

A Summer of Secrets

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A Summer of Secrets?

Hear ye, hear ye! Well, that certainly caught your attention, didn't it? I suppose now that I have your attention I should tell you something. Okay, here it is.

Hmmm. What was I going to say again?

Oh, yes, about the summer of secrets. This story had quite the history. Part of it was scheduled to appear in a mystery anthology but the company went out of business before it could be published. Then I thought of expanding the story into a sequel to, "*A Priceless Christmas*." I worked on it for a while, but wasn't making progress...Summer was slipping away, so I decided to serialize the story in my blog before the seasons changed.

During August 2007 I committed myself to creating and posting a new short episode everyday, which taught me one thing. Deadlines can be cruel, but effective motivators.

I wrote this after writing another novel called, "*Love from the Crucible*." Therefore, some characters were carried over from that project. In the timeline of the stories, "*Love from the Crucible*" would take place between, "*A Priceless Christmas*," and, "*A Summer of Secrets*." Don't worry, you don't need to read, "*Love from the Crucible*" to understand this story.

During the writing of this, I amused myself by poking fun at some of the characters that I have played on stage. If you saw the shows, you'll know what I mean. If you didn't see the shows, well, what can I say?

On a somewhat serious note, this book is a figment of my imagination, therefore it should not be taken as an indication of my opinion about or as a reflection of anyone or anything in reality. Earlier I recall mentioning something similar about Gladstone, that principle still applies.

There, now I have told you my secrets....

What is your secret?

Kelvin



August 1
11:37 p.m.

Breathe in.

The room was painfully small. Enough space only existed for a bed with a small cavity beside it.

Breathe out.

The filthy yellow mattress was covered with a red blanket, beneath the blanket lay the wrinkled body of an old man. His watery blue eyes stared upward with an empty blankness.

Breathe in.

A solitary yellow bulb dangled from a fly speckled wire in the middle of the ceiling.

Breathe out.

Strands of white hair twitched on his unshaven face. The end would come soon. He could feel it.

Every rasp was harder than the last.

A melancholy moon of blue beamed overhead.

Far beneath the soft light, a town of black silhouettes huddled together for protection against the silent summer night. Streetlamps twinkled as if to say all was well with the world. The only life visible was at the north end of town where an ancient red Chevette puttered noisily along a small street.

The neighbor boy was five minutes late for his night shift.

Inside an old one story house at the dead end of the street, two pairs of loving lips danced to the symphonic sounds of the stereo.

A telephone scream pierced the night.

Jason sighed as his moist lips left those of his wife.

His right index finger flicked the off button on the stereo remote. His left hand reached for the cordless phone sitting on a small table beside their couch.

"Hello!" His voice was more than a little irate. Candace, his wife, watched. A mischievous smile flirted at the edges of her lips.

Candace was small; about five foot two, with medium length blonde hair. Gold framed glasses perched on her nose, enhancing the European look of her features. She was dressed in a striking black skirt topped off by a fashionable white blouse.

"Oh sorry, I was a bit distracted...What am I busy with?" Jason paused, and then grinned. "Oh not much, a little of this and a little of that." Candace stifled a laugh. "Nothing important." Candace grimaced as she swatted Jason with a couch cushion.

"What? Oh, I was distracted again. You know how pests can get in summer...."

Candace raised the pillow once again.

Jason's blue eyes rolled in their sockets as he listened to the rambling rumbling in his ear.

Breathe in.

His thoughts were drifting. Oh the beauty of the past, of a simple life on the farm. His wife submitting to his every whim...His rowdy children...The wickedness of Abe and his wife Mary....

Breathe out.

Many happy hours had been spent working his yellow fields of grain. As a result, the sun and wind had sculpted many furrows and lines into his rugged face.

Breathe in.

Bright yellow light glared at him. The bulb never moved, and neither could he.

Breathe out.

Dry lips twisted. His crooked smile glimmered with cynical pleasure. His body was weak with age and neglect...Very soon his miserable time on earth would have ended. He would be free.

Breathe in.

Footsteps were approaching in the hallway.

The old man sent up a prayer against his tormentors.

The door began to open.

Breathe out.

“Okay, I can do that. Of course, I’m sure...Yep. See you soon.”

Jason set the cordless phone down, and then turned toward his wife. “That was Charles...being himself. He wanted me to meet some strange old man with a mystery. Not only that! After I’m done with the mystery man, I’m supposed to report to the pharmacy. I tried, but I couldn’t get out of it, so I said I’d see them on Monday. How convenient...Monday is my only day off, your only day to recuperate after a weekend of shows...as if you needed to be told that.” Jason shook his head as a puzzled expression crossed his face. “We seem to get involved with the strangest characters and the oddest coincidences.”

“Life is strange. We just happen to be two people who notice. Because we notice the strangeness, we get into odd situations....”

Jason stared at his wife for a moment. “You know, you’re right. Why don’t I just shut up? We get little enough time together these days...Now...Where were we?”

Jason reached for the remote.

Soft classical music began to play once again.

Two pairs of lips moved closer.

Meanwhile, on the south side of town, angry lips spoke hostile words. A threat was uttered, a door was slammed, and then the scene ended.

August 6
2:37 a.m.

Feet hit the pavement.

Overhead and all around, the hazy bleakness of fog swirled through the empty night.

Two silhouettes bent as their arms reached into the back of a long station wagon. Their figures straightened as they pulled.

"Was this really necessary?"

"Shut up and pull!"

A pair of hands hung lifeless over the bumper. Fingers pulsing with vigor grasped the dead hands.

"Last stop, everybody off...."

Faint glimmers of moonlight beat their way through a passing cloud. The struggling shadows were briefly revealed to be an old woman and a young man. The moonlight faded as quickly as it had come.

"Do you have to joke about it? You're old enough to know better...."

"Exactly. That is why I'm giving the orders. Pull!"

There was a slippery smack as the body slid into a puddle.

"That wasn't so hard, was it boy?"

"Never mind...I've had almost enough of this. We should never have started this nonsense...I told you."

Fresh smelling rain began to caress the dirty naked corpse as it lay in the pool of water.

"Don't worry yourself...He'll be clean soon...now help me drag this over...Oh my, my, my...."

In the distance, a pair of headlights drew ever nearer. The pair of silhouettes melted rapidly into their station wagon.

"Look where your babbling got us. We'll have to leave the sleeping dog where he lies...."

"We did what we came for anyway. Now let's get out of here before things get out of control."

"It would have been better if we had got him onto the road. But I'm optimistic...."

"Don't you think this has gone a little too far?"

"And why shouldn't it? Nobody would ever suspect us...."

"Okay...Well, are we going get out of here? The lights are coming closer by the second...."

"Playing closer to the edge is more fun...isn't it? Oh don't look like a sour puppy now. I'm going. I may be old, but I'm no fool. I know what we came here for. She's almost here...just like one of those truckers, she's always on time. Life is about to get very interesting...."

An engine hummed smoothly to life.

The car accelerated quickly. Soon it had vanished into the curtain of melancholy drizzle.

August 6
2:45 a.m.

The night was black and the road ever winding.

Candace's mind slowly drifted into a slumber, numbed by the constant flicker of the yellow line in the middle of the highway.

Home was only ten minutes away. She hoped she made it before she fell asleep.

Her husband Jason would be waiting.

Candace felt herself jerk awake as a human form appeared in her brilliant white headlights.

The synapses in her brain, suddenly motivated, ordered her foot into action.

With a frantic pumping of the brakes her car finally shuddered to a halt. Too late, she had felt a terrible thump as her car hit something...someone?

Perhaps that thump had come from her car stopping so suddenly. Candace hoped that she hadn't hit anyone.

Driven by alarm, she reached for her cell phone and then dialed the emergency number. As she waited for someone to answer, Candace opened the car door and then stepped out onto the dark highway.

Early morning traffic was very sparse in this area, an advantage if a person wanted to walk on the highway. There was a major disadvantage. Zero traffic meant zero witnesses.

Candace rounded the corner of her small Honda Civic, peering down, she saw what she had feared. The illumination provided by her car's headlights revealed two frail human hands protruding from beneath the front bumper.

Drops tingled as rain dribbled down her bare arms.

"Hello! What is your emergency? Hello? Hello!" The voice in her ear was jarring, in her shock she had forgotten about the phone still pressed to her ear.

Candace frantically began to babble out her situation.

Mosquitoes began to buzz like little airborne chain saws

as they circled for a feast of human blood.

A sudden gust of wind dispersed the pests and sent the stench of putrid decay into the air and around her nose.

Soon the warbling wail of sirens could be heard.

Candace turned to face a rumbling sound behind her. The sound of a rapidly approaching car roared through the misty veil.

Two gleaming white eyes glared at her.

She leaped to one side as a black station wagon roared past. Brake lights glowed red. The station wagon slid to a stop about thirty feet away. Two red taillights gleamed evil as the vehicle began to speed backward.

Sirens screamed, crawling closer by the moment.

The passenger side door flew open. A shadowy form burst from the station wagon.

Candace kept enough presence of mind to continue speaking to the emergency operator.

Footsteps pounded on the pavement. Someone was running forward....

The voice on the telephone was the only thing between Candace and the rapidly gathering forces of insanity.

Had Candace killed someone?

How had she ended up on the side of the highway?

The mixture of fog and rain combined with the late night could well have lulled her to sleep. Just one moment was long enough to kill an innocent pedestrian.

Who knew what else lurked in the darkness?

Candace forced herself to ignore the footsteps that were slowing as they neared her.

Last night's show had gone well. The warm memories of it faded with the chilling rain.

"Pardon me Ma'am, was there an accident?" A young man had run up behind her and burst this question out between gasps of breath.

Spinning, flashing lights raced toward them.

"Yes, there's been an accident." Candace heard herself saying with surprising calm. She wished she had changed out of her stage costume.

A white glittery jumpsuit wasn't quite the right style for a late night alone beside the highway.

The young man, full of nervous energy, crouched, and then peered beneath Candace's car.

He was dressed for the occasion. He wore faded jeans and a plain black t-shirt that revealed skinny white arms. His youthful face seemed to crumble like a brick tower in an earthquake.

"I'm sorry about this...Ah, oh my...My friend Albert escaped and I was looking for him. Found 'em too late I guess. Oh your cell phone doesn't work? Here, you can use mine."

"I just used my own phone. Look around, the police are almost here!" Candace shook her head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that...I shouldn't have been driving on the shoulder...I suppose I'm a bit too sleepy..." Candace's voice faded as a thought crept into her mind.

The young man sighed as he stared down at Candace.

"Regardless, it's too late..." He repeated sadly. Or was that a slight grin toying around the edges of his thin lips?

Candace couldn't be sure.

"Who is in the car?" Candace pointed toward the station wagon. It was parked about one hundred feet away, but there seemed to be the form of a head sticking up in the driver's seat.

"My car? There is no one in my car." The young man looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

Candace felt her eyes squinting slightly. She shrugged. "It's nothing I guess...I just thought...Oh well, it wasn't important." She was sure she had seen the young man burst from the passenger side door. Obviously, there had to have been a driver. Why would he lie about something so obvious?

Emergency personnel appeared everywhere, a few herded Candace and the young man out of the way as others pushed the car off of the body.

Gyrating, swirling patterns of red and blue created the ambience of a jumping dance floor around the milling black silhouettes.

Candace watched with horror as the frail body of a naked old man was revealed under the bright white lights carried by police officers.

The corpse was of an old man. His arms and legs were splayed open as if he had been in the act of making a snow angel

when he died. Rain drizzled steadily into the open, unseeing eyes and down the sides of his grizzled face.

A wave of voices, orders, combined with the rumble of engines to overwhelm her senses.

There was an authoritative police officer looking at her.

His legs jerked into motion, he was walking forward. Soon the interrogation would begin.

Candace's overtired mind struggled to grasp reality.

How could a body arrive on the highway already reeking of decay?

August 6
3:39 a.m.

Then there was one. A station wagon glided off the street and came to rest before a large stone building cloaked in shadows.

The rain was slowly splattering to a halt as the clouds cleared away from the moon. Clouds of mist hovered over the surface of the earth. Moonlight fell upon the ghosts of rain, granting them a look of haunting beauty.

"Sorry to bother you again. I just wanted to remind you about the car...I'll leave it in front of the insurance building. Pick it up when you can."

Pause.

"Who cares? I planned for that. We're okay. I may have sounded a little grouchy before, but that's nothing. We found what we were looking for. That is the important thing. Good-bye, and have a good sleep whenever you do get in...Take care now, and don't forget the car...."

The old woman set her cell phone onto the car seat beside her. Some conversations were tiresome. It was high time for a little nap. Morning would arrive all too soon.

August 6

9:25 a.m

Jason pushed the off button. There was nothing worth listening to on his cell phone. It was dead.

Jason was a tired looking young man with a slightly bulky figure. His muscular and well-tanned arms filled out his casual black dress shirt with ease. His new and blue jeans stretched tightly around his powerful legs. His short blonde hair might have made him look like a soldier, but the softness of his boyish face thwarted that effort.

Jason sat in a small coffee shop, occasionally sipping coffee and constantly looking bored. Absentmindedly, he began watching a group of elderly women sitting at a table across from him. There was only one table separating them so he could hear and see clearly.

He could hear Christmas music playing somewhere in the back of the bakery. The sound, plus the smell of fresh baking brought welcome memories of a Christmas past.

As reality returned, his worried fingers toyed with the cell-phone as if it were a rosary.

How could some people talk so long about so little?

Today's topic: James and Rebecca.

Mabel was the wise old matriarch that sat on the bench at the left side of her table. She wore a bright green blouse and a jet-black skirt. Her body was thin. Her eyes flashed with spirit and her attitude was all too obvious.

She held court like a queen lording it over a herd of pathetic peasants.

Jason checked his cell phone for a text message.

Nothing.

Where was Candace?

Jason struggled to stay sane as the conversation began to repeat for the third time that morning. Wait a minute...things were about to change.

And so it came to pass in those days that one of the pawns opened her mouth to attack the queen.

“Well I’ve said it before but I’ll say it again, it’s disgraceful how young people carry on nowadays! Take Mabel’s grandson James for example; a thoroughly eligible young man. A fine young girlfriend he had, and there is still no ring on her finger. Now there won’t be...He had to break up with her and start chasing Rebecca Marchand! Disgraceful! If you ask me, he takes after his friend Albert. Silly old man that he is. That’s farmers for you...crazy...plain crazy....”

Mabel glared at a plump and pleasant looking peasant woman sitting on the bench at the right side of the table.

Her adversary wore a plain red dress with crimson ruffles on the sleeves and a purple hat. Who was she to talk about crazy?

Between these two, circling the rectangular table, sat the rest of their group, seemingly a quiet bunch compared to the two women sitting opposite each other.

Two rival factions in the search of a war.

“Exactly! Maybe my Grandson is a little shy. What’s wrong with that? Shyness is an essential ingredient in the character of a gentleman.”

Francis, the purple hat-wearing adversary, stifled a laugh of contempt. Her round face lit up with a sarcastic smile.

“Shy? Ha! James sure wasn’t shy about ditching Alice to chase Rebecca. Was he now? No. Do you know why? He just wanted to get at my Charles...that was the only reason he decided to chase her. And you, you encouraged him, didn’t you?”

The petty argument continued. Jason’s mind drifted toward more relevant matters.

Candace wasn’t at home.

Jason started to rise, but thought better of it. He was a man of his word. He would force himself to wait a little longer. Surely, his client would arrive soon.

Candace, his petite, exploding firecracker of a wife. Her soft blonde hair, her gold-rimmed glasses, her eyes staring at him with a slight twinkle....

The sound of Christmas music ended abruptly. Why? Who cared. August wasn’t the time for Christmas.

Jason grabbed his cup and took another slug of coffee. The full-bodied taste was a lot better than the blue haze of cigarette smoke that toyed around his nostrils.

Candace was a free spirit. It wasn't usual for her to be late, but she usually called if she was extremely overdue.

What if something had happened to her?

August 6
9:32 a.m.

Life slowed. Even at this early hour, the oppressive humidity worked to dull senses. The lack of sleep only compounded the feeling of unreality, as if everything was moving in tequila time.

“My name is James, James Freed.”

James blinked rapidly as if the bright yellow sun beating down upon his head bothered him.

The day looked beautiful but felt sticky.

“My name is...Candace....” She was about to continue, but thought better of it. “*Never trust strangers,*” was the motto of her adopted parents. Sometimes last names were better left unsaid.

Once upon a time, Jason had been a stranger. Why had she trusted him?

Candace smiled as she held out her hand in greeting. James grasped her fingers briefly and then let them fall.

Jason had radiated honesty. James was different, it was hard to read his character. That meant caution.

The two story red bricked building that served as the local police station stood behind them. Candace’s small blue car was parked before them in the small parking lot.

James used his index finger to rub his eyes. “Well, I guess there’s nothing keeping us here. We might as well move on...You had somethin’ to say to me?”

“Yes, I suppose I did.” Candace licked her dried out lips.

James watched her with a slight smile. His fingers strayed to the right pocket of his jeans. He seemed about to speak, and then stopped. Instead, he turned away as he took a step forward.

The two of them began to walk south along a well worn sidewalk. Their target was town center.

Candace stared at James, he was thin, and he had brown hair that he wore long. His eyes were rimmed with red as if he had been up all night. Candace knew that he had. He had been detained just as long as she had been.

In a vague sort of way James looked like a pale version of Scott Stapp, the former front man of the band Creed. The mane of gorgeous brown hair, a brown cowboy hat, a black shirt and blue jeans rounded out the perfect look for a grunge rocker. Then there were the intense eyes of blue, the unshaven chin....

Candace chided herself; this was no time to be thinking of music. That was her weekend job. At least until....

"You married?"

Candace tore her mind away from her thoughts. "Yes, as a matter of fact. But I didn't wait out here just to talk about my personal life. I just wanted to apologize and...maybe ask a few questions?"

James shook his head. "Life is all about fate. We can only adjust to what we're given. Therefore it wasn't your fault..."

James's raspy voice wandered off into a weary mumble. "Albert's farmin' time was up...."

A noisy old farm truck roared past on the opposite side of the street. Candace shook her head as she watched the black plumes of exhaust spewing from it. As the truck faded, her attention returned to the stranger beside her.

James tilted his head upward to stare at the sky. "I'm sure glad I got my cowboy hat before my Grandmother left...Weather like this is just the pits. I sweat easily and then salt gets into my eyes...It's freakin' uncomfortable...." He lowered his head.

"I suppose we have to adjust to what we're given...."

Candace said carefully.

White flashed as James curled his healthy red lips into a mild smile. "Yeah, I guess I just said that, didn't I? Didn't I?" His voice trailed off as his eyes stared at something in the distance.

"You know it's shady by these bushes. We could step in for a minute. It's private, so we could yak in peace. Then you wouldn't need to walk all the way back to the police station for your car...."

Candace watched his hand return to the right pocket.

A graphic vision exploded into her mind. Albert splayed out on the side of the road with rain drizzling into his unseeing eyes.

"Well, what do you say?" Judging by the tone of his voice, James was impatient.

His foot fell, crushing a tuft of grass sprouting from a crack in the concrete.

Candace shivered as she opened her mouth to reply.

August 6
9:39 a.m.

Where was he? Jason stared at the blond strands growing from his hairy wrist. To be accurate, he was staring at the cheap plastic watch wrapped around his hairy wrist. If only he hadn't agreed to wait....

Would the legendary man of mystery ever show up?

Life continued its downward spiral as Francis preened. Judging from her expression, she was about to make an important point about the meaning of life.

"Well, my grandsons aren't shy! They've all got a healthy backbone! Yep. They come right out and ask a girl! Now every one of them, except Charles of course, is happily married. I personally think that courage is genetic. I was never one to shy away from danger and well...." Francis paused to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't mean to brag, but my grandsons have turned out the same way! Ha!"

Jason felt his mind jiggle as he jotted that fact into his mental casebook. He had his brain with him; it might as well be utilized. He needed to do something to combat the worry that was nibbling at his emotion.

Mabel grinned hesitantly as if threatened, then nodded in agreement. Her thin face was hard with determination.

"Exactly! Personally, I was never afraid of dating either! As a matter of fact, I asked the neighbor boy out on our first date. That kind of thing wasn't accepted in my day, but we managed to enjoy ourselves anyway. You know how it is with teenage boys...." Mabel rolled her eyes as she sighed.

The group of women found this to be quite amusing and took a moment to chuckle over it.

What was going wrong? Candace hadn't made it home, and the old man was already fifteen minutes late. Fear was an ever-growing monster, waiting in the corners of the mind....

Jason drained the last of his coffee.

His attention wandered around the cafe, taking in the smells of coffee, cigarettes and fresh baking. The sight of new brown wallpaper distracted him for a moment.

He pressed his lips together. Brown wallpaper?

In the center of the room, a gently spinning ceiling fan spread the slight chill needed to combat the summer heat.

At the west end of the room stood an L shaped glass case. Half of it was at waist level, a cash register sat on one end of this part. Behind the glass were racks of wonderful baked goods. Every item was expertly designed to please the palate and fatten the belly.

The faint strains of Christmas music returned, tickling Jason's ears. Every snow covered note stimulated memories....

The bake and coffee shop had been renovated since that memorable meeting with Elijah Phillips. What a character that had been, still, he had paid for their honeymoon....

Jason tilted his head.

Where was that music coming from?

Somewhere in the coffee shop a stereo was blaring out a bold, brassy version of, "*Joy to the World*." Obviously, someone had a sense of humor. What a joke, Christmas music to combat the sweltering summer.

Jason began to tap his foot to the beat.

It was amazing to think that a few years had already passed since that priceless Christmas when he had first met Candace.

So many characters had faded away since that time. Brent Gunner had moved on to Pastor a Church in Moose Factory, Ontario. Elijah Phillips had been killed by a Brinks truck on its way to a delivery. Harvey and Hilda? Who knew where they had ever ended up...Who cared?

Fear had returned. Staring at him with hollow eyes of despair. Whispering doubt into his soul....

What if Candace had met with a terrible accident?

Jason reached for his cell phone once again.

August 6
9:43 a.m.

“Okay! If you feel that strong about it, we won’t step into the shade. I was just thinkin’ practically. Well, this may sound a bit ridiculous, but I was worried about walking down main street together...Ah, you know how some people can gossip in a small town. I just don’t want people to get any funny thinkin’ in their noggins.” James chuckled.

Candace watched him as he moved his hands away from his pockets. The pair of them swayed as he walked forward.

“Okay well, I don’t really care what people like that think. If their lives are so small....” Candace halted.

This was not the time for raving on about her opinions about gossip and the shallow minds that appreciated it.

“Not to mention the fact that you’ll have to walk all the way back to your car. And, well, you’ve been up all night....”

Candice breathed out a silent prayer for strength.

A two-lane bridge approached. Beyond the bridge lay the downtown business district.

“Honestly, you look like you need more sleep than I do.” Candace observed. “The sensible thing would have been to give you a ride downtown in my car. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“We’re obviously both too tired for our own good.”

Candace swiveled her head. “Well, we can still get my car. It’s not that far back...The sooner we get away from here...the sooner we sleep.”

“No, no. Sleep is for the dead!” James shook his head regretfully. “I shouldn’t have said that I guess, I wasn’t thinkin’.”

“Well, then, let’s do one thing right today. We could go back to my car. I feel stupid for not offering that before.” Candace turned away to stare down at the river running beneath her feet.

