

"Yeah, I think he's finally headed up the ladder. This was as big as it gets."

"He's the kind of guy you need at that level."

"Agreed. See you later, then?"

"Okay, see you on the court in a week or so." Rance clicked the phone shut and tossed it on the table.

"Michael, is everything all right?" Sophia said.

Michael/Rance smiled and sat on the edge of the bed by the beautiful woman that he had fallen for over the course of the past two weeks. He pulled her backwards on the bed with him and brought her head to

rest on his bare chest where he could smell her hair and wrap his arms around her strong brown shoulders.

"Dr. Garza," he said, staring up at the ceiling wondering where to begin, "We need to talk."

The End

The Appalachian Malady climaxed and eased to a close underneath Andy's fingertips. He finished. It was the fastest that he had ever cranked out a first draft. For some reason the distractions of life had failed to bump the story off course, they had, instead, enhanced it. He saved the work and sat in silence. He was beyond emotion. He was too drained to be exhausted. He left everything in the story. After splashing some water on his face and staring out the front window, aimlessly for several minutes, he composed himself enough to email the draft to his agent.

Dear Will,

Here it is, the Applalachian Malady first draft. I hope you like it. It's rough, but I think there's something here. Let me know what you think. I appreciate your kindness through the process.

Sincerely,

Andy

attachment: appalachainmalady.pdf

Chapter 24

He usually celebrated the completion of a novel by ordering in a Chinese feast and a bottle of wine from Trader Joe's. But tonight would be different. In keeping with what he had been feeling for the past few days, he would spend the evening with his friends. Debbie was meeting him at his place at 7:30 pm; about the time Mr. Martin would re-open the doors for his guests.

Debbie arrived right on time and Andy went down to the street to show her how to park in front of his little garage like his mother. From there they walked over to the Martin's.

"So this is your neighborhood," she said. She was bundled in a long purple topcoat and red knit hat and scarf against the cool wind off the bay. She put her hands in her pockets as they walked.

Andy wanted to put an arm around her, but didn't. He stuck his hands deeply in his own pockets, balling them into loose fists. "This is it. I like it. You know, if you like the City, it's hard to beat this area, really."

"I love it," she said. There were about a dozen old Germans and Italians in the deli when they walked in; the little string of bells bounced noisily on the glass door as it closed, announcing their arrival. Mr. Martin looked up, as did many of the guests. His eyes lit up as he saw his friend, and doubly so as he saw that Andy had brought a guest. Mrs. Martin was

in a wheel chair, sitting at a table with old friends, laughing and enjoying being home. Mr. Martin made his way across the room and gave Andy another crushing bear hug. Andy stuck his tongue out and gasped over the old mans head, making Debbie laugh.

“Andy, my friend! Welcome! And who is this beautiful young woman that you have brought tonight, huh?”

“Mr. Martin, this is my friend Debbie Williams.”

“Mr. Martin hugged Debbie, who was his same height, and said, “My dear, we celebrate tonight, ja? My wife, she came home from the hospital and everybody hugs tonight. Hugs and kisses and good German beer, ja?” He laughed and turned again to the crowd, dancing around, back to the counter to bring out some food.

“What a guy!” she said.

“He’s happy to have his wife home. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Martin.” They made their way through the tables and steins to where Maria Martin was sitting. Andy leaned down and hugged Mrs. Martin.

“Andy, I’m so thankful for you,” she said. “You make my family very happy, I tell you.”

“Mrs. Martin, this is my friend Debbie Williams. I told her about your accident.”

Mrs. Martin took both of Debbie’s hands and drew her close, kissing her on both cheeks, “Debbie, it is so nice to meet you. You have a fine man here,” she said.

Mr. Martin returned with two glasses of dark brown beer which he gave to Andy and Debbie and said, “Hey, everybody, come back and look at the new machine, huh?” And with that, he wheeled Mrs. Martin carefully through the saloon doors and into the back room followed by the parade of guests. He helped her in the chair and buckled her in for the trip and said, “This machine is to help Maria get up to our home. It was a gift from our neighbor, Andy Boyd.” he said and started clapping. He pushed the up button starting Maria on her journey to the top of the stairs. Everyone clapped and she waved and raised her arms like she’d won the gold medal. Her smile of joy lit up the room as she rose above the crowd. At the top she unbuckled herself and carefully stood up and turned a circle, showing everyone the finished product, and her friends all raised their glasses and cheered. Mrs. Martin sat back down and buckled in and pressed the down button for the return ride.