So many things in life lay hidden just under the surface....

James looked handsome, but his eyes looked haggard. His hand rested on the brim of his cowboy hat. His fingers pushed

the brim upward, and then fell back to his side.

"Don't worry about it. I'm up to walking if you are. It's not that far off. If only my car problems were as easy to fix. Apparently, my old beast decided to stall downtown...so that's where I gotta go. I'm sure it'll start now...it just stalls when it gets warm. Once it cools it works okay...I don't know why. Anyway, enough about our car troubles. I'm sure you're thinkin' about Albert. You said you had some questions?"

"Actually I'm wondering about how your car managed to get here from the highway. You were with me all night...you even rode into town with the police. Who drove your car?"

James shrugged. "Oh! That was my Grandmother...she had to get home to bed. She was tired from searchin' for Albert all night...and well, she wasn't lookin' forward to a long episode of questioning. I tried to make her stay...but you know how miserable old women can get. Mabel's usually okay, but she gets pretty grouchy when she misses her beauty sleep." His voice began to fade as he shook his head. "Her and Francis...."

Candace put a finger to her lip. "Oh, you were with your Grandmother? A few hours ago you told me there was no one in your car."

James spread his hands helplessly. "You expect me to remember some little thing about my grandmother after seeing my friend lyin' dead beside the road? Albert was ornery, but he didn't deserve to die that way. Nobody does."

Candace pushed her glasses further up her nose. "Sorry for that little digression. The police wouldn't appreciate your Grandmother taking off...Well; we won't worry about that now. You were going to tell me about Albert. Go on...."

"Oh yeah, well...there's not much to it. He is, er, was...a bit of a mental case. He also had a bit of a religious streak to him. I guess that's why most of his family never visited him. When he escaped, they needed somebody familiar with miserable Albert and his tricks. Abe and Mary are the only two members of his family who care and they are on a much-needed vacation. So, I had to drag myself out of bed, chase up my grandmother, and then we had to help search...After all, in his will Albert left us everything he ever owned, searchin' was the least we could do."

James placed a fist before his mouth as he yawned. "Well

not quite everything, the carehome gets a clock. A souvenir I think it was meant to be. Yeah it was a clock. I remember because my ex-girlfriend Alice wanted it, she won't get it though. Oh well...Life is tough sometimes."

"Which home was Albert at before he died?"

"The Golden Door it is called, a small little place. You might know it...It's not the public one on the west side. It is a private place just on the eastern edge of town. Anyway, it seems Albert had a bit of a habit of walkin' out. They had to watch him all the time...I suppose they must've slipped up last night! Otherwise, Albert wouldn't have been wanderin' on the road, and into the path of your car. "

"Three miles from town? Isn't that a bit far to wander...."

James smiled slightly. "Oh, three miles wasn't much for him. He used to tell me about going on five mile jogs, back when he was healthier. It always amazed Alice; she said she had never heard of someone with so much energy."

"Maybe I should've inherited some of that energy, and then maybe I'd have popped the question...instead of breaking up with her to go after Rebecca. "

A four-way intersection approached. After that lay two sets of railroad tracks. Just beyond the rails, a black station wagon lay in wait.

Candace took a deep breath.

James's pale face blushed red. "I can't believe I just said that...." He muttered, rubbing his eyes with his index finger.

"Marriage isn't all bad you know. You just have to be man enough to face it." Candace teased as a sudden determination burst through her.

"Yeah, that's what my ex-girlfriend Alice said, among other pointed things. I can't believe I was stupid enough to break up with her. I guess I shouldn't be lookin' back. I've got Rebecca. My grandmother is happy, and well, so am I. Oh my, we're here...I better move on...."

James looked nervous as he walked over a set of railroad tracks toward his car. He stopped suddenly as Candace fired a question at his back.

"I don't mean to be a pest, but...How did Albert get that nasty case of bedsores?"

August 6
9.58 a.m.

Jason was fading. The humidity index combined with the tiresome conversation had dulled his senses.

His eyes stared dully at the teenage girl behind the glass display case. She had short black hair, a pleasant face covered with acne, and she wore a body length apron.

She looked as depressed as he felt.

A few moments ago, a harsh command had drifted from the back of the shop. After that, the Christmas music had ended once again. Obviously, the heat was getting to some people.

The waitress met his eyes. She looked flustered as she began to walk toward him.

"I really think if your grandson James were a real man he would have asked Alice to marry him. He obviously isn't going to succeed with Rebecca." Francis smiled proudly. "It's obvious that my Charles is a better man...It's just taking Rebecca a little longer to realize that. And well, about James...Don't take this personally...but weak genetics always have an effect!"

Mabel leaned forward as she glared at the plump, haughty face of Francis. It was startling how two grandmotherly faces could appear so adversarial.

The waitress looked nervous. She smiled, revealing a mouthful of crooked teeth and metal braces.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Jason struggled to shake the numbing unease from his mind. "Sure, go ahead." His voice sounded forced.

Mabel drew in a deep breath, and then her mouth opened, allowing her slightly accented voice to boom throughout the restaurant. "Of course, ideally a man should ask the woman. However, in the case of my James, it's not genetic! It's not the lack of courage! It's not that they don't love each other! Honestly, if you ask me, he should have married Alice. I wouldn't mind having a grandchild to enjoy before I die. Yep, I may not be a

doctor, but I can feel when the old ticker is starting to give.”

Mabel waved her hands for emphasis, almost hitting the table. “Still, I respect James and his decision to pursue Rebecca. I may have suggested it to him, but he made up his own mind. If he has to date her for a few months before he marries her, so be it. I’ll wait, because Rebecca is worth it!”

The table banged as Mabel’s hand slammed into it.

Jason watched the waitress twitch as if she had been slapped in the face. The waitress scratched her eyebrow as she recovered.

“Um...Your name is Jason, right?”

“Yes.”

Francis held her hand to her mouth as she yawned. Her nasal voice grated as she spoke.

“Bah! Rebecca will soon tire of dating a poor pig farmer...if the poor girl has any sense she’ll realize that a pharmacist has so much more to offer. James is...well, he is nice enough, but honestly, he falls short in so many ways. Just look at that station wagon parked outside!” Francis shuddered. “If that’s not genetic...what is? You never answered that. Maybe your husband was weak genetically...you had to ask him out after all. That sounds like a weak man to me....”

Mabel seemed about to slap the pudgy face of her haughty adversary, but then thought better of it. She smiled.

“Exactly, it is genetic in a way. It’s rebellion against society. I was that way in my youth and James has obviously inherited that. Strong genes are rebellious genes!”

Mabel held up her hand. “Don’t misunderstand me; I’m not angry at the boy. I’m proud of him for rebelling against society by listening to his grandmother. You don’t get that much these days. You people think they know it all! If he has to date for a couple of months first, that is perfectly fine with me. The prize is worth it! But enough of that silliness! We sound like schoolgirls the way we carry on sometimes.” Mabel paused, staring at her adversary with concern. “Francis...have you been getting enough sleep? I’ve been noticing that you don’t look well at all.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening....” Jason prompted gently.

Candace haunted every thought, but life went on. He needed to concentrate.

The waitress flushed. "I'm sorry. I was distracted."

Jason forced himself to grin. "They are quite the show, aren't they?" He winked. "Whenever you're ready...."

Francis sniffed as her fingers toyed with the silver bun on the back of her head. "A young man like James should be left to choose his own girlfriends I say. It's ridiculous to interfere in the relationships of grandchildren. Albert used to...to...do that and...."

Mabel seemed about to speak, but thought better of it.

Francis blinked rapidly. "Anyway, that was a different life. Charles has been trying to keep my favorite brand of sleeping pills in stock. People have been stealing them you know...Now that I don't have my pills, and I can't seem to sleep properly. That's what the memories...can do." Her voice was drenched with pain and longing.

Mabel waved her hand dismissively. "Sleeping pills? That's nothing! I asked Charles for a stronger prescription of heart medication. Do you think he gave it to me? Nope! And me with my heart about to pack it in any day! I switched back to the downtown pharmacy right away after he did that. So many young people don't know how to listen anymore! My James could teach some people a few things...let me tell you!"

"And did the other pharmacist give you the stronger medication?" Francis grinned with a hint of malice as she waited for the answer.

The waitress hung her head and sighed. "This is silly. But, here it goes. My boss told me to leave the Christmas music off, unless some customer asked for it. I um, well, sort of like it on while I work...so I was like wondering if...you could...."

"Talk to your boss about it?" Jason finished.

The waitress nodded shyly.

"Well, no...The pharmacist said my Doctor had to..." Mabel trailed off, visibly fuming about the trap she had fallen into.

Francis chuckled, obviously pleased with Mabel's answer.

"Ha! There you see...It wasn't the fault of Charles. You shouldn't have switched away from him. He obviously knows what he's doing. If only he could get those thieves under control. I'm thinking that I might bring the thieving problem to the ladies aid...maybe we could think of a way to help...Yes, I think I'll exercise my role as society secretary."

Jason tore his eyes away from the show, and then stood from his seat. "I'm sorry for being so distracted. I'm always interested in the preservation of Christmas music. Lead on! Take me to your boss! Incidentally, why did you ask me?"

The waitress really was young. She must be sixteen at the most. She laughed nervously.

"My older sister used to work here. She told me about you and Candace. About what happened at Christmas...You seemed like really nice people, and well...I don't really wanna bother Mabel and Francis about something like that."

Jason nodded as he stroked his chin. "Yes, I can see your problem. Don't worry, I'll talk to your boss. I don't think the guy I'm waiting for will show up anytime soon."

Mabel hesitated for a moment, and then shook her head.

"I don't know what the ladies aid could do about thieving! I do know that the other pharmacy is much much better. I've often wondered why Charles thought he could compete against them. Have you been in there after the new renovation? It's beautiful inside. Exactly! You know what I mean, it's much nicer than that little shop that Charles has."

"Now now...Spitefulness is starting to seep through and that isn't becoming to ladies, old or young." Francis rubbed a red-rimmed eye. "Your life would be a lot easier if you would just accept my Charles as the brilliant young man that he is."

"Yes, well, that would be your opinion. Let's get back to the real Charles though...did you hear about what happened when he first met Rebecca? I couldn't believe it...."

Jason roused himself from his stupor enough to follow the girl toward the back of the restaurant.

Interfering with employer employee relations was probably not the best idea. Oh well, he had committed himself now. When he gave his word, he kept it.

Fear hadn't tormented him for a few brief moments. Perhaps there had been some benefit in encouraging the whim of a teenage girl. Distraction was always useful.

He had better try Candace once more before he swung into action. Jason punched the redial button in his cell phone and then held it up to his ear.

August 6
10:05 a.m.

James lifted his cowboy hat. His fingers slid through his mane of greasy hair.

"Yeah, I'm still worried about whether my car will start. You never know what'll happen with an older vehicle. But anyway, you were talking about bedsores. I've never heard of them. What are you talking about?"

James set the cowboy hat back on his head. His eyes stared into the southern distance. He seemed to have been possessed by a melancholy spirit.

"Well, it's this way. If someone lies in one position for too long they can get pressure sores, the sores rot; they smell of decay and...." Candace trailed off, she had said too much.

James shrugged as he rubbed his eyes. "I don't know! I haven't seen him for a few weeks, but sittin' still doesn't sound much like Albert. He was always movin' if he could be. Which wasn't very often I guess, but still...I'd think they'd know better at the home. What are you, some kind of nurse or somethin'?"

"As a matter of fact, I am studying to be one."

"Oh."

James shook his head. His facial expression turned thoughtful. "Umm...Come to think of it. I was going to tell you somethin'...What was it? Ah, stupid me! It's hard to think with an overtired head. Oh yeah, the police think that Albert was dead before you hit him. I guess you probably guessed that already...bein' a nurse and all. I guess I did tell you that already, but not in those exact words."

Candace glimpsed a colorful travel poster in the window of the stone building before her. Oh...to be in the Bahamas...She sighed as reality entered her tropical paradise. She had indeed suspected something as soon as she saw and smelled the body.

"I suppose that is good news in its own way." Candace said slowly, unsure of how to respond.

Her arms glistened with sticky moisture. A cool shower and a warm bed would be enough paradise for now....

Albert's body had obviously spent a lot of time lying down. Not running as James claimed. Otherwise, he wouldn't have formed that terrible case of bedsores. Sores like that would only be formed after a lengthy period of lying in one position.

What was going on at the carehome?

James yawned as he began to pace between the edge of the street to the imposing stone building just to the west. "Well just so you know..." James paused. "I really feel ready for sleep. Adrenaline helps a man for a bit. But when it wears off, watch out! Normally I'd be feedin' pigs by now...Oh well, Karl, my boss can work today. It'll be a nice change for him. I've worked with pigs enough in my life...it won't hurt him to fill in again."

James stopped abruptly, and then turned east to stare at his car. He cursed under his breath, and then swiveled back toward Candace.

"Ironical isn't it? I live so close and I haven't seen Albert for weeks. All of a sudden, Harvey Martins thought it would be best if visits were limited to family. Not that most of Albert's family cared enough to come down. "James looked thoughtful. "I was goin' to see Albert last night. I made an appointment and everythin'. I guess Harvey was right though! Even the thought of me comin' was too much excitement for 'em. He took off into the night! Ah well, Albert had a good life. Yeah, so I guess that's it. Just like that, He's dead."

"Harvey Martins?" Candace burst out.

"Yeah, Harvey started workin' at the Golden Door in...spring? Yeah it was spring when he started. I heard he was fired from his other job. You were his fiancée weren't you?"

"I don't want to talk about that." Candace placed her hands on her hips, then thought better of it.

James cocked an eyebrow, and then grinned slightly.

"Everybody in town knows your story, I...."

"What was Albert's full name?" Candace interrupted, blurting out the first question that popped into her mind.

"His name? Oh, his full name was Albert Francis Dyck. He never liked to use his full name though...he hated the name Francis. He thought it sounded too feminine, besides that, his

wife's name is Francis. If a man has the same name as his wife, it's just...just...strange! These last few years Albert started usin' his initials, A. F. Dyck instead. Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I really need to get some sleep. I'll need to work early tomorrow morning. Karl won't be happy if I miss another day...even if I had a good reason to miss today."

"Yeah sure, thanks for taking the time to talk. I didn't want to distract you from your work."

"No problem. Pig farmin' isn't that much fun! I'm sorry that we had to meet under such...Ah...difficult circumstances. I'll see you around town maybe." James grinned, rubbing his hands in mock anticipation.

"Now for the moment of truth...Will my old beast start? It's old enough that nobody steals it...even with the keys in the ignition!" Jason chuckled cynically. "See you later."

Candace returned the farewell, and then watched as James walked toward his car. Once he reached it, he opened the door and climbed inside.

A moment passed.

The car roared to life on the first crank.

Obviously, the ornery wagon had rested enough to work well for another few moments.

Jason raised a hand, waved it slightly and then began backing his beast into the street.

Candace felt her eyes wrinkle into a glare.

Like a slug, Harvey had crawled out of her past and into the care home. She felt dread sweep over her, remembering his insatiable greed.

Would Harvey be capable of murder?

August 6
10:11 am.

One more minute. That's all Jason could tolerate.

The romantic antics of Charles the pharmacist were obviously a popular topic. Everyone in the group of women had begun to contribute vigorously to the conversation. Soon Mabel and Francis were just another two cymbals in the drum kit, metaphorically speaking of course.

Jason rose to his feet. The mystery man had not arrived. It was obvious that he never would. It was time to leave one wild goose to chase another. Namely, his wife, Candace.

A faint wave of annoyance washed over him. His shoe was untied! He bent toward the trouble spot, extending his hand as he did so.

His heart rested in the knowledge that his morning had not been a total waste. The teenage waitress was now free to listen to her Christmas music.

The boss had grumbled. However, in the end, he had fallen victim to Jason's charms. More likely, he didn't think it was wise to argue with a regular customer.

In return for his gallantry, Jason had been rewarded with an affectionate gaze. Yes indeed, he had become the object of a teenage crush.

There! The troublesome laces had been well knotted. The moment of escape had arrived. Jason straightened, and then took a step forward.

"Excuse me. Are you Jason? Hello, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Mabel Freed."

Jason halted, fighting the almost uncontrollable urge to run for his sanity. Instead, driven by politeness, he turned.

Jason stared uncomprehendingly at Mabel's grin. Her wrinkled hands smoothed an invisible wrinkle in her black skirt.

He wiped away the droplets of sweat that were trickling down his nose. There were no words to be said. If he weren't so

polite, he would be long gone.

"Exactly. I'm Mabel. You were waiting for me, weren't you?" Mabel tilted her head as she stared up at Jason. Her British accent came through quite strong when she was forceful.

"I was waiting for you?"

"Oh yes. You were waiting for me. You just didn't know it."

"I'm sorry; I think you've made a mistake. I was waiting for a man...Now if you'll excuse me, I really need to get going."

"A mister A. F. Dyck, correct?"

Jason's face wrinkled with surprise. "Yes, that is correct."

"Well, that is my neighbor's name." Mabel winked. "I used my neighbor's name to disguise myself. Clever of me isn't it. One cannot be too careful in these days of wickedness."

There was an awkward pause as Jason struggled to find a sensible reply. He was on the brink of a verbal deluge. He didn't want to encourage it.

Mabel's slender fingers began to adjust the blue bow pinned into the silver bun on the back of her head. "I hope you aren't too busy to listen to an old woman's troubles. I was so thankful when Charles said that you had agreed to meet me. Do you mind?"

"No, no...er...What was it you wanted to talk to me about? Oh and just so you know, I won't help you with Charles and James. Don't even try to get me involved in that."

Jason hesitated, and then returned to the embrace of the wooden chair. He would face this challenge sitting down. He exhaled as ambition left him.

Shoe clad feet clacked on the linoleum floor as Mabel hobbled to his side.

Her left hand rested on his right shoulder.

"Don't worry about what I said a little while ago. I know I said a few harsh things about Charles...He was Francis's first and still the only grandchild, so he got a bit spoiled. Just between us, I heard that his parents never married...You know, I always make it a policy to help people like that...they haven't had a good start in life. Advice from an older, wiser woman can be so beneficial, but only if it's said bluntly. There's no point in fooling around when something serious needs to be said."

"Yes, it sounded that way...I...Uh...." Jason sputtered to a

halt. What could be gained in pursuing such an obviously ridiculous line of conversation?

Mabel looked hurt. She returned her hands to the handles of her walker and then stared into Jason's eyes. "I'm serious! The truth is simple. I get along with Charles quite well! That is why I asked him for help. Not that I'd admit it to Francis, but Charles is an excellent young pharmacist. Like I said to Francis, he just needs to stay away from James and Rebecca and things will be fine. That's all I ask, but even that is too much for Francis."

"It might be better to let James, Charles, and Rebecca take care of themselves." Jason muttered under his breath. The morning had been far too long; he didn't need yet another longwinded story about nothing.

He just wanted to fulfill his promise and leave.

"What was that?"

"Oh nothing. Please, have a seat." Jason gestured toward the empty wooden chair across from him.

Mabel leaned on her walker for support as she maneuvered into a chair. She gasped for breath as she landed on the seat across from Jason's questioning gaze.

She was a thin and frail looking creature but her watery blue eyes still flashed with the spark of life.

Charisma seemed to radiate from her body.

"Old bones ain't what they was once, but a body learns to adjust when you're my age. You'll learn someday."

"I guess that's the way life is, just when it gets interesting it lets you down." Jason observed philosophically.

"Yes, I suppose that's it." Morella coughed into her hand.

"A cold?"

"Yes indeed. A miserable thing it is. It just so happens that is exactly what I want to talk to you about."

"I'm listening." Jason prompted, eager to get on with the search for Candace. Mabel had exactly two minutes to prove herself. After that, she was on her own.

On a whim, Jason peered into his coffee cup. Yes there were a few precious drops to be salvaged. He raised the cup to his lips.

Mabel searched her mind, "All right now where was I?" She mumbled to herself, tapping her fingers on the table. "Yes the

cold...that was it. I got it when someone tried to kill me.”

An energetic, jazz flavored version of, “*Rock Around the Christmas Tree*,” began to fill the restaurant.

Jason’s coffee cup clunked as it hit the table. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“Someone tried to kill you?”

August 6
10:14 a.m.

She would watch for Jason.

By now, Jason should be interviewing the man of mystery. It wouldn't be very sensible to interrupt him. On the other hand, if she couldn't find Jason's truck....

Candace searched the row of vehicles parked across the street. Since there were only two vehicles, the search didn't take very long. Where had Jason left it?

Waves of weariness crashed into her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. Despite this, the clarion call of curiosity echoed through her mind.

What mischief was Harvey up to at the care home?

If she had a pair of wheels under her, she could roll over there right away to investigate. Although, walking was another option....

No, the Doctor had warned her to take it easy! She had already done more than enough walking. She needed rest, or else....

Her skull felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. A state that was only aggravated by air that felt like a heavy wet blanket.

Candace fought to keep the fires of imagination alive.

She needed to catch her husband. Jason would know where he had left their transportation.

Her feet stumbled as she walked ten paces to the south. After a brief moment, she had arrived at the center of Gladstone.

Candace stood at the edge of a four-way intersection. To west, there stood the bakery and coffee shop. Beside that, as part of the same building, there was a segment with one door and three small windows. The green and white sign attached to it proclaimed it to be, "*Gladstone Supermarket*." At the moment, the most interesting thing was a concrete rest bench to the south. Just before the yellow bricked building that served as the town post office.

The bench beckoned. A shrine of relaxation shimmering in the haze of early morning heat.

Candace felt her legs weakening as she stumbled over the intersection.

Her eyes traveled beyond the concrete bench for a moment. There she saw the town bulletin board. Then her gaze dropped to the bench as she moved closer.

Ah to sit...Candace was seated facing east, but she didn't care. Jason couldn't escape without being seen. She would make sure of that.

Further to the east, there was a darker building that served as a Credit Union branch office. Looking farther, she could see the brown and yellow walls of Clarke's gift shop.

Candace glanced at her watch. Knowing Jason, he would be awhile yet. However, he wouldn't be as long as he used to be.

When Brent was still in town, he and Jason had spent many happy hours over chocolate donuts and coffee. Those were the days....

Brent's absence had left a hole in Jason's life that couldn't be filled by Candace. However, she had learned to accept the fact and offer her support in other ways. Jason was more than happy to return the favor.

Her arms stretched toward the sun as her mouth allowed a yawn to escape. She allowed her back to press into the hard bench. Her overtired mind drifted, mentally perusing the shelves of the well-stocked gift shop.

Eyelids fought briefly against the pull of gravity and then succumbed.

"Hey I was just at the coffee machine, and brought you a cup. You look tired...You might as well have some while we wait. Caffeine usually helps...." A vision of James gliding across the police station waiting room flashed through her mind.

The strangely bitter taste of the coffee lingered on her tongue even as Candace stretched lengthwise on the concrete bench.

A short nap in the sunshine shouldn't hurt.

Vehicles began to trickle through the intersection, but their noise did little to bother the small form lying on a bench at the street corner.

August 6
10:19 a.m.

“Now, pay attention young man! Someone tried to kill me!”

Mabel wiped away the line of drool that was beginning to slide from the corner of her lip.

Orchestral strains of, “*Silent Night*” drifted into the room. Obviously, the waitress wanted to share her good vibrations with everyone. The volume was about five times as loud as it had been before Jason had intervened with her boss.

“I tried to open the door of my apartment...You know the senior’s apartment where I live, it’s on the east end of town... Anyway, I tried to get into my apartment but I couldn’t. You know why? The door was locked! It was dark. There were drifts piled all around, snow flying in my face. Obviously, I couldn’t get around very well with my walker. So there I was, pounding on my own door while my skin was turning blue. It was a lucky thing that my neighbor came along. Albert Dyck is a miserable coot, just like most men...but he did save my life! Yep, I was lucky that night.”

Jason stared at Mabel for a long incredulous moment, eventually he found the strength to state the obvious. “Since when has there been a snowstorm in the middle of summer? I may not be the most observant person, but I think I would have noticed snow in August.”

Mabel sighed as if the burden of foolishness was almost too much to bear. “They tried to kill me in February. February twenty-ninth to be exact. ” As the last words dribbled from her mouth, her eyebrows arched proudly.

“And your cold has carried on until now?” Jason felt like laughing at the madness of it, but his sheer commitment to duty kept him sober.

The Christmas music was getting a bit too loud for his taste. He searched the crowded room for the waitress, but she couldn’t be seen. Jason frowned as he returned his attention to his client.

"Exactly right! Colds can do that you know. Especially at my age! We seniors can't fight off infection that well...."

"Okay and..." Jason took a breath. "You obviously think this was...deliberate."

Jason rubbed his aching head. Why had he bothered to get out of bed? If the Christmas music didn't finish him off, Mabel would.

"Yes, I do. You know why? Because of Francis! She is Albert's wife. She's gone crazy now that she doesn't live with him. She used to be real conservative, but then...Well, I don't want to gossip. You should have seen her...She was sitting across from me just a few minutes ago. Anyway, I heard say that she was in the area of my apartment at the time. She probably saw me go into Albert's apartment and got a head full foolish ideas. As if, I would try something at my age! I didn't even know the man! Still, I'd bet that she was the reason I never saw Albert after that day. Jealousy is a vicious little devil!"

Mabel bared her teeth like a wolf about to bite. The fierce expression faded as she coughed.

"*Silent Night*," had faded. "*God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen*" was the next track on the cd.

The boss, a muscular man dressed all in white was now standing behind the glass case. His black beard almost hid an unfriendly scowl, but not quite. He crossed his powerful arms as he continued to glare at Jason.

Jason ignored the glare. Instead, he pondered the fact that he hadn't even noticed the seniors gathering breaking up. Obviously, his mind had been otherwise occupied. What a relief....

"Now where was I? I'm not saying that Francis did it. Nope. I'm not that kind of woman. But facts are facts! Ever since his family put Albert into the care home, Francis has changed. You'd never know her from what she used to be."

"But why would that ...?" Was all Jason managed to get out before he was interrupted with the answer.

"Albert used to have Francis under his complete control. Now that she is free of him, she became him. She learned well! As contrary as a kid less goat she is! She hates my James because he's only a pig farmer, and they were farmers themselves once. Hypocrite! She told me once that I was like an

arrogant queen lording it over the peasants. Imagine! I think you can see exactly why I wanted to protect Rebecca from that crazy family. Charles may be okay, but the rest of them....” Mabel shook her head to show her despair.

Jason struggled to find diplomatic words. “Francis didn’t seem terribly nasty...I....” His voice faded. The Boss was ambling toward him; the expression on his face was positively grim.

Mabel did look like a queen lording it over her peasants. She just needed a golden crown to perch upon her head of grey. Actually, Mabel and Francis had a lot in common in that way.

“Francis wants to break up a beautiful relationship. She says my James is a bad influence on Rebecca. And I...” Mabel paused with a dramatic flair. “And I...I just want love and happiness for two fine young people perfect for each other!”

Mentally, Jason was already out the door and walking along the sun drenched sidewalk. It was impossible for him to keep the impatience out of his words.

”I’ll be perfectly honest. I doubt very much that Francis would try to kill you, even if she was jealous. Why would she? It doesn’t make sense. Maybe you accidentally locked the door behind you; I know I’ve done that.”

The boss watched the conversation silently. He was obviously waiting for the opportunity to leap into the conversation.

“Young man, I never forget my keys. I may be old but I’m not that senile. I would never do something that foolish! Now, about Albert and Francis. I heard that their family sold their house in Camden and moved them into Gladstone...You know why?”

Mabel lowered her voice to a whisper. “There were mental problems that the family didn’t want to deal with. Did you know that Albert threw an axe at his son Abe? That makes you wonder doesn’t it? Yes indeed, I heard it straight from....”

“All right, All right!” Jason held up his hand to halt yet another tirade in its infancy. Mabel reminded him of Hilda, thankfully, his former girlfriend.

“I’ve heard more than enough! I’ll come down to your apartment, later. Right now I really have to go!”

Jason lifted himself from his chair and then began searching for the appropriate change.

“Where?” Mabel’s voice was commanding.

Jason hesitated and then shrugged.

"To the police station."

Jason tossed a five-dollar bill to the table. That would pay for the coffee plus a healthy tip.

The boss glanced at the money and raised an eyebrow.

"So you won't be needing that Christmas music anymore?" He asked in a gruff voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I..." Jason cut off his reply, and then shrugged. He didn't need an argument.

Mabel was about to ask a follow up question, but Jason forestalled that by charging for the exit. He needed to escape before he went totally mad.

Candace had become priority number one. Jason hoped that he wasn't too late.

August 6
10:27 a.m.

Jason knew he had made a mistake.

Mabel fell into step beside him. After a slight pause, she peered over her horn-rimmed glasses. She had obviously shifted from her role as ruler to the grandmother that she looked like.

"So I hear that you're off to the police station. Hmmm. Anything exciting brewing in our fair town? Usually there isn't too much. Nope, it's just young people raising Cain."

Why hadn't he taken the truck? Because it was a short walk and he needed the exercise. Stupid, stupid....

Gritting his teeth, Jason slowed his pace to match Mabel's. At her pace, the short walk would take all morning.

"Er...I'll probably have to drive my wife's car home...Ahh...she's probably been awake all night, and she hasn't been feeling very well lately." Jason knew he sounded impatient, but he didn't care. He was very worried and it showed.

He had managed to place phone call to the police station before Mabel had caught up with him. According to the officer on duty, Candace's car was at the station. Although, the officer didn't know where she was, and he was too busy to find out.

Candace had a way of finding trouble. Just as Jason had a way of finding strange people. Those facts made for an interesting marriage.

Jason glanced at the imposing stone building across the street. Some things in life were hard to move.

How could he leave Mabel behind without being impolite?

Cars raced past at the official speed limit of thirty kilometers an hour. Jason felt like a snail scaling Mount Everest. So far, he had barely managed to escape from the coffee shop.

Some people knew how to accept a goodbye. Certain other people followed the goodbye speaker onto the sidewalk and then continued rambling.

Jason felt his eye brows droop into furrows.

Mabel cackled. "Ooh my. Now let me guess, you called home and she wasn't there...so now you're going to the police station. There is no need to be ashamed of it. Young men do worry about their women from time to time...I remember putting a few grey hairs on my husband before he died."

Two sets of railroad tracks passed beneath their feet.

Mabel cackled again, louder and longer. Eventually her belly stopped quaking long enough for her to gasp out a breath.

Jason stared at her, becoming ever more confused at this sudden change in attitude. There were more layers to Mabel than he had first thought.

"Oh my, my, my. You been married long?"

"Not really. A few years it is now. We had a Christmas wedding...."

"Oh my...You got married at Christmas, how nice. You asked her out I suppose? "

"Yes, of course!"

"I am so glad. So many young men your age don't have the nerve to ask a girl out...Yep, they're so busy with their video games that they don't know how to deal with reality."

Jason felt his mouth twitch. Mabel was a fine one to be speaking of reality. It took a bit of effort, but he managed to suppress the lurking laughter.

"You know, the thing most men don't know about us women is that we're a bit restless sometimes. Sometimes we like to be like Jane waiting for our Tarzan to come swinging through the trees after us..." Mabel held her hand to her mouth as she giggled like a mischievous schoolgirl. "Oh my that is a silly thought, isn't it? You know, I always liked those Tarzan movies when I was a young girl. All those wild and shirtless young men...." Mabel winked at Jason. "Oh my, those were the days. But I'm getting distracted. I'm sure your wife will turn up soon. We women usually do, crazy though we may be."

Mabel held out her cane to prevent Jason from crossing the busy street before them.

"Don't mind me, I like playing different characters sometimes. I always wanted to be an actress, but my parents thought acting was of the Devil. As you can imagine, that kind of thinking makes for difficult career choices...Eventually I got

married instead. The funny thing is...marriage requires acting some days, sometimes...If you don't mind me asking. What do you do when you aren't out chasing your wife?"

Vehicles rumbled and hummed, veering in all four directions. The intersection was surprisingly busy for this time of the morning.

Who knew what kept people so busy in a small town?

Mabel shifted. "I asked you a question young man."

Jason didn't see any harm in telling her, so he did. He felt a certain satisfaction as he told Mabel about his plans to help Charles stamp out the thefts from his pharmacy.

A train horn blared somewhere close by.

Mabel seemed disturbed. She lowered her cane and then hobbled forward as the street before them cleared.

"Are you a police officer?"

"No. Charles is a friend of mine. I offered to help him out. I've been doing some law enforcement training. To be precise, I am training to be a security officer. So I've been studying security systems and things like that."

"Exactly...well...I guess Charles needs the help."

Despite her attempts to claim otherwise, Charles was obviously not one of Mabel's favorite people. There was a brief moment of silence before Mabel continued.

"I'd bet that it was some punk kids. Why, in my time we'd be punished if we got caught stealing candy bars. Nowadays there's not even punishment for selling drugs and killing people! That's exactly the reason they steal. Crime, that's all the kids learn these days. It's the video games that teach them."

Mabel shook her head as an expression of profound sorrow overwhelmed her face. As if that wasn't enough, she began wringing her hands.

Jason looked back at the short street he had just crossed.

A crimson red Mustang roared as it charged through the intersection. It was obviously intent on beating the train that was approaching the railroad crossing.

Mabel sighed. "What did I tell you? Look at them go...racing off to their own funerals. My parents always frowned on speeding...."

The early morning sun beamed happily on the busy town.

All traces of rain had vanished. Birds were chirping cheerfully as they fluttered past. The day would be wonderful!

Jason's blond eyebrows sank lower into depression.

A train horn blared behind them.

If Mabel pushed her walker any slower, she would be standing still. The time had come to part ways.

"I really need to go." Jason said firmly, but as politely as he could manage. "I know you asked for help, and I respect that. I'll come by your apartment later, all right? If you can think of a reason why Francis would be after you, I'd be happy to listen then. Right now I really need to worry about my wife."

Rumbling and clanking signified the powerful presence of a slowly passing train.

Mabel began to play the part of heroine in a suspense movie. Her voice was dramatic, her eyes shifted, and her body language spoke of tension. "I hope I stay alive until then, but I'll wait. Like I always say, today we laugh, and tomorrow we may cry. Who knows what sorrow the future brings!" Mabel snapped back to reality and smiled to show it.

Jason attempted to match the grin. "I don't know about tomorrow. I'll see you this evening though. I hope that's okay."

"Good bye then. Remember! I'm at the Golden Door care home, just on the east end of town. I'll be expecting you at six o'clock exactly. Don't be late!"

"Alright, well, I'll probably see you then. I don't know what the day will bring, but it should work out. See you later."

Jason felt relief wash over him. He felt like dancing in the street. At last, he was free!

Mabel was behind him now. A silhouette watching an endless line of passing rail cars. She was an obsessive fan, much like those who had afflicted Elvis.

Jason felt like Elvis, but unlike Elvis no one would ever say about him with the same tone of awe, "Ahem, Jason has just left the building." Perhaps it was best that they didn't, with the name of Jason, that famous phrase just didn't have the same ring to it.

Caffeine fueled thoughts raced through Jason's mind as he admired his reflection in a glass window alongside the sidewalk.

Jason knew that he was more handsome than Elvis. The proof was reflected in the window of the tavern he was passing. Well, at least the restaurant portion of the tavern. Not the official portion of the tavern. Therefore, the reflection must be valid.

The warmth of the sun beat against his skull, slowly bringing Jason back to reality.

He lowered his head and increased his pace. His journey wouldn't be long now.

This was no time to be dreaming silly nonsense. Jason felt disgusted with himself. He needed to be serious.

Fear had returned like an old friend.

Why had Candace ended up at the police station?

August 6
10:39 a.m.

“Candace was here. She was involved in a situation, so we asked her to fill out some paperwork. After that, she hung around waiting for James Freed...they left together...Oh what was it now? Over half an hour ago, I guess. Where they are now, I have no idea. Sorry.”

The officer looked up at Jason as he shrugged.

Jason muttered his thanks, and then left the officer to tend to the mountain range of paperwork on his desk.

Where had she gone? Her car was still the lone occupant of the parking lot. She obviously hadn't gone far....

Sweat trickled down Jason's face as the yellow sun glared down at his insignificant silhouette.

If James Freed was any relation to Mabel, there might be cause for concern.

His legs carried him along the concrete path. The red bricked police station building fell behind him.

There was an older looking two house across the street. It grew closer as Jason strode toward it.

He stopped at the edge of the street. His head swiveled, looking both ways. There was no inspiration to be found.

A small green sign stood on a white pole. Oh yes, fifth street, the road to William's park. There was a lovely pool there.

Jason ran his tongue over his chapped lips. A pool of cool, wet water would be just the thing to caress his sweat-covered skin. The park wasn't far, just two blocks down fifth street, to the west. It was a short walk that would have to wait for a better time.

Where was Candace?

To the south lay town center, there was only open country to the north.

Jason licked his lips again. His mouth felt so dry. Where to go next? South seemed the best option, perhaps he had

missed her.

His hand penetrated his pocket, his fingers grasped the slender body of the cell phone.

He hadn't tried to call home for a few minutes. Maybe Candace had returned home...He would soon find out....

Warm hands wrapped around Jason's neck. Squeezing, pressing against his jugular. Startled, he spun to face his attacker.

"Hello Darling, surprised?"

Candace grinned, but she was obviously exhausted. "You sure move! I've been trying to catch you. I was resting on the concrete bench by the post office. Watching, waiting...but I dozed off. I woke up and saw you walking away with some old woman. I jumped up and then started after you." Candace sighed. "Then I had to wait for a train! A long train...."

Jason laughed as relief flooded his face. "Well, I also ran into some trouble. Er, I guess I'm still in it...but that's another story. I'm just glad you're okay!"

Candace stared up at her husband. Her eyes were twin pools of puzzlement.

"You thought I was in trouble?"

Jason gestured toward the building behind him. "You were at the police station. What was I supposed to think?"

"It wasn't that serious, at least for me. I thought, and the police thought it was an accident. Well, I guess all that is still under investigation...."

"Am I the tired one? Or why am I confused?"

Candace blinked a pair of long eyelashes. "It's been a long weekend...The shows, the doctor's appointment, and to top it off I found a corpse beside the road. Of course, the police had to get involved after that. They wanted to talk. I talked. They wanted reports filled out. I filled out reports. I'm fed up! Can we go? I need to get out of this sweaty stage costume; I've been wearing it since...last night."

Jason eyed his wife for a moment before he spoke. "Okay, fair enough. Have you got your keys?"

"I left the keys in the car. I figured that it should be safe enough parked in front of the police station."

Jason headed for the driver's side window and then

peered through it. "Yeah, I guess it was. The keys are still there. Come on."

There was a brief moment of silence only broken by the sound of opening and closing car doors.

"Oh, I suppose this wouldn't be the place to forget about seatbelts, would it?" Jason chuckled as he pulled the strap around his chest.

Candace fastened herself into the passenger seat. After she had completed that task, she reached for the tree shaped air freshener dangling from the mirror.

Her fingers pulled the plastic packaging down a little more. The pungent scent of cinnamon filled Jason's nostrils, squeezing forth a sneeze.

Jason shook his head.

After a moment, he started the car and then began to back it out into the street.

Jason turned to his wife. "A corpse beside the road? James Freed? Why don't you tell me what happened and I'll take you home."

"Wow, that's obviously a deal I can't refuse. Here it goes. Hmmm...I guess you know about the police station."

Jason pushed heavily on the accelerator, forcing the car to charge forward over the bridge.

"What's this I heard about you and James?"

"Oh that! I walked downtown with him. It was a good opportunity to find out a little more about Albert. Albert was the name of the guy I found. I don't know how he ended up beside the road, but I still had to answer a lot of questions about it."

"Why didn't James park closer to the station?"

"His old station wagon stayed downtown because that's where it stalled. His Grandmother had tried to drive it home, and then it stalled. It had cooled off by the time we got there, so it started just fine. Then I made the mistake of lying down on the bench instead of watching out for you. Serves me right, sleeping on the job. I guess the lack of sleep does have an effect."

"You could have joined me in the Coffee shop."

Candace sighed. "I could have, but I was tired. Besides I didn't want to interrupt what ever you had going with that mysterious A.F. Dyck...I really was going to catch you when you

left the coffee shop.”

Jason pushed the brake pedal, slowing the car to a halt before a stop sign. It was a four way stop.

He stopped.

“A.F. Dyck never showed up. Well, there is no need to dwell on past mistakes. Let’s talk about something pleasant. How did your weekend shows go?”

Candace didn’t hear his question. She had another question in her mind, one of her own creation.

“Jason?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you think we could stop by the Golden Door carehome? It’s on our way home after all. I’ve been wondering how Albert could get from the carehome to the side of the highway. It wouldn’t hurt to check into it, would it? A few minutes, a few questions, and then we’re on our way.”

Jason’s lips reluctantly stretched into a smile. “Yes, of course, just like those other times. A few minutes indeed....”

He gazed mockingly at his short, blonde haired and vivacious wife. He had been through this many times before in their short marriage.

“Don’t you want to go home and get some sleep? You look like you’ll fall over if you stay awake much longer. Besides, don’t you have your palliative care duty tonight?”

“Yes, but...”

“Yeah? I thought so. Wouldn’t it make sense to sleep, and then go to the carehome in the evening? We could go together; I promised Mabel Freed that I would stop by anyway....” Jason paused.

“Mabel was part of the reason I didn’t get here sooner. That, and me fantasizing about being Elvis....”

Candace tossed her head of short blonde hair. “Elvis and Mabel? How does that relate to a meeting with the mysterious A.F. Dyck?”

Jason sighed. “I’ll tell you the whole sordid story when you’re rested. Like all good stories, it’s crazy and complicated. Which brings me back to the care home... Wouldn’t it make more sense to go there later on when you’re rested and alert?”

“It wouldn’t be that long.”

"Maybe not, but I've got to go to the pharmacy yet. I can't watch out for you...and you're obviously too tired to function."

Candace's mind flashed back to the Doctor's warning.

"Well, okay. Maybe I could use a little sleep. But, not too long...I...I keep thinking of Albert splayed out beside the road. I need to know who put him there."

Jason felt his eyebrows arch with curiosity. The situation was starting to sink in. "Who did you say it was who died?"

"Some old person named A.F. Dyck...Well, his full name was Albert Francis Dyck, but apparently he used his initials because he hated the name Francis."

"A.F. Dyck eh? Well well, it is a small world indeed. Mabel Freed, the woman who showed up at the coffee shop used the exact same initials. Apparently, she was using the initials of a neighbor who saved her life. She was worried about security or some such nonsense."

Candace felt a cold chill creeping along the edges of her nerves. "Her neighbor?" She took a breath. "What did she want to see you about?"

"To make a long diatribe short, Mabel thought that Albert's wife Francis had tried to kill her in February. Then there was a whole lot of babble and brag about her grandson James...."

"Really? Interesting. I just was talking to James, apparently this A.F. Dyck was a friend of the family."

Jason stared at his wife as suspicion stirred in his mind.

"Albert may have been a friend of James, but his wife Francis is definitely not a friend of the Freed family. Why? I have no idea. How did you meet up with James anyway?"

"Apparently James and his grandmother were out looking for Albert. James drove up with his station wagon just after I found the body...."

"The whole set up is pretty convenient, isn't it? Everyone found each other at just the right time."

"You know, it almost makes me think that Mabel and James were the ones who dropped the body in the first place. Although I can't imagine why they would have come back when they saw me there."

"Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised at anything that Mabel was involved with." Jason swatted at a fly buzzing around his

nose. "Hmmm...Another thought just popped into my mind."

"Oh?" Candace grabbed the fly with a quick reflex.

"I was just thinking that a station wagon would be a perfect vehicle to haul bodies in."

Candace's hair bobbed as she nodded. "Well, stranger things have happened in life. But why? Why would they try to pull us into it?"

Jason wiped a sheen of sweat from his face. "I don't know. Now... let's go back to the beginning. Charles called and said that there was an old man, Albert, who wanted to meet me for help. Mabel, his neighbor, showed up instead. I was also privileged to witness a feud between Mabel, and Albert's wife, Francis. What were they arguing about? Mabel's grandson James is dating Rebecca, the former girlfriend of Charles. Apparently, Mabel had encouraged the relationship. Francis was angry about it on behalf of Charles, her grandson. It's a crazy mess."

"When I talked to him, James didn't really seem that interested in Rebecca. To me it sounds like the real feud is between Mabel and Francis. Since no one likes to fight alone, they have been dragging the rest of their family into their battle. Why would Mabel want to get you into it?"

Jason smiled as an air of grimness settled over his face.

"To fill my head with nonsense, to distract me from whatever Albert wanted to tell me. I don't know. I know it's normal for old women to feud, but when people start ending up dead, it needs to be taken seriously. I think I'll have to ask Charles a few questions about who exactly it was that wanted my help."

"There is one other fact that you should know."

"What?"

"Harvey is running the Golden Door carehome. That is where everyone involved lives. It could be a coincidence...but you remember how Harvey treated us."

Jason blinked. "Yes...Harvey...Greedy Harvey. He confuses the issue. Well, I guess I'll start by asking Charles some serious questions. After that, we'll pay a visit to our old friend Harvey. Maybe we can get to the bottom of this madness before the day is out."

Candace rested her head on the window beside her. "If I wasn't so tired I would come with you to see Charles. But I've

been up all night, so I likely wouldn't be much good anyway...."

Jason guided the car into a familiar driveway.

"I'm glad to hear that you're finally accepting the truth! Well, we're here...In a few minutes you'll be able to sleep. But before that, can I ask you a question?"

"What?"

"I haven't seen you very much lately...But I have noticed that you haven't been looking well. I know you've been working hard...Studying, doing shows, and whatnot, but you haven't seemed like yourself lately. You went to see a Doctor...You hate Doctors! Why won't you tell me what's wrong?"

August 6

10:56 a.m.

Jason was distracted.

Why hadn't Candace answered the question about her health?

Didn't she trust him anymore?

He struggled to push the thoughts aside. Logic said that they were ridiculous. Emotion was fed by feelings of insecurity, of inadequacy that he usually covered with jokes and a smile. Jason didn't have time for an internal battle; he had the problems of Charles to deal with.

Jason needed to focus.

Charles had been extra vigilant, but even his watchful gaze hadn't observed anything suspicious.