“This was an amazing gift,” Debbie whispered to Andy. “You’re amazing,” she added. Everyone made it back in to the dining room where food was served and stories were told. Mr. Martin and his friends had the group doubled over in laughter for two solid hours. Debbie’s eyes never dimmed from their wide-eyed wonderment at the joy and community of Andy’s neighborhood. Her smile never left her face.

At 9:30 pm they said good-bye to the Martins and the few remaining guests. Mr. and Mrs. Martin both began to cry when they thanked Andy for everything he had done for them.

“We love you, Andy, you know that,” they said.

“I know. I just want you to stay open, we all need you around here, okay?” he smiled and brushed off their sentiment, but he knew they were seriously touched by his generosity. It felt pretty good. Debbie kissed them both and thanked them for such a wonderful evening and expressed her hope for a full recovery for Mrs. Martin. As they stepped out of the Deli, leaving the laughing, conversation and opera music behind the closed door, the city became quiet and cool. They walked across the street with the signal and turned toward Andy’s place.

Debbie locked her arms around Andy’s left arm as they walked slowly up the street. She had seen him among friends and had never been more proud to be with a man. In thirty-five years he didn’t know if he had ever been happier than he was at this moment.

“I read your blog today,” she said. “Your mom gave me the link.”

“Oh great,” he said.

“No. It was good... You know that part, about ‘less of me?’”

“Mmm, yeah.”

“Did you know that’s right out of the Bible?”

“Huh-uh.”

“Mmhmm,” she said, gripping his arm tighter against the cold and snuggling her head tightly against his shoulder. “John the Baptist was talking to his followers about Jesus, and he said almost exactly the same thing. He said, ‘He must increase, and I must decrease.’ In other words, I came to prepare the way for Him, you know, now it’s His turn to take the center stage. More of Jesus, less of me.”

“Interesting,” he said honestly as they reached her car. She gave him her keys and he opened the door for her. She turned in to him and he held her close in the chilly evening air.

“I’ve always thought that was a good motto to live by, in general. More of Jesus, less of me. Kind of like you wrote,” she added with a tender smile.

He nodded and kissed her on the cheek. Not as soft and tender as hers from the other night, but the best he could do.

“This has been an amazing evening, Andy,” she said.

“They’re great people, they really are. And they loved you.”

Debbie smiled and shook her head, looking up into her new friends gently, loving eyes. She stood to her tiptoes and returned a long soft kiss to his nervous lips before he had a chance to react. She hugged him tightly and sat down in the drivers seat. He handed over her keys, somewhat reluctantly, and she started the car and buckled in as he watched. Then he shut the door, releasing her to go. They touched fingers against the glass of the window and smiled. Neither knew what else to say or what the future might hold for them. They just knew that this moment was perfect.

As he watched the most wonderful girl in the world drive out of sight, he whispered to the cool evening air, “Less of me.”

The End

Author Notes

A book that profoundly touched my life, from a creative perspective, was *The Novel*, by James A. Michener. The story wraps around the life and work of Lukas Yoder, a successful novelist who has written, what he believes, is his final work. As I read and was absorbed by, *The Novel*, I began to think about the way fiction draws a reader in to its pages to watch, listen and experience the narrative. As I read about a fictional writer, Lukas Yoder, writing a fictional book *Stone Walls*, I was entranced by Micheners ability to lead me through not one, but two fictional levels. I found myself thinking of Yoder as a real person and his work that I was reading and reading about, as the truly fiction part of the book. It was like looking over the shoulder of an author while he works, watching him and watching the product of his work appear through the course of his everyday experience. Kind of a book within a book.

I wanted to try it.

Less of Me is my feeble attempt, not to emulate Michener, he was a class unto himself, but to follow this idea of writing a book inside of another book. Andy Boyd is my writer. He's an insecure, regular guy that I hope you came to know and root for as he discovers himself and faith begins to kindle in his super-sized soul. Then, his story, the one he was frantically trying to complete before deadline, featuring his super-spy alter-ego, Rance Broadback, was able to take you through yet another door, one that held the suspended reality style of some of the exciting fiction you are used to reading. Did it work? That's up to you. Let me know if I got anywhere near the mark.

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