Jason had watched some of the surveillance tapes himself. After some momentary highlights, all he could see were the shuffling gaits of elderly customers. Who cared about that? He could watch for hours and see nothing. If something needed to be watched for, he could always do it later.

Charles, the pharmacist, was behind a waist high white partition looking into a tube of...something. Who knew what foul concoction he was brewing.

Breath escaped from Jason's tightly pressed lips. His next task would be to search out the blind spots he had noticed in the gaze of the security cameras. What fun.

Charles, to his credit, wasn't demanding. No, he was more the politely arrogant type.

"You know Jason; if you're in the area...maybe you could stop by. I would appreciate your help. August sixth would be fine for me...see you then."

Helping Charles wasn't the main problem. The biggest problem for Jason was Candace. He should be at home...taking care of her. Making sure that she actually did find the time to sleep.

If murder had visited Albert, who knew who could be next?

Jason glanced around the store, searching out yet another blind spot. His first task would be to ensure that the security cameras could observe every corner of the room.

The store wasn't that big. It was like a small cube with walls of brick. Two shelves of steel, painted white, squatted in the middle of the room. In addition, wooden shelves filled with the finest in over the counter medication lined the walls. There was one steel exit door on the south end. The north end was where a cash register and a small cubicle were located. Behind the cubicle with the waist-high wall was where Charles would practice his healing powers by mixing potent powders.

It seemed obvious that Mabel and her grandson James had left the body on the road. Why?

Charles was looking at Jason with those accusing eyes of his. That meant it was time to get back to work. Otherwise Jason wouldn't get paid.

Letters formed words and sentences as Jason scribbled mental notes to himself. There were a few blind spots, nothing spectacular, but maybe it had been enough. In a few moments, Jason would reposition the cameras for maximum coverage.

Jason stopped writing as his mission entered his mind.

"Hey Charles, you never told me that the mysterious A.F. Dyck was a woman."

The blue eyes of Charles opened wide, bulging with indignation. "What are you talking about? A.F. Dyck is a man! I should know. I make his prescriptions every month and then personally and precisely deliver them to the carehome."

"Really...? I...." Jason stopped. Sometimes it was better to be quiet. He resisted the urge to speak only for a moment.

"Oh? What about Albert's family?"

"Don't worry about them. Most of them don't live around here. I think they all live out of province. Oh, except for his wife Francis and his son Abe. Abe lives around here somewhere; I don't know him personally. I remember Albert showing me pictures of Abe and his wife Mary...He hated them for some reason. I never felt brave enough to ask why. Albert used to come in here pretty often. I guess that is why he asked me for help."

"Has Albert come in lately?"

"No...To be precise, I only saw him when he first moved

into town. After a few months, he stopped coming in. That is why I've been bringing his medication directly to the care home. He is not in condition to take care of himself anymore. The staff take care of him."

"Okay then, how could Albert ask you for help?"

"There was a note in one of his empty prescription bottles. The home always returns them for refills. The day I called you was the day I got the note. Albert said he needed help and that he wanted to meet me on August 6. I figured you could be more of a help to him than I would be, so I called you. Did you actually meet him?"

"I met someone...." Jason said reluctantly. Frantically searching his mind for a safer topic.

"You weren't suspicious when you got the note?"

Charles bent down to pick something up, and then tossed it at Jason. The small pill container spun through the air and then was caught by Jason's hand.

"No, I cannot say I was surprised. His medication was prescribed to control mental problems. I was not surprised at all; Albert could be quite the character even with his medication. Take a look at the bottle yourself. That is not the pill bottle he used, but it is similar. You say Albert never arrived?"

"Nope."

Jason stared at the object in his hand.

It was a small black bottle with a white label on the outside of it. The opaque factor was obviously why the note had gone unnoticed. Jason twisted the bottle, looked in, shrugged, and then tossed it back.

Charles grabbed the bottle and then set it down somewhere out of sight. He grunted as he turned back to his work. "Hmmm. I wonder what happened to him. Albert is a miserable character, but decent enough in some ways. He may have been crazy but if there was one person you could rely on to keep his appointments that would be him. It is very strange that he would not show up when he said he would. I suppose it is possible that his condition got worse."

"Maybe he didn't show up because he was lying dead beside the highway." Jason dropped the verbal grenade and then waited for a reaction.

“Oh.” Charles sounded unfazed. “I remember hearing that he was getting worse. I thought it meant physically, but maybe it was mentally. Maybe he escaped and had an accident. Sometimes patients in his condition will do that. It is always sad when people get so far that medication can’t help them anymore.”

A tube smashed to the floor.

Jason was confused. Charles sounded uninterested in the fate of his Grandfather. That wasn’t normal.

People were usually interested in hearing about a possible murder. Why was Charles the exception?

“You know what the strangest part was? Mabel Freed showed up and acted as if she had arranged the meeting. According to Mabel, your grandmother, Francis, tried to freeze her to death. Mabel wanted my help to catch her.”

“Oh Mabel has been feuding with my grandmother ever since the Rebecca incident. They both do and say stupid things; usually it is best just to ignore them. Most of what they say is lies anyway. On the subject of thieves...I’ve got something to show you that may come as a surprise.”

Charles bent, and then straightened. A large shotgun rested in his hands. His eyelids crinkled as he smiled.

Jason stared at the gun.

“I hope you aren’t planning on using that anytime soon.” He said, pointing at the instrument of death.

August 6
11:10 a.m.

Why hadn't she told Jason? The question distracted Candace from the pleasant voice in her ear. She forced herself to pay attention.

"Charles is odd." Rebecca paused. "I don't know what else to say. Sometimes he strikes me as a wonderful man...other times there seems to be something dangerous about him. Well, it's not actually him. It's the influence that his grandmother Francis works on him. It's not normal."

Candace lay back on the queen sized bed, fighting the sleep that threatened to overwhelm her. She only needed to stay awake until the end of the conversation.

Jason deserved to know. She should have told him. Guilt nibbled at the edges of her sanity.

She couldn't let her husband work while she slept. That wouldn't fit her reputation at all. A call to Rebecca was a necessary part of the research.

"Why did you break off your relationship with Charles?"

"Um...This will sound weird. We had only been going out for, what was it? Less than a month, I guess. Charles was already talking marriage, which made me a little nervous. Although, to be honest I mostly thought that it was sweet and harmless. The biggest reason I dropped Charles was James. I always had my eye on him, and then he started coming around. He is hot. If you've seen him, you know what I mean. Anyway, I didn't need Francis in my life, so I broke off my relationship with Charles...I regret it sometimes...."

"Why?"

"For one thing, James isn't any better. I don't know what's with the guys in this town! They don't know how to think without their grandmothers! Actually, I think James might be more under Mabel's control than Charles is under Francis's. With a little encouragement Charles might be able to break free...."

Rebecca sighed.

"Sometimes I wish that I wouldn't have been so hard on Charles. I'd give him another chance, but...I only started dating again because my original boyfriend thought we should take some time to see other people. You know, take some time off from each other and see how it goes...Now he's finally getting serious, so I won't bother Charles and James anymore. They were fun, but I've got someone else. I haven't told them, so I'd appreciate it if you kept quiet about it. It'd be better if I told them."

Candace yawned. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to continue this conversation later. I've been up all night. I just thought I'd get a few phone calls in before I fell asleep."

"No problem, thanks for the call! It was nice to talk to you again. Don't be a stranger...."

"Thank you for answering my annoying questions. Talk to you later."

"Okay, take care of yourself now."

Candace placed the phone onto its base beside the bed. She lay back in the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Rebecca obviously didn't know about the feud she had helped to fuel. It was better that she didn't. Her life was obviously about to enter a different track. She didn't need to be weighed down with the nonsense of Francis and Mabel.

God bless the quiet, there was nothing better after a weekend of constant motion and commotion.

For now, there was no threat, no fear of evil, only a blind faith that God would work things out for good.

No one would bother her in her own home, would they?

Candace felt her eyelids fall shut.

The question returned, lingering at the edges of consciousness.

How would Jason react to the news?

August 6
11:16 a.m.

"Guns are a little hobby of mine. Not many people know that about me. I am guessing they would be a little surprised at what I keep underneath the shelf. It is better that they don't...You will not tell anybody about my little secret, will you?"

Jason shook his head. "No. I better get back to what I'm supposed to be doing. I do have to point something out though...isn't it illegal to have a gun stored casually like that?"

Charles removed his silver rimmed glasses, and then wiped the lenses with his thumb. He looked remarkably handsome without his glasses. Rugged, blue eyed, and blonde, what more could a woman want in a man?

"All I wanted was to give you a little fright. You looked freaked out and I thought it might be fun to scare you just a bit. I thought the gun might distract you for a minute."

"That still doesn't make it legal."

Charles stared at Jason as his eye brows arched slyly. "Do you ever speed?"

"Umm...Sometimes...."

Charles showed off a set of perfect white teeth. "Why?"

"Because I need to get somewhere in a hurry."

"So it is okay to break the law because you need to get somewhere in a hurry?"

"It's not okay, but I do it anyway I guess."

Charles smirked with prideful triumph. "There you see. it's the same with my gun. I need protection, so I do what it takes to get it. The law is one thing, reality is another."

Jason grabbed an aluminum ladder from the floor and then propped it against the wall.

"Aren't guns a little more dangerous than speeding?"

Jason began to climb the ladder, aiming for the security camera perched on the wall above him.

"I think that point would be arguable...I...." Charles

seemed about to continue, but thought better of it. He replaced the glasses on his nose. After that, he picked a bottle from the table before him and then began to fill it with pills.

Jason guided his screwdriver toward the base of the camera. A few quick spins of the wrist should be enough.

An old woman was sitting in the dark of her living room, staring at the fragment of a white stone column leaning against the wall.

The column had been carefully built to resemble something ancient. She loved ancient symbols of power. However, there were other things to think about.

Jason and his wife were asking questions.

It would have so much more pleasant if the blame for Albert's demise had been firmly cast upon the enemy. The plan could unravel with too many questions.

What was the best way to deal with meddlers?

"Anyway enough about guns, how about you? How are you keeping these days? I haven't talked to you in...years...."

The first silver screw fell loose into Jason's cupped hand.

Charles sighed. "I have not been doing very well."

"Oh, what is the problem?"

Jason continued to work professionally, but he lacked any joy in it. He needed to go home.

He hadn't seen his wife for days, but it felt like months. He longed to see her smile, to smell her scent, to caress her blonde hair and then....

The voice of Charles interrupted Jason's reverie.

"You probably heard about me and Rebecca...."

"Oh...yes... I remember hearing about that in the coffee shop. How's that been going?"

Jason finished adjusting the camera, and then began to replace the screws.

"Not well...she told me off. Lately she has been dating some pig farm boy named James. A farmer! Imagine that, I was

rejected in favor of a farmer.”

Jason shook his head as Charles outlined his tale of woe.

“I thought we were connected...we liked the same things...You know my complete collection of Shakespeare movies? We used to have a great time watching them together....”

Laughter lurked at the corners of Jason’s lips, but he suppressed it. Not that there was anything funny about a relationship falling apart, but frankly, Charles had probably deserved it.

As arrogant and self-centered as Charles could be, it was surprising that Rebecca had even considered marriage after only a month of dating.

She would be better off with James, the pig farmer, but Jason would not be the one to enlighten Charles about that fact. He had other things to do before the day was done.

Jason twisted the last screw into place and then headed down the ladder.

The doorway caught his eye. Perhaps a scanner would snag some shoplifters...Yes; there was enough space beside the door...Would it be enough?

The voice of Charles broke back into his consciousness.

“So...my father bought me this store, and now...Now I work all day, and then go home to be alone. You know, I wonder why I even try sometimes...Gladstone Pharmacy still gets ninety nine percent of the business in this town. I do not want to brag, but I do think I am better than they are...And James...James...Do not even get me started on James and his grandmother. That whole feud has gotten way out of hand.”

Somewhere in the store a radio was playing, “*It Must Have Been Love*”, by Roxette.

“Hey...they’re playing your song!” Jason said glibly as he recognized the tune. He felt guilty even as the words left his mouth. Charles was obviously ready for a shot of his own happy powders.

“Yes...that is all I have left...memories of the music we used to make together.” Charles set down the pill bottle he was working on.

His fine white lab coat rippled as he turned.

Charles grimaced as his index finger pressed the off

button. The radio trembled under the slight pressure of his finger. After a moment, it teetered, tottered, and then crashed to the floor. Charles glanced at the wreckage, shook his head, and then returned to filling the pill bottle.

Jason was impressed. Perhaps he had been a little hard on Charles. If a radio had fallen over in the old days, Charles would have flown into a rage. This time he had remained calm.

Charles grinned suddenly, sending a flash of charm across his face. "Maybe it was for the best that the radio fell. Sometimes I just get so sick of all that commercial radio music, you know what I mean? It is note perfect, but there is no character or soul to it."

"I know what you mean." Jason began to fold the ladder into it's original compact format.

"Ummm...This might sound crazy. Do you think you could help me get Rebecca back? I hate to even ask this...but I know I am a bit flaky when it comes to relationships. Could you help me?"

"I told you before; I don't think I'm very good at the love game...if I was...I'd be at home with my wife."

"Oh, is she sick?"

"I don't think so..." Jason grew thoughtful. "I don't know...she seems to be hiding something. She seems distant lately...I don't know what's...wrong. She was at the Doctor over the weekend...Something happened there that she won't tell me. I don't know why...Well, I suppose it has been a long day already...."

Conversation stilled.

Action. That is what was needed.

Murder?

The thought chilled her, although not as much as it once had. It was becoming apparent that life was very cheap.

Some people were not worthy of the life granted to them. Did Jason and Candace enter that category?

A confident young woman, dressed in western styled blue jeans, a brown shirt, and topped off with a matching cowboy hat, strode into the store. She headed straight to the cubicle and then leaned across it. She smiled at Charles as she spoke in a softly lilting Irish accent.

“Hello Charles, is my prescription ready?”

Charles straightened and his voice turned professional. As he spoke, he removed his glasses and then placed them on the shelf before him.

“Just a moment, I will be right with you...I normally would not be open on a Monday. You are lucky I was in today. Now just a few more pills and I will be done. “The young woman toyed with her long red hair as Charles turned toward her.

“I’d just like you to know how grateful I am to you for your effort with my pills...It’s so rare to find a gentleman who understands the needs of a diabetic...Speaking of gentlemen, have you heard that new country song? Who is it by again? Hmmm...I just heard it on the radio....”

The conversation carried on like this, but Jason wasn’t paying attention. Charles was obviously uncomfortable, but he was distracted, that meant peace to work.

Thank God that Charles wasn’t nearly as arrogant and opinionated as he used to be. It was refreshing to see that some people had the capacity for positive change.

It was five minutes to twelve when Jason finished.

Everything was positioned. The cameras could miss nothing. If this new configuration didn’t catch the thief in the act, Jason would recommend a scanner.

Now all that remained was the waiting. Would a thief be caught in the act?

Charles was still suffering through his visit with the red haired cowgirl. She stood beside the wreckage of the radio, but she didn’t notice it. Her eyes were focused on higher things. No one was paying attention to Jason, so he seized the opportunity to escape into the warmth of the great outdoors.

Despite being hit with a sudden blast of heat, Jason shivered. He replayed the memory of Charles giving his welcome speech.

“Thank you for coming down today, I really appreciate it.

I have been losing a lot of money on those stolen sleeping pills. It is not just me that I'm worried about...it is what those pills are being used for. They can easily be abused. What someone would need such a quantity for...I dread to think."

"Why...what's wrong with a little sleeping pills?"

"Nothing is wrong with the pills themselves. It is just when they are stolen and misused...Mixed in with other drugs...overdosed on...there is all kinds of ways for those pills to be abused."

Jason was impressed. Charles had made some serious strides forward in his character. He had learned to care more about others than himself.

Perhaps he should invite Charles out for a chocolate donut sometime. Brent wasn't around, and Jason missed those days of chocolate and coffee. If Charles was making changes in his life, Jason should encourage him.

Jason's skin trembled. For now, he had his own life to worry about. Who knew how Candace was managing at home. Upon further thought, she had appeared to be drugged. Although, that could well have been the lack of sleep, couldn't it?

So many questions needed to be answered.

Drugs, murder, and thefts and come to plague this normally pleasant town.

Who was behind it all?

The old woman made up her mind.

She reached for the telephone beside her.

Somewhere in the apartment, a clock chimed twelve.

His questions could wait.

According to his wristwatch, it was twelve o'clock.

He needed to go home. He would continue his investigation later, after Candace had rested.

Maybe the Golden Door carehome held the answer.

August 6
6:03 p.m.

Binoculars brought the image closer.

Ah ha, there it was. An old blue and grey truck moved slowly along the street.

How easy it had been for them. It had taken no time at all for them to realize that they needed to head for the Golden Door.

A door that must stay shut.

It would be easy to do. First, the trap needed one mouse, then the other mouse would be lured in. After that, they would go down the same road that poor Albert had traveled.

The binoculars lowered.

The Golden Door carehome was a small red bricked, brown trimmed, building surrounded by the glow of evenly space evergreen trees planted around the entire lot where it stood.

Despite the best efforts of the evergreens, the whole setting looked strangely industrial, even the roses planted in concrete pots beside every door seemed to have an air of plastic to them.

Jason parked his old truck in the empty parking lot. Someday he would be able to afford something better. He could only hope that God brought that day soon. The truck was about to collapse.

Candace bounced in her seat as they halted. She turned to tease her husband about Elvis, but then thought better of it. This wasn't the time, or the place. She should have thought of a sly comeback when he had first mentioned it.

A few hours of sleep had cleared her mind and increased her energy to normal levels.

"Here we are...do your thing beautiful!" Jason said in a voice so flat that it drained the energy from the statement.

Candace gasped with mock outrage as she turned to face her husband. "I'll deal with you later! Now I have some serious business to take care of. So if you'll excuse me...I need to be beautiful somewhere else." Her hand grasped the door handle.

Her husband sighed. He was exhausted.

"You wouldn't tell me what your secret visit to the Doctor was about...so I've got to needle you a bit myself. Maybe I can find something...."

Candace opened the door. "I don't want to talk about that right now. It's a distraction from the mystery. We need to be focused."

"Later?"

"Maybe."

"Whatever happened to us? When we got married, we told each other everything...You know you can trust me...."

Candace stepped onto the gravel parking lot. "I know, but...Well, we have to solve one problem first...."

It was amazing how well a mind worked with a few hours of sleep. The world was beautiful, even in shimmering heat. The heat was already fading as the sun fell toward its fate. However, nature still glowed, even as human darkness frolicked on the horizon.

Candace smiled brightly. "Well, here we go. I haven't seen Harvey for years. If he's too much of a jerk, you'll rescue me, won't you dear?"

"I guess I'll have to...." Jason smiled as Candace frowned. "Don't worry I'll be there if you need me. My visit with Mabel shouldn't be long. Oh, and if everything goes okay, we'll meet back here."

"Good enough."

Jason's face wrinkled with concern as Candace leaped out of the vehicle and then marched ramrod straight toward the front door.

Jason had disapproved of splitting up. However, he disapproved of most of his wife's wild ideas. One problem was that her wild ideas had a strange habit of being correct.

With danger went Jason's golfing time in the cool air of early morning. Still, he was thankful for the Christmas letters that had brought him and Candace together.

Candace had forced him to organize his life, which had freed up a lot of time. Life was easier with his personal universe in balance.

Why had she stopped communicating?

It must be something serious. Candace could get that way when confronted with something serious. Not always, but it had happened enough for Jason to recognize the signs.

Jason, the loyal and understanding husband, stepped out of the vehicle and prepared to begin his own search for the secrets of summer.

Candace was like a little terrier, once she got something in her mind she didn't stop until it was ripped to pieces. Jason smiled broadly to himself at the image that came to mind. He would tell her later, after the serious work of the day had been completed.

Jason eyed the slim blue denim clad figure of his wife.

Candace's dainty fist beat upon the white office door.

The door swung open with a suddenness that obviously startled her.

A young, professionally dressed, and freckle faced man stood before her. His hair was slicked back perfectly, his blue suit was ironed impeccably, and the only thing out of place was an arched eyebrow.

What was Harvey doing in town after all these years?

Jason leaned against the door of his vehicle and began the wait. His job was to watch for ten minutes, after that, he would drop into the wonderful world of Mabel Freed.

His mind jerked with a spasm of indecision. His instinct was prompting him to support Candace as she faced off against her former fiancée.

Should he stay with the plan, or go with his feeling?

Strangely enough, Candace was thinking the same thing. With careful control of her will, she suppressed the emotion that had burst into her consciousness. Harvey here? Why? Her resolve strengthened, she would stay with the plan, no matter who stood in her way.

"Hello Harvey...I need to talk."

An eyebrow arched higher. Then the boyish young man relaxed. A mischievous smile graced his pudgy face.

Age and parties had obviously worked together to bring

plumpness to the figure of Harvey.

"Of course, won't you come in? Now is this question about a potential client, or about an existing resident of our facility? Forgive me for my presumption; it's just that most questions that would be asked would be of that nature. We have an excellent facility here...One of the finest in the province if I may say so myself." The boasting continued as Harvey smoothly guided Candace into his office.

Jason was left staring at the plain white door. For now the spotlight shone on his wife. She was obviously continuing with the plan, and so would he. Another six minutes and then he would walk to his destination.

Harvey slid behind his impeccably clean desk and then sat primly in a blue office chair. He folded his hands as he stared expectantly with wide innocent eyes.

"I believe you had some questions. I'm waiting."

His rich baritone voice was smoothly textured with an English accent, giving him an air of cultured sophistication. Long lean fingers began drumming on the glossy desk surface.

What had motivated Harvey take on an accent? Candace mulled over this question as she glanced around the small room.

A black flat screen computer monitor on the desk, the white marble tile and even the wooden grandfather clock on the wall gleamed with glossy cleanliness.

Should she ask him about the accent?

Candace hesitated, and then blurted out the question she had planned originally. "How could one of your patients end up dead on a road?"

Harvey showed off a mouthful of perfect teeth. "I can assure you that our facility takes the utmost precautions; however, occasionally patients do wander off and come to harm. We are not a prison. Our clients are able to leave at any time they wish."

There was a period of silence that ended with the exclamation point of the young man tapping the desk extra hard.

"Is there anything else you would like to ask?"

Memories of the past tugged at her mind. Harvey had changed drastically. What had motivated him enough to change?

Should she ask?

Candace shrugged her thin shoulders. "No, I suppose not."

Thanks for your time. I'm sorry for interrupting your work. This may seem a bit silly...but I had it in my mind...and I had to ask the question...."

Candace began to back toward the doorway.

What a lame explanation. Doubts nagged at her mind as she slowly made her escape.

Harvey's slightly bored voice interrupted her.

"This is about Mister Dyck, isn't it?"

Candace stopped her hand on the door.

"Why do you ask?"

Harvey's emotionless eyes stared without blinking. "Well, he was in a tragic accident last night...I just assumed that it might be him that you were referring to." His eyes blinked.

Candace noted that Harvey's accent had faded.

There was a brief pause as the young man rose from his seat. His steps clacked against the floor as he stepped toward Candace. His knuckles cracked as he stretched his fingers casually.

"I always felt that you would come back to me." Harvey's face leaned closer. His breath smelled like mint gum.

"Now, is there any special reason why you were asking?" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Or were these questions just a charade. A reason to see me again?"

August 6
6:15 p.m.

Thoughts raced, driven by adrenaline.

Which would be the first?

It didn't really matter. Soon both Jason and Candace would be casualties of their own curiosity. What a pity, they were such a nice couple.

One could only hope that things didn't come to that.

His cheap plastic watch ordered him forward.

Jason idled along the sidewalk, looking for a name plate or any useful clue that would help him find Mabel.

It was a pity that it couldn't be a little cooler. The humidity, combined with the heat made it hard to find motivation after a hard day of work.

Jason frowned as he rubbed his grizzled chin.

If only he had taken those piano lessons his mother wanted him to. He could've written a hit song, traveled the world, and now be sitting under a palm tree with a margarita by one arm and a senorita by the other.

Jason chuckled. He didn't drink, and the only senorita on his arm would be Candace. Still, if he knew music he could get involved with her band. It was lonely sitting at home every weekend while the band played shows in the city.

Sure, he could go along as a roadie. He did sometimes, but he was just a spare wheel. Life as a spare wheel was....

Clang! Jason gasped as his head collided with a steel post protruding from the edge of the sidewalk. It was a welcome reminder of his present location and the work to be done.

Aha! The target had been reached.

Jason halted. He was sure that he had reached his destination. His surefire clue was the small, neatly painted

nameplate screwed to the door. The words, "*Mabel Freed*," were etched into the metal.

Jason reached out and then rapped his fingers against the wood.

Mabel and her grandson James were obviously guilty of leaving the corpse of Albert beside the road. The only other possibility was that they had been framed by someone....

Francis?

The door flew open.

Jason blinked, and then entered the delicious smelling apartment.

There was a click as the door closed.

Fresh baked bread always enlivened the atmosphere where it was created. Salvia filled his mouth with anticipation. Jason forced his attention away from food.

A quick glance revealed that Mabel's apartment was totally without dirt. Was being the key word, because Jason had brought in dirt with his shoes and so ruined the perfection of the blue carpet. What a pity.

Happily, the shoes had been quickly removed. Now they stood beside the screen door. No shoes meant that the sweaty odors from Jason's wool socks were free to roam the apartment.

"I'm so glad you could come...." Mabel sniffed and then wrinkled her nose with distaste. "I worried all afternoon that you would forget, that you would just think I was some crazy old woman imagining things and leave me here...Alone."

Jason brushed guilt away from his soul as casually as he had stomped away the dirt that had accumulated on his shoes. It had been a long and exhausting day.

"I always keep my appointments."

"I'm thankful that you do...so many young people nowadays ignore commitment! But, that's not what you came here to talk about. Why don't you have a seat in my rocking chair and then I'll get you something. You do like raisin cookies...don't you?"

Jason swallowed even though his mouth was dry. Why did it have to be raisins? A slice of warm bread would be fine...Still; he had foolishly dirtied her carpet....

"Sure...I'll have a cookie...."

Mabel bustled off toward the kitchen. "Excellent and I'll

bring that and some coffee for you in just a minute...I find that it's so much easier to visit over coffee and cookies, don't you?"

"Sure..." Jason exhaled slowly. It would be a long evening. Perhaps he could ponder serious matters, such as...Why was someone stealing sleeping pills from Charles?

How to avoid helping Charles in his mad scheme to lure Rebecca away from the affection of James?

It was silly, but sometimes even silly things needed to be dealt with. People did enough of them after all.

A verbal bomb exploded in a moment of sudden silence.

"You think me and James killed Albert and then left him beside the road, don't you?" Mabel's accusing voice wafted in from the kitchen.

August 6
6:21 p.m.

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have talked like that." Harvey looked sorrowful. "I've changed since you last knew me. I've become a Christian, and...I have changed...but sometimes it's so hard to leave my past behind. Can you forgive me?"

Candace opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. Was this for real?

Harvey stared at his hands. Fingers were twisting around each other, fueled by nervous tension.

"I...I...." Candace's second attempt at replying failed.

Harvey looked up. His eyes were devoid of emotion.

"I know it's hard to believe...but it's the truth. I am a new man, thanks to the efforts of you and Jason. I saw how treated me and Hilda after that Christmas...and...." The word lingered, casting doubt where it echoed.

Candace stepped back from Harvey. Suddenly afraid, remembering the devious ways of his past.

"Okay, I can see that the healing will take time. Maybe I should...."

"It's not that I don't forgive you. I do, we do...It's just...just...."

"Trust?"

"Yes, that's it. If you have changed, I'm happy for you. It's just that the past has consequences...like it or not." The speech was halting and almost incoherent, but Candace didn't notice.

Her confidence had been shaken. She had been sure that Harvey would be involved with Albert's death. Now she was supposed to believe that he had changed.

Harvey exhaled slowly, sending another blast of mint perfume through the air. "I wish my past was different, I really do. However, you didn't come here to talk about the past, did you? Where were we? Oh yes, you wanted to know about Albert. He was killed in a car crash, early this morning."

"Yes, I came here because of Albert. I know that he didn't die in a car accident."

Harvey looked disturbed. "No? The news on the radio said that a car had hit an old man and killed him instantly. I assumed it was Albert. My boss said that's what had happened. Funny, now why would he say that?"

Candace placed her hand on the doorknob. "At first the police thought that it was an accident, but now they know better. I should know what happened. I was there! "She took a tentative step through the exit, then paused. "Their first impression was that Albert was dead before he ended up on the highway. Sorry. Normally I'd be happy to play the fool...but I decided to take today off."

Harvey retreated to the office chair behind his desk. His gaze remained fixed upon Candace as he spoke.

"There's no need to be sarcastic about it. I wasn't trying to mislead you, I was just telling you what I heard. Obviously that was wrong."

"Okay, I guess that wasn't the best phrasing. I'm sorry."

"Accepted. Although, I can't blame you for being angry with me...I did some nasty things." Harvey laughed. "You still make me nervous you know...that's why I tried that accent on you. That was a stupid move I guess...."

"Maybe I am still remembering those days. I can forgive you, but I can't forget what you did that Christmas Eve. It worked out for the best, but...Well...its history. I should leave it there. It's just hard, you understand?"

"I understand."

Harvey was quiet. He looked as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head.

Candace's bright mood had faded, her voice with curt as she spoke. "I'm sorry to rush off, but I have some other things to take care of before the night is over."

"Just a moment." Candace was tempted to ignore the statement, but she paused. Harvey's voice was earnest, maybe he had something useful to say.

"What?" Candace turned back to face her former fiancée.

"The reason I have this accent...is...Well, you aren't going to believe me anyway, but here it goes. I've decided to get into

acting. I've got a role, and it requires an accent. The only way to learn it is to use it. I was just trying it out when you came in. I'm not trying to pull a fast one on you."

Candace felt doubt enter her soul. Was this the same Harvey she had known? It didn't seem like it.

"You probably think I killed Albert and left him out last night. I didn't. I was at an all weekend prayer retreat; I only came back at seven this morning. That was pushing it, but my shift only starts at six in the evening so I could sleep a bit before coming in. If you don't believe me, call Pastor Mike. I was with him all weekend. While you're at it, ask him about my accent. He knows the truth."

"Okay, thanks...I guess...."

Candace sighed as she stepped through the exit and then closed the door firmly behind her.

Was Harvey sincere? She hadn't seen him in church, but that could simply mean that he attended somewhere else.

There were a few churches in town.

The soles of her shoes collided with the sidewalk as Candace walked briskly toward a parking lot filled with white crunchy gravel.

Harvey had changed? It seemed hard to believe. She would run the situation past Jason, perhaps he could offer some insight.

Jason could always be counted on for a unique perspective. That was part of his appeal. Ghosts of melancholy appeared to haunt her mind. She knew that she hadn't spent enough time with her husband.

There was too much activity in her life. The secret that the Doctor had revealed wouldn't help.

The romantic Christmas they had shared seemed so far in the past. That sweet affection was being dissolved in a whirlpool of work. Sure, there were still flashes of passion, but....

Candace snapped her finger angrily. She had forgotten to call the band manager. According to the high-strung message on the answering machine, it was urgent.

Maybe a record deal was finally about to come through. Wouldn't that be nice? She could quit studying to be a nurse.

She should also call up Pastor Mike, just to be sure that

Harvey wasn't telling one of his stories.

Candace opened the passenger side door of the truck and then climbed inside.

She had two phone calls to make. Then, she would allow Jason to weigh in. Where was he?

He had claimed that his visit would only take five minutes.

Candace couldn't wait for long. Her palliative care visit was only five minutes away....

August 6
6:26 p.m.

Mabel picked a knife off the table. She was in the kitchen, just off the living room. The large knife was clenched in her fist as she prepared to slice the loaf of bread on the table before her.

"Well, you may think evil about us. I can't exactly help that. I'll tell you the truth though; last night was great before we met Albert. I told you about the money I won, didn't I?"

The blade slowly sliced through the warm, steaming flesh of the bread. Oh, the fresh bread smelled delicious.

Jason gulped down the last of the raisin cookie. It was okay, but it still smacked of raisins. Fruit did not belong in cookies, even if it had been dried.

"Yes, you told me all about it. Two hundred dollars, the best night of bingo that you've ever had."

"Exactly. I guess I did tell you. Does your wife ever attend the bingo games?"

"No, I..." Jason paused.

"What's that? You were about to say something more. Go on...Tell me. I won't bite. Or at least I'll try not to. Heh heh."

Jason pushed his feet against the floor, rocking himself gently.

Mabel turned away from the bread and stared at him with undisguised interest.

"I was just going to say that I can't imagine my wife at bingo...Nothing against you, it's just not something that she would be interested in."

"Not our type eh?" Mabel grunted as she began to slice off another piece. "Oh well, it takes all kinds. Well, I just wanted you to know how it was. I don't want people to think me and my grandson killed Albert. It wasn't that way at all! I had barely got into bed after the bingo before James was banging at my door. Apparently, Albert had escaped. Albert was miserable, but he did save my life once...so what else could I do but return the favor?"

Besides I had gotten to know him a bit, so it was a natural thing for me to join James in the search."

"You are probably pretty tired now huh?" Jason swished the raisin taste from his mouth with a mouthful of coffee. His stomach yearned for the bread, just out of reach.

"No. I had a little nap this afternoon and that helped a lot. I would be a lot more tired if I hadn't borrowed the station wagon from James and headed home. Those policemen love their paperwork...James had to stay at the station until who knows when. I suppose you would know that, your wife was there."

"Indeed she was...." Jason leaned forward, forcing the thoughts of bread from his mind. "Now can you answer one question for me?"

"Depends what it is."

"It's just this...Ah..." Jason thought for a moment, and then took a random shot. "How much do you and James stand to inherit from Albert?"

The knife clunked against the table as Mabel sliced the final piece of bread.

August 6
6:32 p.m.

Her husband was nowhere to be seen. Obviously, Jason's visit would take longer than he had first thought. Oh well...Candace yawned and stretched as she exited the vehicle.

Life was exhausting. It was only a little while ago when she had felt energetic, now her energy was fading. Which wasn't surprising, given what the doctor had told her.

Still, she had to make her palliative care visit. Tara would be waiting. She didn't have much longer to live. Candace had vowed to do her part to ease the moments of life that remained.

A slight breeze wafted over her sweat covered arms. It cooled slightly, even as it brought the sour stench of a nearby cattle farm to her senses.

Candace wrinkled her nose.

Harvey was watching her from the window of his office.

Pastor Mike had authenticated Harvey's story. Who would have ever guessed that Harvey would ever spend a weekend at a prayer meeting?

What if it was all part of his plan? This thought leapt unbidden into Candace's mind as she continued forward.

"Yes, we will inherit a modest sum. How much shouldn't concern you. Albert didn't want his family to get his money, so he decided to leave it to James and myself. We looked in on him from time to time, so he promised to reward us. There is nothing illegal about that."

"I didn't say that there was anything illegal, did I? Now, what was going on in Albert's family?"

Mabel set her knife down and then surveyed the table filled with bread. She licked her lips as she began to put the slices into plastic bags.

"I don't know exactly what all was going on. I know two of his family came by at least once a week to visit. Abe and Mary were the names...It's actually too bad that they didn't get Albert's money. They did a lot for him, but he didn't seem to appreciate it. He spoke well of the rest of his family...I don't know. I know he hated his wife Francis."

"Why?" Jason set his empty coffee cup onto a small table beside his chair. His eyes rested on the loaves being stuffed into plastic bread bags.

"It's not my place to say it, well...Anyway both Albert and his wife used to be conservative types. Albert had a few problems, so Abe and Mary put him in here. This carehome has a special section to deal with mental cases, it's just a few doors down. Anyway, after Albert came to live here, his wife Francis got her own room. I was one of her best friends when she first moved into town. Then she changed. I mean, she really changed! Francis used to be a really mousy, submissive type, but now!" Mabel whistled. "Now it's like she's the opposite of what she used to be! She's flamboyant, and has a mean streak like you wouldn't believe. Albert must have been quite the influence on her. She's free from him, but she became him. They were so much alike that they hated each other...I guess that kind of thing happens from time to time."

"Francis didn't seem too worried that Albert is dead."

"She probably didn't know that this morning, but even if she did, she wouldn't miss the miserable old coot. What a character he could be...Strange isn't it?" Mabel furrowed her brow. "Francis tried to kill me, but her husband saved my life."

Mabel wagged her finger. "Francis must have heard about Albert changing his will! That's why she wanted revenge on me. I thought I shouldn't say that in the coffee shop...Francis was in a pretty ornery mood today." Mabel smirked, and then struggled to suppress it. "That's what happens when you run out of sleeping pills I suppose...Her precious grandson Charles should have gotten his drug order in sooner."

"Why don't we get into the night when you were locked out in the cold? That's why I came here after all. If I remember correctly, the door was locked from the inside?"

Jason thought of Mabel's smirk. It was only a small clue,

but it was enough to prompt an idea. After the questions ran out, he would need to concoct a reason to search the apartment.

Mabel was playing a different character now. It was pathetic, sorrowful, and wore a face that said pity me.

"Exactly, that's what it was, locked tight as a drum. It was cold that night too, minus 35 and that evil wind was ripping into me. I nearly froze to death. It was a lucky thing that Albert came along and let me into his apartment, otherwise...otherwise I'd have been frozen to death."

Finished packing every bread slice into a bag, Mabel began to tie each plastic bag shut.

"Pardon me for asking a stupid question, but why would you go out in such weather without proper clothing?"

"The doorbell was stuck and ringing. I didn't like that constant racket in my house, so I went to see if anyone was there, there wasn't. Then to get a good look at the button I had to get right in front of it..."

"And then." Jason prompted after a few moments of silence.

Mabel jerked as if startled back to life. "When I tried to open the door. It was locked. There is no way that it could lock itself...is there? Then I examined the door bell button and can you guess what I saw?"

Jason didn't feel inclined to guess and said so.

Mabel looked disappointed. "The button was taped down with masking tape!" She said triumphantly. "Yep, Francis wanted me to go outside, so she taped down the doorbell button to force me to come out and investigate. Then she must have crept into my room from the hallway and locked the door behind me!"

"I thought you said the hallway door was always locked."

Mabel toyed with the cordless phone fastened to a belt around her waist. "Yes, I did say that."

"Well, then how could Francis creep in through it?"

Mabel looked flustered. "I guess I didn't think of that."

Jason suppressed a yawn. Mabel's ridiculous story was slowly falling apart. There was no surprise there. Although, there did seem to be a very faint reason for suspicion. He just had to clear away the thick brush of vindictive imagination.

"Was James visiting you when this happened?"

She shook her head. "I was alone, that's why Francis chose that time. She knew that I would be alone because I remember her calling me about an hour before. Yes...that was just after Charles and James started fighting over Rebecca. Charles was going out with her and I thought that wasn't a good match, so I encouraged James to take a try. Rebecca dumped Charles because of it. Francis found out about what I did and we haven't been civil since. Anyway, I still trusted Francis that day, and like a fool I told her that I was going to be alone for the entire evening."

"Why would Francis want to kill you just because your grandson was going out with Rebecca?"

"Why? How should I know? I do know that's what made me so thankful that I did my part to get that nice girl Rebecca away from Charles and his family."

Jason felt that the end was in sight. The cracks in Mabel's story were becoming ever more apparent. Still, he pressed on toward the truth.

"Back to the night that Francis supposedly tried to kill you. There was nobody at all in the room? Hmm...Did anyone else visit during the evening?"

Mabel shrugged. "Well, Harvey Martins stepped in for a moment. He's the new manager of this place. He had just started in February, so he wanted to meet everyone."

She slapped her forehead. "Stupid me, I forgot! Tara from down the hall came to visit. Yep and she brought some cookies she'd just made. She wasn't as sick then...."

"All right, and other than that no one came by. There was no one inside your room when you went out. You're sure."

Mabel nodded as she loaded her arms with the bags of bread. "Exactly! That is quite a mystery isn't it? I've spent many an evening pondering it myself. I haven't figured it out yet...maybe a young mind like yours can figure it all out."

"Was the door in from the hallway locked?"

Mabel's face betrayed her contempt at the thought.

"Locked? You asked me that before. Of course, it was locked! How else is an old woman to survive? I always make sure that it is locked. Check it yourself...." Mabel began to enter the living room, but halted suddenly. Instead, she reversed direction.

Jason watched with interest. He had read Mabel correctly.

In just a moment, he would have a green light to search her apartment.

“Er...that won't be necessary...There was obviously no way for anyone to get in to your room from the hall...And if they had come from the outside, you would have seen them. There must have been a way for Francis to creep in here. Are you sure that you always lock your windows?”

“Yep, that is exactly what I said. Everything is locked.” Mabel looked annoyed. “Go on! Take a look around the apartment; see if you can solve this mystery.”

Success! Not only did he have permission, he had been urged to look around. That would make his search for sleeping pills a little easier.

“Just stay out of my bedroom. It's sort of a mess...and there's no way for anyone to get in by that route anyway....” Mabel carried an armful of bread the living room, obviously headed for the small freezer in the utility room just to the south.

“I've just got to put this baking away. Feel free to help yourself to a raisin cookie while I'm gone. They're beside the sink in the kitchen.”

Jason fought the urge to smile. Not only did he have permission, he also knew where to look.

He just needed to ensure that Mabel stayed away for more than a moment. How?

August 6
6:48 p.m.

There was a shrill shriek.

Candace plucked a pink cell phone from the pocket of her denim jeans and then held it to her ear.

“Hello?”

She listened for a moment, and then pushed the off button.

“Who was that dear?” The question came from a faded green couch where a frail old woman lay under an old yellow blanket.

Candace turned toward Tara, her client. “That was my husband, I need to...Just a moment.” Candace dialed, and then held the phone to her ear.

“I need my pills...” The voice was fading between gasps.

Candace knew that medication would clear up the breathing, but she needed to assist Jason first.

It wouldn’t take long.

Tara’s breathing slowed with every moment.

“Hello.”

Mabel’s voice was audible from the freezer room.

Jason smiled as he shoved his phone into his pocket. Candace had gotten through. If all went well, she would keep Mabel out of the way for a few minutes.

Jason quickly searched through the small apartment. The north side of it held two couches and a rocking chair; the west side was kitchen space. Mabel’s irate voice came from a small room to the south. Beside the utility room was a small hallway leading further to the south. On the east side there was a bathroom, complete with a curtained shower, and brown tub.

Jason’s target was at the end of the darkened hall.

If his theory was correct, that was where the pills would be hidden. The bedroom would be the obvious place to hide a stash of sleeping pills.

Jason glanced toward the utility room. Mabel was still busy, he could see her side, but not her face. She wouldn't be able to see him at all. It was time to move.

Mabel's bedroom held one single bed, covered with a pink blanket. Beside the bed there was a small table holding an alarm clock and a cordless phone. Oddly, the bed was raised about a foot off the floor. The pink blanket draped down and covered the gap between the floor and the bed.

Could someone hide beneath the bed?

Jason crouched and then brushed the blanket away. Yes, someone could hide beneath the bed. There was enough room, but that wasn't important.

Jason straightened and then walked over to the sole window in the bedroom. His finger pushed on the catch. It opened easily and with silence. Despite Mabel's claims, the window was large enough for someone to creep through if they wished.

Mabel's room was not as messy as she had claimed...Hmmm....

The windows were protected by an alarm system. If a window was broken or compromised it would scream. Unless the alarm system had been disrupted....

Why did he persist in assuming that Mabel had been telling the truth?

Jason stepped back as he scratched his head.

Oh yes, the pills. Where were they hidden?

Mabel's voice grew nearer. She was still talking to Candace, but by the sound of her voice she had moved into the living room. In another second, she would be in the bedroom.

The dial tone droned.

Candace pushed the off button, and then shoved the cell phone into her pocket.

Tara was gasping for breath now. She needed immediate attention. Now where was her medication?

Candace searched frantically through the kitchen cupboard. She found spices, a bottle of vinegar, and then success! The pill bottle.

She hoped that it wasn't too late.

"Yoo hoo! Where are you?"

Mabel was peering into the bedroom. Through a crack in the blanket Jason could see her feet in the doorway. She stood still for a moment, and then hobbled away.

Jason felt foolish. Imagine a grown man, hiding beneath a bed, afraid of a harmless old woman. He began to roll out from beneath his hiding place, and then stopped.

Looking straight up, he could see the bottom the box spring mattress. It consisted of white fabric stretched and stapled to a wooden frame. At the edge of his vision, almost at the head of the bed, he could see that a small hole had been cut into the fabric.

Jason pushed himself closer, and then reached into the small cavity. Dust sprinkled down, tickling his nose, and then...Then his fingers felt plastic, plenty of plastic bags by the feel of it. Jason pulled one out.

In his hand was a small white bag filled with sleeping pills. Every bottle was factory sealed; they were obviously from the pharmacy of Charles.

"Yoo hoo! Are you still here?" Mabel was still searching for him. Jason rolled quickly, and then sprang to his feet.

For now, the bag remained beneath the bed. It would remain hidden until the confrontation.

Jason charged for the doorway. Adrenaline pulsed through his veins, preparing him for the showdown.

"Oh there you are...what were you up to?" Mabel was staring at him with suspicion plain on her face.

Jason paused, searching for words.

Would it be best to confront her now, or should he bring in the police first?

August 6
6:59 p.m.

The crisis was over. Tara's small chest rose and fell steadily.

Candace blinked as she took a step back from the couch.

"How do you feel?"

Tara coughed and then smiled. "I'm dying. Naturally I feel fine...." There was an awkward pause. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't blame you. I used to smoke a carton a day, that's what put me here. It's nobody's fault but mine. Thanks for getting my medication for me by the way. Did you get everything taken care of with your husband?"

Tara's deep blue eyes met Candace's gaze. Tara had been beautiful once, the skin on her round face was still smooth. Charisma still radiated from her, even though the years had turned her once blonde hair white and stained her teeth with smudges of yellow. She was slender, Russian looking, and....

Candace shook herself into the present. "Yes, yes, I think so..." She paused. Had Jason made out okay?

"Excellent. I'm glad to hear some young couples still get along. There's far too much divorcing now days. Now, if you don't mind I'd like you to read to me." Tara hesitated briefly. "I ah, I have another book for you. It's on the right side of the bookshelf. Yes, right on top. There, you've got it."

Candace felt her fingers wrap around the book as she pulled it from the shelf. She returned to her chair beside the couch, and turned her gaze to the cover.

There was only half an hour left.

Soon she would find out what had happened to Jason.

"*The Murder of Lovers*," was the title etched onto the black cover in blood red letters.

Candace shivered.

"First it's some silly woman trying to sell me a vacuum cleaner...then you start snooping around in my house! I can understand telemarketers, but..." Mabel crossed her arms.

"You said I should." Jason was back in the living room, but he hardly noticed. He was trying to figure out a way to manage a situation that had suddenly spiraled out of control.

"Don't interrupt! I trusted you. I liked you! Now I find you snooping around for something to steal...Just like Francis, or her worthless grandson, Charles."

Mabel glanced at the kitchen, the knife was still on the table, but she made no move toward it. Instead, she placed her hands on her hips and glared at her adversary.

Jason sniffed. The wholesome smell of bread had passed, now there was only the faint smell of disinfectant in the air.

What to do?

His nerves tensed. "Why don't you stop pretending? I know what has been going on here..." Jason felt another wave of weariness wash over him as he watched Mabel's eyes grow wide.

It had been a very long day. Thank God that he had made progress on the case of the missing sleeping pills. He might as well be blunt and get on with the confrontation.

"Your little vendetta against Francis and Charles has gotten a little out of hand, don't you think?" Jason blurted suddenly, too harshly.

Mabel looked stunned; there was a moment of inaction and then she raised her hand to her heart. An expression of outrage contorted her features.

"Me!" She sputtered. "Me? It was Francis! A murderer she is...she tried to kill me!"

Jason gestured toward the rocking chair. "You really should have been on stage. That would have been better than what you're doing now. Why don't you be real, take a seat and then we'll discuss it."

Mabel seemed about to blast out a retort, instead she sat in the chair and began to rock. A condescending smile spread across her lips.

"Well, well...I'm anxious to hear what lies Francis told you about me. Go on now. Twist the knife into my ailing heart."

Jason began to pace the room. Three long steps to the

north wall, then the same back.

"Speaking of lies, here are a few. You said that Francis taped down your doorbell. The fact is, masking tape wouldn't hold anything down in the cold very long, if at all! Try it sometime; you'll see the truth of it. You also said that there was no way in or out in your bedroom. A room that was far too messy for company. Let's see, there is a large window overlooking a spotlessly clean room. Now, do you want to tell me why you lied to me?" Jason paused for effect. "Or should I guess?"

Mabel's wrinkled face contorted into several different and slightly amusing shapes before returning to normal.

"I, I...." She began, and then she paused, lost in thought.

"You know I can't arrest you." Jason stated blandly, eager to move on to more productive pursuits. Candace probably had completed her palliative care visit long ago.

Mabel relaxed; her feet pushed the rocker in increasing intervals.... "Well, that's a fine thing isn't it?" She murmured, seemingly puzzled by something. "A pity that I didn't think of the tape freezing, you're right now that I think of it. It wouldn't stick. Oh well, it was worth a try."

"What was worth a try?"

Mabel sighed. "I don't exactly see why I should tell you. It's none of your business."

"Actually it is, I volunteered to help Charles with his theft problem. I told you that!"

"I still can't see what that has to do with me. My feud is with Francis, not Charles...I told you that." Mabel smirked, the mockery plain in her face.

"Then why is there a healthy stash of sealed sleeping pill bottles hidden inside your mattress?"

All traces of mockery vanished from Mabel's face. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair as he continued.

Jason lowered his voice. "Coincidentally, that is exactly the item that was being stolen."

"Serves him right...it's illegal to have those pills on display anyway, they're supposed to be behind the counter, for prescription only!"

"Maybe he should have them behind the counter. That doesn't give you the right to steal them."

Mabel heaved herself out of the chair as a look of determination charged across her face.

August 6
7:14 p.m.

“Thank you. That was very well read.”

“Should I continue? We have fifteen minutes left.”

Candace glanced at her client, hoping that the answer was no.

The book was well written, but Candace wasn't a big fan of that kind of fiction.

Tara nodded. “Yes, that would be nice. I can't read so well anymore, my eyes can't seem to focus. I don't know what the problem is, but I guess it doesn't matter....”

Candace sat on a small backless chair beside the couch, a thick hard cover book rested in her hand. Her fingers turned the page necessary to reach chapter two.

“I can be thankful for one thing.”

Candace stared at the words before her, waiting for the cue to continue. A thought materialized in her mind.

“At least I'm not a mental case.” Tara's voice rasped as she chuckled. “I'm sane enough to realize my own impending doom. How wonderful is that?”

“I hate to interrupt...but did you know Albert...I believe he was a resident here.”

“Oh, Albert.” Tara's cynical laugh grated through her voice box once again. “Idiot Albert...I never knew him, but I heard enough about him. The staff had their hands full with that character! Always singing, always preaching, he was a real religious fanatic. Eventually the staff had to tie him to his bed. That was the only way he could be controlled when he had a spell. I always thought that was inhumane, but I suppose it was necessary. His room smelled rotten because of it. He had to lie still, so he got those bedsores, and then they started rotting...and bleh!” Tara made a gagging sound.

“How do you know about bedsores and such?” Candace felt her exhaustion fade as her curiosity awoke.

“I used to be a nurse. Ironical isn't it? A nurse should've

known better than to smoke, but I didn't...But anyway, how about you? Why do you want to know about idiot Albert?"

Candace squeezed her eyes shut. Picturing Albert lying on his back, his empty eyes staring at the sky....

"Last night Albert got away...do you know how?"

"I swear I didn't kill him!"

Mabel stood before Jason, staring up at him with eyes of desperation.

"Thank you for that," Jason muttered. "I must say that it looks like you did in fact kill Albert, but I'll leave that for someone else to decide. Oh, and if you try stealing those pills again, we will catch you. This afternoon, I personally set up a system for tricky people like you."

Mabel chuckled as a wicked expression graced her face.

"Is that a challenge?"

"No. That was your first and last warning. You're lucky that Charles doesn't want to press charges. He only wants the product back. The matter of Albert will be more serious."

Jason's grim words seemed to remind Mabel of her position. She stiffened like a cat afraid of something sinister just around the corner.

"I stole the pills. I admit it. I was a thief and a liar, but I didn't kill anybody! Believe me!"

"You talked James into it, didn't you? Just so you two could snag whatever money Albert left you. Come on, by now everybody in town knows about your feud with Francis and Charles. Nobody will believe that you were still friends with Albert despite everything else that has gone on."

"We were friends with Albert...or at least...casual acquaintances. Albert may have been crazy, but his wife Francis was our mutual enemy. We had that in common."

"That doesn't make the situation look any better. You were in the area where the body was found. You are the only people to benefit from Albert's death. I don't know about James, but you are a confessed thief and a liar."

"Lies!"

"I guess you should know about them, shouldn't you?"
Mabel looked hurt. She seemed about to shout something, but then changed her mind. After a moment, she headed to the kitchen table and then picked up the knife.
Jason's nerves drove him after her.

"I suppose that's the long way of saying I don't know. Sorry." Tara seemed apologetic.

"That's okay, I was just curious, that's all."

"You never did say why you were interested in Albert."
Tara observed.

"I ah, I can't say...It's a personal thing. Should I read that other chapter now?"

"Mysterious huh? Oh well, read the book then." Tara leaned her head against a pillow and waited.

After a moment of silence, Mabel handed Jason the knife and a white plastic shopping bag.

"Use the knife to open the bottom of the mattress, it'll be faster that way. The bag should have all the bags you'll need."

Indeed it did. The plastic bag was stuffed full of bags, each bearing the logo of Co-op, a local grocery store.

Jason felt as if the world was moving in slow motion. He was close to the source of the evil that had left Albert beside the road. What was the best way to handle it?

"What's the matter with you? Can't you take a joke? I stole those pills as a little prank on Francis and her grandson. Just to prove that I was the smarter one. I would have given them back eventually."

"Didn't Francis need those pills?"

"Humph, what's the harm in losing a bit of sleep? A medicated sleep is never the best anyway. Besides, even the Bible talks about no rest for the wicked, and Francis...."

Jason swiveled and then headed toward the bedroom.

"Are you also ready to admit that also lied about Francis

locking you out in the cold?”

“Maybe....”

The bedroom door opened.

“Can maybe be translated as yes?”

“Maybe...” Mabel’s feeble laughter spurted from her mouth and then fell to the floor with her gaze.

It only took a quick tug for Jason to pull the bed away from the wall. Now there was a little more room at the head of the bed.

“So, you thought that calling me over to the coffee shop and telling me stories about Francis would be a good joke? Accusing someone of attempted murder isn’t that funny in my opinion, but maybe that’s just me.”

“You have to admit that sneaking that note into the pill bottle was clever. It got Charles involved and it got you to the coffee shop.” Mabel’s voice carried a note of pride.

“You don’t need a mysterious note to get me into a coffee shop. A box of chocolate donuts would be enough. But I guess that wouldn’t be as dramatic as a mysterious note in a pill bottle. You know Mabel, have you ever thought that maybe you have a little too much time to think?”

“No answer huh? Maybe you’d rather explain why Albert was found beside the highway this morning, dead. According to Candace, both you and James were there right after she was, that sounds suspicious to me. My wife told me that at first James lied about you being his car...he changed his story later. Or was that just another joke?”

“I don’t understand...I....”

Jason stared at the bed. He needed to get the pills, but how to do that and keep an eye on Mabel at the same time?

“I mean this...the police might not believe that you were in the area of a dead body, just for a joke. They might find that a little strange, don’t you? Especially in light of everything else that has gone on...Especially in light of the fact that I was not supposed to meet you at the coffee shop. I was supposed to meet Albert...and you showed up instead. Why?”

“I told you, I didn’t want to use my real name. That’s why I sent the note. We only went out last night because Harvey called and told us to go out and search. He said that Albert might be around the highway. That’s why we went out. That is the exact

truth. May God strike me dead if it isn't!"

Jason slid between the head of the bed and the wall, and then knelt. His hand ran beneath the bed and up into the hole in the mattress as he stared up at his adversary.

"You know what. I'm beginning to believe you. I think that somebody who knew everything you were planning set you up for a nasty fall. That doesn't excuse you from stealing though...."

Mabel looked confused.

"The reason I say that is simple. Well, I don't think you would have been stupid enough to hang around the body if you had dropped it off. There was no reason to make yourself look guilty. I think someone else has a reason to make you look guilty. I think someone else dropped off the body just before you and Candace arrived on the scene."

"Maybe Francis and Charles did it."

Jason thought for a moment. "You know what, maybe they did. I'll have to check into that."

August 6
7:28 p.m.

“Good Bye.”

“I can finish the chapter. I don’t need to leave exactly at seven thirty.”

Tara waved her hand dismissively. “Next time. You need to get on with the business of living. Besides I feel tired, I think I’ll go to bed early today. Go on, I’m sure you have other things you need to do.”

Candace eyed her client. “Are you sure? What if you have another attack?”

“You gave me my medication, I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, if you’re sure....”

“Go on! You’ve done plenty. I can’t tell you how much I enjoy having you read to me. If there is a God....”

Candace waited for a moment. “If there is a God, then?”

Tara coughed. “Never mind. I don’t know what I’m talking about. Now, I recall letting you off early. Why are you still here?”

“You aren’t trying to get me out of the way so you can smoke, are you?”

Silence greeted this question. Candace sighed. “You know you aren’t supposed to smoke. Look where it got you....”

“What difference does it make now? I haven’t got much time left...what would it matter if I smoke a few now and then?”

“It matters to me. Your Doctor told me to throw away your cigarettes if I caught you with them. They only make things worse! Now, will you tell me where you hid them, or do I have to guess?”

“You know what has puzzled me ever since I met you?”

Pill bottles in small white bags began to pass through Jason’s rapidly moving hands and into the large shopping bag beside him.

"What?" Mabel glanced behind her, as if pondering her escape through the open door.

"The fact that you found a body beside the road, apparently, the body of your friend and you don't seem concerned at all. According to Candace, James was the same way. Is this all just a TV show for you? Entertainment?"

Jammed between the wall and the bed wasn't the most comfortable place to be. Jason wriggled, he would be glad when his task was complete. It wouldn't be long now.

"We didn't know Albert that well. Sure, we may have called him friend, but that was very loosely. Albert was too miserable to have friends. Even his family didn't enjoy their time with him."

The last bottle fell to its fate. Jason stood, and then stepped away from his narrow prison. He tossed Mabel's knife onto the bed. He hadn't needed it.

"I think the police would want you to leave the evidence exactly where it was, don't you?" Mabel smirked.

Jason swallowed a retort. He stared at her for a moment, and then proceeded to push the bed back against the wall.

"You know, you may be right." Jason grimaced as he muttered the admission. "Oh well, it's too late now. Besides, my job was simply to return the pills to Charles, and prevent any further thefts. I didn't expect a murder to complicate things. You never know, you may be lucky. Maybe Francis killed her husband. That would make her look bad. Much worse than having you spreading fake stories about her."

"Who said it was murder?" Mabel looked uncomfortable.

"What else would it be?" Jason brushed past Mabel on his way to the living room.

He halted.

Jason stared at Mabel's slouched back for a moment, feeling the strange emotion of compassion well up from somewhere in his overtired mind. He ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth.

This room was so dry.

"Maybe it was Harvey. He is in charge here; he is the one who ordered Albert to be tied down. Maybe he got tired of Albert and got rid of him." Mabel cracked her knuckles.

Click. Click. Click. The hands of the clock filed away at the

seconds and minutes of the day.

"Maybe it was Harvey." Mabel repeated.

"I thought you said that you didn't know what happened to Albert." Jason's voice was flat.

"Did I say that I didn't know? I must have been confused. I knew he had been strapped to his bed, but I didn't know much more than that. So I thought it would be best not to say anything...I hate repeating gossip."

"I've noticed." Jason licked his chapped lips. "Why did Harvey order Albert tied down?"

"Oh Albert could have his spells, he had some mental problems. I suppose something drastic happened and Harvey had to take some extreme measures. I always thought that kind of treatment was terrible. I wouldn't be surprised if that's what killed him in the end."

"Did you let Albert go?"

"No. I told you, I never knew exactly where they kept him. They didn't tell me."

"You told me you had been in his room."

"I lied. Remember? We never really got together. Albert's condition kept getting worse, so James and I stopped seeing him. It was safer that way. Albert wasn't the most stable character...."

Jason tightened his grip on the bag of pills. Obviously there was nothing more to be gained here. It was time to turn the situation over to professionals. His free hand rested on the doorknob.

"This is your last chance...."

"James and I had nothing to do with Albert's killing. Harvey set us up."

"You really believe that about Harvey? Come on now. Tell me the truth. It would make more sense if Francis was trying to get rid of her husband and get at you at the same time."

"She never used to think that way...." Mabel sounded remorseful.

"You tried to do the same to her. Why would you be surprised if Francis wanted to pin Albert's murder on you? Your little feud about Rebecca has grown into a fine young monster."

"It wasn't supposed to go this way...."

"Well, it did, now we have to deal with the consequences."

Some people snap after they put up with enough abuse. Between you and Albert I think Francis has had a healthy helping of abuse, don't you?"

Mabel stared into the distance. Her fingers twitched erratically. She looked depressed.

Jason wished Mabel a hasty good bye and then stepped out into the fragrant summer night. The smell of barbeque smoke drifted through Jason's nose.

The gentle white moon watched from its perch in space.

Somewhere in the distance, a radio blasted out the bouncy beats of a hip hop party jam.

What if Mabel was telling the truth? The thought niggled in the back of Jason's mind.

It was time to consult with Candace.

"Here we go. One pack of cigarettes." Candace held up the crimson package. "You know, you could have saved us both a lot of trouble...."

"You didn't have to search for them."

"Actually I did. Personally, I wouldn't go through the effort, but I promised your Doctor that I would. I am a Christian, and I keep my word. Now, who is bringing cigarettes for you?"

"I can't tell you....now, please leave me to my rest." Tara twisted on the couch until only her back was showing. It was time to leave.

Candace began to walk toward the door, and then stopped. "You know I'll find out somehow...Wouldn't it be easier to tell me?"

August 6
7.40 p.m.

Jason's feet clacked along the sidewalk. He could see the rusted form of his old truck. Candace wasn't there yet.

Too bad, perhaps she could see what was missing. Jason didn't want to involve the police until he was sure and he wasn't.

Mabel had overreached in her vendetta against Francis. She shouldn't have tried so hard pin an unbelievable attempted murder charge on her. If she hadn't, she likely wouldn't have been caught with the pills, not so soon anyway.

Mabel could be foolish, vindictive and arrogant, but was she capable of murder?

"Enjoying the silence?" Candace squeezed his fingers.

Jason smiled at his wife. "Not really. I was just thinking about murder."

"Hmmm. Well, I'm glad you weren't thinking of me. Your expression looked dour to say the least." Candace opened the passenger side door of the truck and then climbed in.

"I think it has come down to Francis and Charles...but I don't know if I want to accept that idea." Jason followed the example of his wife, and soon they were both sitting inside the truck with closed doors.

Candace slid to the middle of the bench seat. Jason slid his arm around her neck. Then as his wife opened her mouth to speak, he kissed her.

She gasped. "Okay...that was a drastic change of topic."

"Murder is hard on the head. I thought we needed a little break after all the madness this day has put us through."

"That was a good idea. Now, the sooner we finish the murder case, the sooner we can get back to where we left off." Candace grinned teasingly. "You've been lonely this weekend, haven't you?"

"I'll answer that later." Jason smirked. "Now, why don't you tell me what you found out...and then I'll tell you what I found."

"Well, by the look of the bag in your hand, you found the sleeping pills that Charles was looking for."

"Yes, the pills...But we'll get to them later. It's your turn."

In a few moments, Candace related her interview with Harvey, how he had changed for the better. How he had ordered Albert to be tied to his bed. The saga of the great cigarette hunt finished her monologue.

"Pills and cigarettes...Amazing what we find in carehomes these days, isn't it? Anyway, I guess it's my turn...."

Jason yawned and then began outlining his evening. As the saga continued he detailed Mabel admitting to making up the story of Francis trying to kill her. His voice took on an air of self-deprecation as told of how he stumbled across the pills. Continuing on, he covered Mabel admitting theft, but denying any involvement with Albert's death. Jason completed his overview, and then thought of two extra points.

"Oh, for what it's worth. Mabel also told me that Albert had been tied down by Harvey. I suppose that's how he got those bedsores. And one more thing, it was important...what was it?"

"Oh yes, Mabel and James will inherit all of Albert's money. Apparently, he had some kind of feud with his own family...I don't know."

Candace snuggled further into Jason's embrace. "Did Mabel say why they were out driving this morning?"

"She just repeated the same story. She and James were out looking for Albert because Harvey had called for help. Supposedly, Albert had escaped and they needed to look where you found them. Then Mabel took the car from James and skipped out on writing a police report. Well, you know all that."

Candace's breath entered Jason's face as she turned toward him. "You're right. It does look bad for James and Mabel. I can also see how it looks far too obvious. Why would Mabel and James come back to the scene where they had dumped the body? Especially when they knew I was there...."

"Maybe they wanted to...deal... with you." Jason mused haltingly, staring at Candace's lips.

"That would be pretty risky...especially since they didn't know who I was before they stopped. They didn't know if I had called the police...It's almost as if someone wanted the body to be

found. Besides, the highway isn't the place to dump a body if you want to hide it. Why someone would want that, I have no idea."

"There is no chance that Harvey is involved?"

Candace buttoned up her blue denim jacket. "None. I called Pastor Mike and he said that Harvey had been with him all weekend. I think that is a pretty strong alibi."

Jason sighed. "That is why I've been thinking about Francis and Charles. Charles had his girlfriend stolen from him. At least, he thinks so. Francis has obviously had a miserable relationship with her husband, and her relationship with Mabel wasn't much better. They could have killed Albert and left him beside the road. Charles could have directed James to the spot in hopes of making them look guilty."

"That could be. But there must have been more to it than that. How could they have known when I would come by?"

Candace pursed her lips.

"What if Charles knew about the pill thefts? What if that is the reason he wanted you involved. He knew where you would find them. If managed to manipulate Mabel and James to be in the same area as the body, well, the evidence would look pretty suggestive against them."

"It does."

Jason squeezed Candace against him as he continued.

"Maybe Charles needed a witness. After all, Mabel and James wouldn't be seen in the area if there was no one around. Obviously. You come back from the city at about the same time every weekend, don't you?"

Candace's eyelids fell shut. "Yes...but how would they make sure Mabel and James arrived at the same time I did?"

"If Charles pretended to be Harvey, I'm sure he could have thought of a way to get them there at the right time to meet you. Most importantly so that you could all meet Albert together."

"Well, that would be easy enough to check. Mabel is right here, I could ask her what was said. You could talk to Harvey and ask him if he sent anyone out. "

Candace looked reluctant as she slid away from Jason's embrace. "Well, it looks like we need to get out there and ask a few questions, doesn't it?"

August 6
8:16 p.m.

“Harvey laughed. He thought the idea was ridiculous. According to him, he wasn’t here to send anyone out on a search, and if he had been, he would’ve called the police...not some residents. He found it hard to believe that Albert escaped at all. He was dying. In Harvey’s opinion, Albert wouldn’t have had the strength to escape...Harvey thinks that Albert died naturally and then was taken away by staff following the normal procedures. What did Mabel have to say?”

“According to Mabel, she was recruited by James coming to her door. Apparently, James had received a phone call from someone claiming to be Harvey, asking for his help. The story was that Albert had escaped and Harvey wanted people familiar to him to bring him in. They were told that Albert was in the area that you met them, and that they should be there around 2:40.”

“Why?”

“Mabel didn’t know for sure. James didn’t explain it. She thought it had to do with someone else coming to help them at that time. Supposedly Albert was in a fanatical state. They wanted to calm Albert down, and then bring him back to the home. When they arrived and saw you, they thought you were part of the search. Then the police arrived and changed everything.”

Jason stared up at the vast expanse of stars above him. The evening expanse stretched into infinity, into divine mystery. A small breeze wafted over them, bringing a welcome smell of freshness.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.” Jason glanced at Candace, shrugged helplessly, and then opened the driver’s side door of his truck. “It should be easy, but....”

“I think both Harvey and Mabel are telling the truth.”

Candace said with quiet determination.

“You trust Harvey?”

"I know what he did to us in the past, but love has changed him. He still has some bad habits...but I think this whole situation was manipulated by someone else, someone who knows everyone involved. You're right, it's down to Francis and Charles."

Jason had been about to crawl into his truck, instead he stepped back. He walked to the hood of the vehicle. He rested his elbows on the metal as he stared at his wife doing the same thing on the other side.

"How could Charles know that you wouldn't be delayed and miss your appointment?"

"He couldn't be sure, but I do keep a pretty regular schedule. A schedule that is posted on the band website. Well, at least the show times and such. It wouldn't be too hard to figure out the rest. The body wasn't found that far out of town, so the arrival time for Mabel and James would be easy enough to guess. It wouldn't be very accurate, but it would be close enough so that we would meet. And if we hadn't met, there probably would have been another plan in place."

Jason felt admiration bursting through his mind, and then through to his lips, twisting them into a smile. "Okay, I'm convinced. Now why did they do it?"

Candace pushed herself away from the hood of the truck. Her arms crossed in front of her denim jacket. "For revenge."

A lonely owl hooted, echoing the sound in Jason's mind.

"Here is my theory. Charles was obsessed with Rebecca, correct? Then he lost her to James, grandson of Mabel. Francis and Mabel aren't the most stable of women. The Rebecca issue was probably like pouring gas over a bonfire. Mabel started stealing the sleeping pills that Francis needed, then she decided to create a preposterous accusation of attempted murder. Charles knew about the thefts, and he knew that Albert had left everything to Mabel and James. After Albert died, or was helped along by Charles and his pills, the plan was in motion. With James and Mabel fighting murder charges, Rebecca would naturally go back to Charles, and Francis would have her revenge."

"That's what I was thinking. Although I must say that you made it clearer than I did." Jason sounded doubtful.

"Thanks. but how could we prove it? We have no evidence...Nothing except this theory."

"Maybe not, but that hasn't stopped us before. What do you say?"

"I say you take Francis, and I'll deal with Charles."

"Sounds good!"

Candace grinned. "That's the Jason I married. With any luck we'll be in bed before midnight."

Jason felt his nerves tingle with anticipation. "We can only hope. Oh and Candace, please be careful. If you're right, this could be dangerous."

"Have you ever known me to be deterred by danger or common sense?"

"Can I talk to my lawyer before I answer that question?"

A face peered out from behind a crimson curtain in the window.

Jason and Candace stood by an old truck. They were Laughing and joking about something, why?

There was a shrill beep as an old woman pushed the talk button on her cordless phone.

"Hello? Yes...Hmmm? Well don't worry about that! I'm watching our targets now...hmmm, I think Jason is getting ready to leave, while Candace is coming this way. I think our little plan is about to fall apart. We'll need to work fast. Can you come over? I think it's time to finish this permanently, don't you?"

August 6
8:29 p.m.

A red mustang idled along the street. Watching, waiting, and then easing forward as Jason's old truck faded out of sight. Candace was now alone.

"This is different, we didn't actually kill Albert. Don't you think that this feud has gone a little far?"

"Buck up boy. Mabel tried to pin an attempted murder charge on me, and we've already done her one better. Tonight we'll give her something she'll never forget."

"I don't think that..."

"Don't start that whining again. Get over here. Candace is at my door, and she's probably got a mouthful of questions. I'll deal with her, and then I'll need your help. I don't need a mess of legal trouble at my age...." The sound of a dial tone ended the call.

There was a crunch of gravel against rubber as the Mustang turned onto the parking lot of the care home.

Candace beat her fist against the door.

Francis lived in the same section as Mabel. That was another fact she had gleaned from Harvey. Poor Harvey, he was trying to be honest, but he had to put up with the shenanigans of two old women who should know better.

"Good evening." Francis pulled open the door. A broad smile graced her plump face.

Her body was stuffed into a jet-black dress, a silver wedding ring was wrapped around her finger. Her eyes turned upward.

"I always like to see the moon when it's still light out. It's sort of pleasant, isn't it? Well, enough of the moon...come inside."

Francis ushered Candace into a room filled with purple and black. As the color shock wore off, Candace noticed that each

corner of the room held a burning candle.

One wall held an ancient looking stone column.

"Close that door would you? I don't like flies inside...."

Candace obeyed, her mind spinning from the strong scent of cinnamon wafting around her head and into her nostrils.

"I enjoy a nice smelling house, don't you? Sometimes I wonder how a woman could ever keep house before air fresheners?" Francis laughed. "Now what can I help you with?"

Charles stared at the floor of his vehicle. A vision of Rebecca flitted constantly though his consciousness. He had seen her in town, walking along the sidewalk.

Who was she going with now?

He sighed as his shoulders slumped.

His grandmother had lost all reason. First, she had pressured him into plotting out an elaborate and vicious scheme for revenge. It had seemed so easy at the time, so foolproof. James was the type who always had the lucky breaks in life, a fall would be good for his character. Then, and then, unreasoning anger had faded into truth. He had been a fool to encourage Francis in her lust for revenge...Now the situation had escalated too far...much too far....

Rebecca wouldn't be impressed when she found out what he had done. Although, she didn't care anyway...did she?

Charles raised his head and stared at the building before him. A piece of the moon hung overhead, even though a fragment of the sun was still visible.

He had made up his mind. He only needed a moment to gather courage. His time had come...No matter what the consequence...The situation had gone too far....

"Yes, Albert was my husband. We may have lived in separate rooms, but we had the same last name. For what it was worth...." Francis shuddered, as some unpleasant memory possessed her.

"You're a woman; you know how some men expect you to

shut up and obey. That was Albert, and I obeyed him for years. When Abe and Mary forced Albert into this place for treatment, I had my chance to escape. I realized that I deserved much more from life. I had been pushed down for too long...That's the beauty of this place; they have different sections depending on how much care a person needs. I can do what I want for a couple more years anyway. Then, if I'm not dead, the staff will have to take care of me." Francis smiled, but there was an obviously deep pit of bitterness and pain behind her tormented eyes.

"Albert got what he deserved, dumped naked beside the road in the rain...Even that was too good for him." Francis paused.

"Don't look so worried. There are plenty of miserable people in the world ready to take Albert's place. Mabel is one of them, as arrogant as she is...she reminds me of Albert the way she got James to steal Rebecca from Charles. And she used to be my friend...Bah!"

Candace followed Francis's nervous gaze as she glanced toward a gap in the curtained window.

A pair of legs appeared briefly, and then vanished.

"Do you want something to drink? Wait a minute...I'll brew up something special for you...Go on, have a seat by the table. I'll be right back and then I can answer your questions...."

Candace glanced around the strange apartment she found herself in. Obviously, Francis had indulged her freedom while decorating her apartment. It was amazing she had kept her creative spirit alive over all the years under Albert's oppression. Many older people wouldn't have.

A cup of steaming coffee appeared before her.

There was a slight scraping sound as a chair was pulled back, and then Francis sat herself across the table from Candace.

"It's amazing what freedom does...I think I've gained thirty pounds since I started living on my own. As you can see, I had fun decorating...Albert always liked things plain, and I guess I was a little rebellious when I got my own place. Ha! I persuaded Charles to help decorate...He didn't like it, but he came around in the end. I think the results were worth it." Francis stared at her. "I also learned how to make a good cup of coffee...Try it. Don't be arrogant like Mabel...."

Candace stared at the cup. She felt slightly suspicious, but

then she thought better of it. The coffee smelled okay. Francis's feud was with Mabel and Albert, not Candace.

It was easy to feel sympathy for Francis. It was also easy to see how she could have been driven to murder.

Candace wrapped her finger around the handle of the cup. The evening had been long and thirst inducing, it was time to wet her mouth.

August 6
8:37 p.m.

Knock. Knock.

Candace carefully placed her coffee cup on the table and then glanced behind her. Someone was at the door, was it Jason?

No, it shouldn't be Jason. He had gone to see Charles...He wouldn't be back for fifteen minutes at least.

Knock. Knock. The volume was louder now, more urgent.

"Bah! Isn't that the way it always goes. You sit down and then the phone rings, or company comes...." Francis pushed herself away from the table and then stood.

She stretched out her arms as she yawned.

Knock. Knock. Someone was obviously desperate to be heard.

"I hope that isn't who I think it is." Francis grumbled as she slowly made her way across the purple carpet toward the door. "Dealing with family can be so difficult at times...."

Candace glanced around the room as she reached for the coffee cup once again. She was really starting to appreciate the color scheme...There was an mystical, faintly oriental feel to the atmosphere that appealed to her adventurous spirit. The small yellow points of light from the candles around the room flickered as the door opened.

There was a brief moment of silence and then Francis began to whisper to whoever was at the door.

Candace blinked. She was sure that her theory was correct. Francis obviously had the motive to get rid of Albert. How to prove it? She opened her mouth and prepared to inhale a blast of warm coffee.

"Do not drink that!"

A sudden shout startled Candace. Her coffee cup jerked. Pain began to shriek, burning through her nerves as coffee spilled down her bare arms.

"Now look what you done! Shame on you Charles, you

should know better! That coffee was hot! Now wait there dear...I'll get a towel and clean you up in no time." Francis bustled past, her hands waving constantly as she moved toward the bathroom. Charles was only a few steps behind his Grandmother.

Through eyes salted with tears, Candace saw Charles reaching toward her with both hands outstretched.

What now?

Jason stepped back from the door of the house trailer. Obviously, Charles wasn't home tonight. One could only hope he wasn't out making corpses....

Jason felt his face contort into a grimace.

The more he reasoned through the events of the day, the more depressed he felt. Charles and Francis had to be partners in crime. How could he prove it?

A melancholy raven of darkness flew through Jason's mind. He balled his fists as the betrayal became ever clearer. Charles had used him...he had callously abused Jason's goodwill to further his plan for revenge.

Charles hadn't changed at all.

If only Brent hadn't moved away, if only there was someone here to help him.

Candace was too busy.

Jason stumbled down the few steps necessary to reach the ground. He stopped and turned back, looking for something to lift his spirits.

The blue and white house trailer was a small rectangle with a square wooden platform elevated beside it. A stairway led up to the platform and the doorway. Everything was clean. Charles was deliberate in everything he did, including the care of his home.

Just around the edge of one corner of the trailer Jason could see part of an old garage, weather beaten to a dull grey. It didn't seem important so Jason began to turn away.

The station wagon! Of course, James was known for his old station wagon. Candace had seen a station wagon in the area of Albert's corpse. What if Francis and Charles had used a similar

station wagon in their quest to frame James and Mabel?

It seemed likely, given that Charles had thought of so many other angles. What if that station wagon was hidden in the garage behind the trailer?

Somewhere, someone was blasting the deep throated screams of heavy metal into the neighborhood. Jason ignored the anguish as he headed around the trailer, toward the garage.

"I told you not to drink that!" Charles grabbed the coffee cup that lay on the table before Candace. Without another word, he charged toward the bathroom, brushing past his grandmother as he did so.

She could hear a toilet flush. Charles had just flushed the coffee away. Why?

Francis began to wipe the coffee from the table, and then proceeded to Candace's arms. The pain faded slightly as the liquid was removed from her skin.

Something had been added to the coffee, it had burned far too much in relation to it's physical heat. Hmmm...Charles had stopped her from drinking it.

Did that mean he had changed his mind? Was it all part of their plan for her?

Charles reentered the room. A strange smile flowed over his handsome face. He carried a pill bottle in his hand. His soft white fingers twisted the cap from the bottle and then removed a small red pill.

"I thought Francis might try something like that. This has gone too far! There was poison in your coffee...Are your arms burning?" Charles stared at Candace with a look of concern.

Was the concern real?

"A bit yes..." Candace said aloud.

Francis stepped between Candace and Charles, babbling, obviously afraid. "Bah! Don't listen to him...He's lying. I would never poison you or anyone...."

Charles braved a withering look as he stepped around his Grandmother. His hand held out the red pill.

"A small amount of the poison will seep through your

skin...it won't be enough to kill you, but it will make you sick and maybe cause some permanent skin damage...Unless you take this." Charles sensed the hesitation. "Go on. I am not trying to trick you. I figured you knew the story if you came here...I also knew what Francis would do if you did, so I brought an antidote...."

If only Jason were here...Candace felt the cold finger of fear tickle her neck.

"Don't listen to him!" Francis urged. "Charles always thinks he knows things that he doesn't. He has been that way ever since he was a child."

Charles shoved the pill at Candace, impatience plain through the rapidly forming sheen of sweat on his face. "Take it before it is too late. I will be honest, I was part of this for a while, but I do not want a murder on my mind. This has gone too far! Take the pill...."

"Ha! He's a liar, he always had been...I would never ever give you something that I knew was dangerous." Francis was recovering from her surprise. Her voice was stronger and more convincing.

Candace felt her heart pounding. Her arms felt like fire and were colored crimson. What should she do?

The garage doors were closed. A heavy new chain had thwarted Jason's efforts to open them. After a few moments of patient scouting, he had found a gap in the wall. It was nearly hidden by a patch of ragweeds.

Jason brushed away the weeds and then knelt, lowering his eyes to the level of the hole. The dank smell of rotten wood penetrated Jason's nostrils as he pressed his face against the wall.

It took a moment for his vision to adjust to the semi darkness inside the garage and then the outline of an old station wagon became visible. Was this the evidence they had been searching for?

August 6
8:54 p.m.

“And then there was one...” Charles dropped the pill into Candace’s outstretched hand. “Now you just pop it in your mouth and swallow, soon you will feel a lot better.”

Candace felt the room spinning around her head as her heart pounded. She was thankful that she was sitting.

Francis was hovering beside her grandson. She seemed about to speak and then fell silent. She smiled as Candace raised the pill to her lips.

Was that a wink?

Candace couldn’t be sure, it had happened so fast. Her tortured skin begged for relief, she was willing to defy reason to achieve it. She pushed the pill between her lips, and then swallowed.

“Thank you, now you might feel a bit tired. If you do, feel free to lie down on the couch.” Francis’s voice was flat and carefully controlled. All traces of panic had vanished. “I’ll go and get a cloth with some cool water on it. It’ll help cool you off while you rest. I’m so sorry that this had to happen...I’ll have to take a look at that coffee I gave you. Maybe I’ll speak to the store manager about it. Bad coffee like that should never be allowed on store shelves.”

“Hey!”

Startled, Jason stood up.

“Hey you by the shed! Yeah, I am talking to you! What do you think you’re trying to prove?” The guttural voice rasped with undisguised anger.

Jason turned, searching for his adversary. Finally, drawn toward the source of the screaming heavy metal, his eyes rested on a weed infested yard about two hundred feet to the

south.

A big bellied man dressed in grey sweatpants and a tattered blue shirt stepped into view. A black bandanna covered a head of curly black hair that dangled down past his shoulders. A fat brown cigar was clenched in a massive fist.

The bakery boss and chief chef looked different when he wasn't wearing his uniform. One thing remained the same, and that was the grouchy expression on his face.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

The fist shoved the cigar into a mouth surrounded by an unshaven face.

Somewhere behind the adversary, angry drums continued to pound, guitars continued to shred out minor chords, and a guttural voice continued to bellow.

"Listen, I..." Jason stammered to a halt. He obviously looked guilty peering into Charles's shed. His face and his knees were covered with dirt...dirt that didn't add to his reputable appearance. What could he say?

A blast of smoke blew from the mouth of his adversary.

"Speechless huh? You thieves get bolder all the time, don't ya? No shame at all. Honest folks like us only exist to get ripped off by worthless pukes like you...Yep, that's all we're good for...aren't we?"

The man was waddling through the weeds, headed toward Jason. He jammed the cigar back into his mouth as he bent down to pick up a wooden baseball bat leaning against an old car wreck at the edge of his property.

"A fine thing. This morning you were in my shop giving me a lecture about Christmas music, and now I find you stealing. I don't care if you are a regular customer, I won't let you get away with this."

"Listen, I'm not stealing." Jason blurted, feeling foolish. He had brought this on himself by not looking around before he knelt to investigate the crack in the wall.

"Of course you ain't stealing! You don't have time to steal now! You're too busy lookin scared...as you should be!" Since the cigar remained in place, smoke billowed from the adversary's mouth as he spoke.

The baseball bat clenched in those massive fists only

added to the bulk bearing down on Jason like a battle tank.

Jason took a breath, forcing himself to remain calm. "Just listen for a minute. I am not here to steal. I'm a friend of Charles...He asked me to look into some thefts for him."

The battle tank slowed. The end of the baseball bat touched the ground as uncertainty flickered over the unhappy face.

"You got any proof for that?"

Jason pulled out his wallet and then fumbled through it, searching for his student id card. "Here's my id card, I'm studying security at the community college. Take a look...You can also ask Charles...he'll back me up."

The card trembled in his hand as he held it out.

Would Charles actually back him up? Jason couldn't be sure anymore, but he could only deal with one threat at a time.

His adversary stared at the card, and then he grinned, revealing a mouthful of nicotine stained teeth." I don't know whether I should look at that card. My evening has been boring so far... Maybe I should beat you anyway, just because of what you told me this morning. What do you think?"

"You sure know a lot about poison." Candace said to Charles from her position on the couch.

Charles shifted, avoiding her eyes. "I am a pharmacist, it is my job to know about chemicals, including poison."

Candace was feeling better. It gave her confidence to charge forward. "I think it's especially interesting that you knew that Francis would try to poison me, and not only that! You knew what kind of poison she would use and you were here at exactly the right time. Convenient, isn't it?"

"Bah! I never tried to poison anyone." Francis said quietly from her perch in the corner of the room. The perch was otherwise known as a black leather love seat. Her face looked beaten, but her lips were stretched into a smile.

She was staring at the ancient stone column.

"I think...er...." Charles was standing beside her, his hands shoved into the pockets of his grey pants.

"Yes, I think from time to time myself. I've especially been thinking a lot about you two...." Candace remarked as she sat up. Charles had told the truth, the pill he had given her had done what he claimed it would.

Charles forced a chuckle as his handsome smile gleamed.

"You may have thought a lot about us, but you don't have any evidence, do you? Now I was just thinking that it might be best just to forget that any of this foolishness ever happened. I admit that this feud got a little out of hand...."

"A little out of hand? Albert got killed!"

"No!" Both Francis and Charles said at the same time.

They glanced at each other as if startled by their synchronized performance.

"We didn't kill anyone. Albert was dead before we ever picked him up. Dead from natural causes, I might add! Francis was prepared to poison Albert, so I did give her something...but Albert died of natural causes before Francis got to him."

Candace shifted in her seat. Charles stood between her and the door. The best she could hope for was that Jason would return soon, until then she would proceed with her diatribe. What else could she do?

"You almost knocked me off with that little potion. You did stop me from drinking it, and I am grateful, but still...Do you really think that you can act like that and get away with it?"

"At the very least you'll get charged with mischief. You tried to frame James and Mabel for murder! The police will be interested in an explanation, and frankly, I intend tell them the truth. Francis tried to poison me! What have I done to deserve that? Don't think you can try it again either...My husband will be here shortly." Candace was on her feet now, ready to flee if the situation demanded it.

Charles looked indignant. "I saved you. That should count for something. Francis was watching you, and when she saw you headed in this direction she panicked and called me." Charles snorted. "She was supposed to be the strong one, but she panicked. I was supposed to wait outside for your death and then dispose of your body. Instead, I saved your life! That should count for something...."

"I know. I know. I am thankful."

Candace wished she were taller so that she could intimidate the clueless jerk standing before her.

Charles seemed to wither as Candace's disgust became ' apparent. "Look, I admit we were foolish. I wanted revenge just as much as Francis did, but I never wanted it to go so far. Never! I gave Francis a few poison pills just to get her off my back. However, Albert died naturally. Then, we had to act quickly. Francis thought it would not hurt that much...She talked me into planning it..." Charles bit his lip. "I even persuaded James that I was Harvey so that he would do that search...I never thought he would fall for that, but he did! I did not really expect that all this would work, that is the only reason I got involved...to get Francis off my back."

Charles stepped back as Candace stepped toward him with contempt flashing in her eyes.

Charles spread his hands as his voice began to plead.

"Please...I never liked James, but I did try to stop all this. I should never have given Francis that poison...I wasn't thinking. Can we just forget it? You do not have any evidence...I will tell you what happened for your sake, but I will not testify in court. I cannot testify against my Grandmother, no matter what she has done. I will make sure that she does not try something like that again...Please...I have been trying to change..."

Candace felt an unexplainable pity sneak into her emotion. Charles did look pathetic and he did have some valid points. As she pondered the sincerity of Charles, she didn't notice that Francis had risen from her seat and was inching toward the door.

August 6
9:17 p.m.

Bam! A massive hand slammed into Jason's back. A brief period of laughter followed the impact. After a moment, a boisterous voice began to speak.

"Oh, don't mind all that gruff stuff, I'm just kiddin around!"

There was a concerned pause. "Hey bud, you still with me?"

Jason's lips opened and closed as he fought for air.

"Sorry about that, I didn't mean to hit ya so hard. I don't know my own strength sometimes. Chin up, that's better...You can't get air with your head hanging down like that."

"I'll be okay."

Foul smelling cigar smoke swirled around the head of his adversary. He lifted his baseball bat and then hurled it back toward his own yard. The bat spun through the air for two hundred feet, and then clunked as it crashed into the rusted out wreck in the middle of a weed patch.

For an encore he pulled the cigar from his mouth and threw it to the ground. His heel ground it into the dirt.

"Good throw." Jason observed, still struggling for air.

"Thanks man. I used to play football in college. These days I'm too out of shape for that kinda thing..." The nicotine stained teeth made another appearance. "I picked up a few bad habits that don't help. Plus I've got the bakery; naturally, I need to sample my own product from time to time. You know how it is. It seems that I can still chuck a decent bat though." A raspy laugh broke the silence before the adversary continued. "Anyway, I hope I didn't freak you out too much. I like scarin' people...especially around here! It seems hardly a day goes by without someone stealin'. Frankly, we're all gettin a bit sick of that. That's why I came on so strong. You understand don't ya?"

Jason brushed at the patches of dirt on his jeans. His efforts at cleanliness weren't very successful. His panting slowed as he began to recover his breath.

“Yes, I understand. I talked to you this morning...There are no hard feelings I hope.”

“About the Christmas music? Oh, don't worry about that! Christmas music isn't my thing, but if you dig it, you dig it. I didn't mean to sound so rough. I get carried away sometimes I guess. Too bad you weren't actually one of those thieving little pukes. Then I wouldn't hafta feel so guilty...Heh heh. Anyway, just jokes, that's all it was. Now I'll leave you to whatever you need to do. We're just havin' a little band practice, so I better get back to it. I don't wanna have 'em get used to rockin' without me.”

“What do you play?”

“I'm a bass man myself. You mighta noticed that the bass was missing from the polished sound over there. That's because I was checkin' out the strange truck in the neighborhood, and then I saw you...and well, here I am. If you ever get tired of that Christmas music, check us out. We hit the bars in the city pretty regular. Anyway, enough yakkin', I better get back to work...See you around sometime.” With those words of wisdom, the adversary turned and waddled back toward the thundering din of heavy metal.

As he walked, he popped a fresh cigar into his mouth and then lit a match to it.

Jason shook his head to clear it. The burst of adrenaline that had washed over him had faded. He knew that he wasn't that much of a Christmas music fan, but he had barely got a word into the flow. Now he was tired and more than a little fuzzy headed. Still, he was happy that his trip hadn't been in vain.

He had found a suspicious station wagon locked in a garage belonging to Charles. What had Candace discovered about Francis? That was the question in Jason's mind as he walked back to his truck.

“Where do you think you're going?” Candace's commanding voice halted Francis by the doorway.

Her eyes grew wide as her eyebrows lowered. A gnarled hand rested like a claw on the doorknob. “Good bye. If you want to listen to Charles and his wild stories, go ahead. I don't

need to stay around to listen. I'm going for coffee, turn off the light when you leave."

"Now Grandma admit it. You know what I said was true. Remember how you hassled me when we were pulled Albert's body from the station wagon? You pushed this crazy plan, and now you don't want to face the consequences. Come on, we might as well admit it. This feud has gone far enough...."

"Lies! Imagine me trying to poison someone! You sound just like Mabel. You remember how she told that little story, the one about me trying to kill her? I'm innocent and I'm free to leave. You have no evidence to pin on me...so don't even try to get your police friends to haul me in. I know few stories myself. Ha! Well, more than a few. Some people might be offended if I told those kinds of stories." Francis sounded like the frail, desperate woman she was.

Candace stifled a yawn. She had to keep Francis talking until Jason arrived. She knew that she didn't have the strength to stop Francis if she made up her mind to leave. Charles was staring into the distance; obviously, he didn't have the will to restrain his grandmother. If the escape of Francis were to be prevented, it would need to be done with words.

"Come now, I just got here. Now you want to leave?"

"I can't help that. I'm just an evil old woman... remember? I don't do things like common courtesy...Now you just have a wonderful time with my traitorous grandson, I'll be okay. Imagine, first I'm abused by my husband...Then if that wasn't enough, I have to spend my old age listening to terrible lies about my character..." Francis was still grumbling as she opened the door and then stepped through it.

August 6
9:44 p.m.

“Well, she is gone.” Charles said slowly, as if he knew he should care, but he didn’t. “I cannot say I blame her for what she did. Albert was miserable to her for years. She got married at eighteen. She never really knew anything else.”

Charles examined the ancient stone structure that dominated one wall. “Look at this place...she got a little freedom and she went extreme. Believe it or not, I tried to talk her out of decorating like this...but I did help her in the end...” Charles fell silent as he stepped back.

Candace strode to the open door and then peered out into the rapidly forming dusk. At last it was cooling off outside, what a pity that she couldn’t be out there. She squinted. There was an empty parking lot, a vibrant green lawn, but no trace of Francis.

Candace took a deep breath of fresh air. After a moment of quiet contemplation, she stepped back inside Francis’s air-conditioned apartment and closed the door.

Charles stood beside a black telephone fastened to the wall. He was talking to someone.

Candace longed to return home. What else could she do? There was no evidence to prove her allegations.

If only Jason would return and take her away.

Charles had emptied the poisoned coffee into the toilet. Now that Candace felt better, she wished she had kept it for testing. Oh well....

Candace shuffled toward the couch. Her brief rush of adrenaline was collapsing into cynical weariness.

The death of Albert wouldn’t cause any great concern. Perhaps his family would grieve, but only for a moment. He was just a miserable old man, one of many. Perhaps some would puzzle over the location of his corpse. However, since Albert had died a natural death, there wouldn’t be any rush to find out how his body had ended up beside the road.

Candace sank into the embrace of the couch. She knew she should chase Francis, but she didn't have the energy or the will. Her doctor had warned her about overexertion.

She knew she had been treading the line. What if she had already done irreparable damage?

The door opened and closed, unnoticed.

A mystery had been solved, but Candace didn't feel any satisfaction. She could see the human bitterness and selfishness at the heart of it all. Those problems wouldn't go away by simply solving a crime. Without the intervention of divine love, there would always be more mysteries to solve.

The couch cushion sank as Charles sat. His voice was flat as he spoke.

"I realized that Abe and Mary did not know about Albert's death. They were about the only family that really cared and Albert treated them like dirt. He would rather talk to James and Mabel than his own family...It was a sad thing. Anyway, I just talked to Mary, so she knows now. I expect they will be by to see Francis later on."

"If she comes back...."

"Yes, if she does...I think she will. What else could she do? Oh by the way, Abe is the son of Albert and Francis and Mary is Abe's wife. Just so, you know...They are not any friends of mine. Do not get them involved."

"Is there room on that couch for me?" Jason had snuck into the room without a sound.

Candace smiled as relief flooded her soul. "Yes. If you answer one question."

"Oh, what is that?" Jason looked as exhausted as she felt.

"Did you see Francis out there?"

Jason sat between Charles and his wife. "I did. Why?"

"She's on the run...."

"On the run? Then why aren't you chasing her?" Jason's voice was vibrant with interest, even though his eyes were weary. "Why don't we go now?"

"Let her run." Charles spoke up. "She will get more punishment by running than if we ever caught up to her. She will be back in an hour or so."

Jason looked around the apartment as if he had just

entered an alien planet. "Oh Charles...I noticed a station wagon in your garage when I was by your place a while ago. I thought it was strange that you would want to drive the same kind of car that James is known for."

Charles's lips formed a silent o. He seemed to be about to speak, but was interrupted by Jason.

"Then I started thinking...wouldn't it be crazy if there was some of Albert's DNA in your car. It might be interesting to check it out, don't you think?"

"Listen!" Charles burst out. "You have obviously figured out what happened, and I admit it. True, you could use that car as evidence, but just listen to me for a moment." Charles continued speaking, outlining what had happened and his involvement. His voice traveled through the fact that he had saved Candace from poison, and finally ended at the scene of Francis's exit.

"Now you know what really happened. Imagine telling that story to the police without any evidence other than my old station wagon. No one would believe you. Sure, it looks like the car that James drives, but so what? All you have is your idea and my word for it. There is a better case against James and Mabel than against us. I would not drag them into it, but Francis would. The whole thing would get very messy."

"It's a messy situation now! I still think that the DNA in the back of your car would be pretty strong evidence. Are you seriously trying to suggest that we all just keep quiet and let you and Francis get away with murder?" Jason was bitter about being used, and it showed.

"It wasn't murder. Albert died naturally. After Albert died, Francis thought of the plan to try and frame Mabel and James for murder. I never wanted to do it, but I admit that James isn't my favorite character. That's why I did it. I'm sorry I did."

"We're all sorry that you did. We could have spent the day relaxing instead of fooling around. I really thought you had changed. I wanted to believe you, but this...this...is just stupid!"

Candace stood and walked over to stand beside her husband as he continued to lecture Charles.

"Come on! Do you really think Rebecca will be interested in you after this gets out? Rebecca deserves better, and so do I! I worked for you all afternoon, and then I find out you knew that

Mabel was stealing all along. Is that all we are? Just pawns for all of you to use in your stupid little blood feuds? Fighting over a girl, for Pete's sake! That kind of thing is for high school. Grow up!"

Candace felt her temper rising as Charles replied.

"Remember, Mabel tried to do the same thing to Francis. We were simply using their own ideas against them."

"Yeah, well. It's kind of late to be rehashing all that again.

As far as I'm concerned, Rebecca deserves better than either you or James. This is a nice town. If people hear about you two, they'll think it's the set of a soap opera. It's, it's beyond belief." Jason sputtered to a halt.

Candace opened her mouth to voice her support for her husband, but was cut off by Charles.

"You let me worry about Rebecca...I think she will see me when I go over there tomorrow. If I just have a chance...."

"I don't think there is any way you could explain yourself that would win her over."

Charles cringed as if he had been slapped. "That may be, but I will try. I will...try...."

"What if Francis kills for real next time?"

"There will not be a next time."

"You wouldn't even stop Francis from leaving this apartment...how could you ever stop her from trying something more sinister?" Candace had tossed that nugget out. She was openly angry now.

"I told you. I never wanted to do this. I will not do it again. Francis won't do anything on her own. I know her."

Those words echoed through the room for a few moments. Finally, Jason stood from his seat and broke the silence.

"Let's go home. I've had enough of this nonsense. "

Charles looked dazed. He sat on the couch, staring vacantly into the distance. "I never wanted this...." He whispered.

Jason stared at the pathetic grey suited figure. Pity lurked at the edges of his emotion. He searched his mind for the words he knew he should say.

A sigh escaped from Jason's lips. "I forgive you. Maybe I'm stupid, but I'm not going to turn you in. I think it'll be better if everybody just cools down and gets back to sanity. This thing about Rebecca has gotten way out of hand. If you get sick of what

you've done, ask for Mabel and James for forgiveness. It probably won't change their minds about you, or get you Rebecca, but at least you'll have begun to start over...Think about it."

Jason stared at Charles for a moment. There was no reply. He grimaced as he turned and shuffled for the door.

Despite her exhaustion, or perhaps because of it, Candace knew she had to reveal her secret. Jason needed to know the results of the Doctor's visit. She vowed to tell him as soon as they were home and lying in bed.

August 7
2:37 a.m.

A long black hearse glided to a stop. The driver's side door opened slowly and silently. A phantom clocked in sinister shadow was released into the moonlit night.

Jason brushed a strand of blonde hair away from Candace's eyes. She looked so serene and childlike when she slept.

Candace had been so tired when they had returned. She had been silent all the way home, and then had fallen asleep almost as soon as she fell to the bed. One could only hope that the dreams haunting her were pleasant ones.

What was the secret hiding inside his wife? She had been about to tell him something...What was it?

Jason leaned back in the bed as his left hand reached for a switch beside him. His index finger flicked it. An almost inaudible hum entered the room as a partition moved away from the window in the ceiling.

Melancholy thoughts of Charles haunted him. Jason struggled to push them aside. There was nothing more to be done about Charles and Francis. Jason had arrived at that conclusion about midnight, but his mind wouldn't rest.

It was obvious that the Doctor had revealed something serious to his wife. What was it? Why wouldn't she tell him?

He stared up, searching for inspiration. All he could see was a sky spangled with tiny points of light. Twisted branches crouched at the edge of the window. The twinkling brilliance thousands, or even millions of stars sparkled around and through the wooden fingers.

The window in the ceiling was Jason's creation. The idea had struck him that star lit sky would provide beautiful bedroom atmosphere. It had been a lot of work to create, but it had been

worth every sweat-drenched moment.

If only sleep would come to soothe his troubled mind.

Jason tore his gaze away from the stars and then glanced at his wife.

Candace's steady whisper of breathing spoke of peace, of rest...of beautiful dreams.

Jason pulled the blanket further up his bare chest as he searched the sky for answers.

What secret lurked inside Candace's beautiful head?

The house was silent. Yes, it had been worth the wait. The task would only take a moment. The evil phantom's feet moved silently and in slow motion as it moved across an empty lawn.

He was so tired. The morning would be a weary haze if he wasn't able to asleep. Perhaps he should have bought a bottle of sleeping pills for himself.

Balancing work and study was hard enough without being hindered by the lack of sleep.

Perhaps if Candace had told him everything... Perhaps then his mind would have been released from the tension. There was obviously something wrong, somewhere....

The gnarled silhouette of a tree beckoned. The phantom strode toward it. A slight breeze rippled the cloak he wore. As he reached the tree, he leapt up to the first branch. Hand after hand, higher and higher, he pulled himself up, closer to his targets.

A scream pierced the darkness. The phantom vanished.

"It's okay. It's okay. Just breathe." Jason repeated.

Candace's skin was trembling. She opened her mouth to

scream once again, but was halted by Jason's hand pressing down over her mouth.

Jason wrapped his muscular arms around the warm body of his wife. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest.

"Shhh. It's okay, it was just a dream." He whispered caressing her hair.

After a while, Candace's heart rate began to slow as the stiff tension in her skin faded. Jason removed his arms and then propped himself on one elbow, watching his wife.

"A nightmare?"

Candace shuddered. "Yes...There was a hearse outside, and then, then...someone evil was climbing the tree beside our house. He wanted to kill us. It was so real, so vivid...."

"Well, it's over now."

"Yesterday was too crazy I guess..." Candace yawned, obviously preparing to return to her slumber.

"We can be thankful that we're done with all of that."

"I am thankful, but I wish things had turned out better. I wish...I wish hadn't seen Albert lying beside the road."

"Don't think about that...It's dangerous to your sleep."

"Not as dangerous as this..." Candace's voice was sleepy, but her eyes were wide as she kissed Jason full on the mouth.

"Take that Daddy. " She mumbled, already half-asleep.

Jason was silent for a moment, and then the meaning of what she had said began to sink in.

"You mean the Doctor...the Doctor said...."

Candace smiled. "He said that I was pregnant. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, but I didn't know how you would react. We needed to finish the mystery first, remember?"

"Really?"

"Yes. Now let me sleep, the doctor told me that it was important to get my rest. I haven't had a lot of it lately. I have to catch up." Candace laid her head back onto her pillow. She smiled at Jason, and then her eyelids fell closed.

Jason crawled away from the warmth of the bed. His mind, already overloaded, strained at the seams. He needed to move.

Behind him, Candace curled deeper under the blanket that covered her. One could only hope that the dreams wouldn't return, but given the circumstances, they probably would.

Jason stood beside the bed. His too large boxer shorts felt like they would fall at any moment. One hand reached down to hold them in place. The other hand reached over to the switch.

There was a soft hum as darkness slowly replaced the brilliance of a summer night sky.

With soft gliding strides, Jason left the bedroom and then swept into the living room.

Dark outlines of furniture surrounded him as he paced. Three steps forward, turn...Three steps back, turn....

He was always careful to keep a hand on his shorts. It would never do to have them fall around his ankles. He would trip, fall, and then crash to the floor. Not only would he humiliate himself, he would wake his wife in the process.

The morning continued as Jason continued to pace. As time passed his thoughts turned toward the challenge that had presented itself.

He was to be a father. God had blessed their love with another gift, another chocolate in the box.

Every act of love is like a chocolate in God's gift box to humanity. The sentimental Christmas memory wafted back into Jason's mind. The quote was years old, yet it still tugged at his heart. Some chocolates were harder to swallow than others....

Jason shook his head and then headed toward the bedroom. The mysteries and feuds of Charles, Mabel and the rest of them had faded in importance. He still didn't understand the full extent and motivations of their foolish actions, but that didn't matter. From now on, his duty would be to provide for his wife and child. However, before that happened he would need sleep.

August 7
5:35 p.m.

Epilogue

“Rebecca, I am so sorry. I have been thinking...and well, I have realized that you would make a wonderful wife someday. Perhaps I could give you a job in my store...No...No...No....” Charles scratched his head, searching for inspiration.

Rebecca would only mock him if he tried those lines on her again. It was time to think of something better, something more romantic. What about poetry?

Yes, that might work. James wouldn't have been sophisticated enough to think of it. A little poetry could be just thing to win her back.

Charles smiled as confidence returned.

Rebecca would be surprised to see him again. Yes indeed, the idea to win her back was a good one. Charles was sure of it.

His week had started badly. He should never have gotten involved with his grandmother's insane quest for revenge. Jason and Candace had frightened him with their zeal for the truth. Thankfully, they had agreed to keep the miserable situation quiet.

Still, the damage had been done. He had destroyed the relationship with Jason. Not only that, the story would be sure to get around. Once it did, the business at his pharmacy would likely cease all together.

It was time to begin the long climb up from the pit he had dug for himself. After a long night of soul searching, Charles had realized that his arrogance was the problem. Arrogance, selfishness, and the corrosive effects of bitterness had short-circuited his reason.

He had never felt comfortable planning revenge with Francis. Recent events had served as a shock treatment, forcing him to face reality. It was time to start over.

Last night he had arrogantly boasted that Rebecca would be glad to see him. He hoped that she would, but Charles had realized that humility would be necessary if he was to succeed.

He would humbly apologize for his attitude and then hope for the best that was sure to come. Later on in the evening, he would present her with the chocolate cheesecake resting on the car seat beside him. Together they would enjoy the cake under a ceiling of starlight.

Charles felt lightheaded with anticipation. His foot pressed harder against the accelerator of his Mustang, speeding him forward to his destiny.

All he needed now was some poetry...Hmmm....

Wonderful dramatic and romantic classical music serenaded Charles as he pondered his problem.

James whistled a joyful country song. He was on his way to visit Rebecca. He was looking forward to surprising her. It was time to mend their relationship.

She had said she didn't want to see him anymore. Why? James didn't know. However, he was sure that he could win her back. He was only a pig farmer, but he knew Rebecca.

James glanced at the small, antique writing desk on the seat beside him. It was a rare and expensive model. Rebecca would love to add it to her collection.

What if she had gone back to Charles? What if that was the reason she didn't want to see him again?

The thoughts disturbed him. James stopped whistling. Then he laughed to himself. Once Rebecca heard about the pathetic scheme that Charles and Francis had been involved with, she would ditch him. The story was in all the coffee shops.

If Rebecca hadn't heard the story, James would be happy to tell it. Arrogant people like Charles needed to be put into their place.

The upbeat country song on the radio faded into a slow romantic ballad drenched in melancholy steel guitar. James began to whistle again, matching the notes of the ballad.

The thought had occurred to James that he should pop the big question sooner than later. Albert had left him and Mabel quite a substantial inheritance. What better time to get married?

All he needed now was a little more speed.

James pushed his foot down, forcing his old station wagon to lumber forward at a slightly increased rate.

Shakespeare! Yes, Rebecca had always enjoyed that. Perhaps he could take her to see Romeo and Juliet. Yes, a trip to Winnipeg to see live theatre would be just the thing.

Charles felt his eyebrows form furrows of worry as he guided his Mustang into the yard of his beloved. In the distance he could see a distinctive station wagon approaching.

A cottage built of solid red brick stood before him. Yellow daisies were planted all around the edge of it. Crimson roses grew in bunches throughout the wholesome green lawn. It was obvious that a gardener lived here.

Oh the joys of country life...Despite the impending arrival of James, Charles felt optimistic as he left his car.

Jason couldn't be right, could he? Charles knew he had hurt him. That must have been the reason for his harsh words.

Water spurted up from an oriental styled fountain in the middle of the yard. Black and yellow birds fluttered around a bird feeder hanging from a nearby tree. White contrails streamed from a silver jet flying through a clear blue sky.

A constant buzz heralded the fact that a lawnmower was operating somewhere nearby. Perhaps even in the backyard? Yes, that was where Rebecca would be.

Charles set his feet into motion.

A jet black station wagon roared into the driveway and then parked behind the red Mustang.

Charles sensed a change in atmosphere. Despite his better judgment, he turned. As he had feared, James was walking up behind him.

The two rivals glared at each other.

Charles was dressed in his typical four piece grey dress suit. He looked polished from the black shoes he wore to the brown hat that perched proudly on his head.

James wore a straw cowboy hat. Below his hat he wore a loose fitting red and white plaid shirt and blue jeans. However, the centerpiece of his outfit was a large silver buckle in the belt

holding up his pants.

“Well, hello there! Anything I can help you boys with?”

Brent Gunner walked around the corner of the cottage. He was well dressed in expensive blue jeans and a black dress shirt. His black hair was carefully combed and parted in the middle. Black rimmed glasses resting on his nose gave him a scholarly look. His ruggedly handsome aboriginal features were brilliantly enhanced by a wide toothy smile.

“What are you doin’ here?” James snapped, transferring his glare from Charles to the newcomer

Brent’s smile faded. “I’m just helping Rebecca with some yard work. She’s leaving soon and there is a lot to do before then. I can get her for you...She’s just mowing the backyard.”

Brent glanced from James to Charles, puzzled, but not very concerned. “You can also talk to me if you want. I don’t know if I can help you, but I’ll try.”

“Where did you come from?” James growled, his voice hardening with suspicion.

“From Moose Factory Ontario, you might have heard of it.” There was an awkward pause. Brent shrugged. “Apparently not. Anyway, I just came out last night. I used to live out here...I was a pastor...Brent Gunner is my name...Oh my goodness! You’ve never heard of me? No? Well, that’s good since I haven’t heard of you two either.” Brent chuckled, but he stopped as he realized his audience didn’t find the joke to be very funny. “Okay, well, Gladstone is a small town, but not that small apparently. Now why don’t you tell me what’s making you two so miserable? It’s not me is it?”

“Why are you here?” Charles already suspected the answer, the irony depressed him. His week had been terrible so far, why should he have expected it to change?

Brent smiled. “Rebecca was looking for a teaching position and I knew of one in Moose Factory, so I came down to tell her about it. I think she’ll make a wonderful teacher....”

“Do you really think so?” James sounded bitter.

Charles felt conflicted. He should never have expected his return to reason to be easy. Despite his best efforts, the pain grew with every word that fell from Brent’s lips.

“I know she will. She is quite brilliant really. A real people

person, she will get along quite well up north.” Brent paused as his eyes twinkled mischievously. “Wait a minute, one of you is Charles and one of you is James...correct?”

Charles and James nodded in turn. They both looked miserable, as if they knew their dreams were about to be destroyed. They weren’t disappointed.

“Yes, Rebecca has told me about you two. I’m guessing that’s why you are here, isn’t it? To ask her out or something....” Brent’s eyes roamed from Charles to James.

“Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. What a situation.” Brent rubbed his hands together as he stared at the ground. “The Lord obviously has a sense of humor to bring us all together like this. Oh my goodness. Ahh...I don’t know any easy way to tell you, but Rebecca is my fiancée.”

“You’re lyin’!” James was indignant. His mouth was stiff with anger as he stepped toward Brent. Obviously, James didn’t see the humor and irony of the situation.

Charles saw the irony, but he no longer felt inclined to smile about it. All that effort he had invested was for nothing. Jason had been right. How depressing.

“No, I’m not lying.” Brent’s voice was gentle. “Rebecca tried to let you down easy, but you wanted it the hard way. I know how disappointing it is...but the truth is that we have had a relationship for quite awhile now. It was a long distance relationship, so we both agreed to date around a bit. We just wanted to be sure about each other before we made a final decision. Ahem, you see...It’s this way...The more we explored other options...the more we realized that we were right for each other. We plan on getting married next spring. Which is why Rebecca will be accepting that teaching position in Moose Factory...That is why I’m here to help her move. Honestly, I think it would probably be best if you two would leave now.” Brent’s voice was polite and precise, but it left no doubt that he meant business.

James stepped forward, clenching and unclenching his medium sized fists.

Brent’s well-formed muscles bulged beneath his short-sleeved shirt. His voice was dead serious.

“Please don’t tempt me. I should turn the other cheek, but well...You should know that I was quite the fighter before I

became a preacher. I am sorry that we all had to meet like this. What are the chances eh?" Brent smiled briefly, inviting his opponents to find the humor in the situation.

James examined the powerful muscles of his adversary. After a moment of quiet contemplation, he returned to his station wagon. Tires spun gravel as he backed the car along the driveway and out onto the road.

Brent sighed as he watched the station wagon vanish into the distance. "You two never really knew Rebecca at all, did you?"

"Apparently not..." Charles said with regret plain his voice.

"She is a bit shy and complex, she doesn't open up that easily...And well, I'm happy to have her." Brent spoke precisely and with obvious affection.

Charles nodded as he scratched his eyebrow. "Yes, well, I guess I should leave." He walked back to his Mustang and grabbed the door handle.

"Oh, before you go! Could you tell me where Jason and Candace live? Do they still live around here? I used to know them, and I'd like to get back in touch with them."

Charles opened the car door. "Yes. They still live in town."

"Do you have their address?"

Charles hesitated; the pain was heavy in his soul. Why did Jason have to be right?

Charles attempted a smile, but failed.

"If you have nothing else to do, you can follow me. I was just going to see Jason. I need to apologize for some things I did. If you have a vehicle you can follow me there, it is not that far. I will not be staying long."

Brent looked surprised."Apologize? Well, I guess whatever happened is between you two. I'm just thankful that you have no hard feelings toward me. I've been looking forward to surprising Jason and Candace, and suppertime would be perfect time for it. We have quite a history together. I helped bring them together in fact! Oh my goodness...that was a few years ago now...Anyway, you just wait there and I'll go and get Rebecca. She'd probably like to come along."

Charles watched Brent disappear around the corner of the cottage. The situation was about to get very awkward. What could he do? He slid into his Mustang and waited.

He could be bitter and vow vengeance against Brent, but he had learned his lesson. Vengeance only made life more miserable and complicated.

As the seconds passed, Charles began to sweat. He hoped that he wouldn't make a fool of himself when he saw Rebecca with Brent. He needed ask her forgiveness and then let her go, but it wouldn't be easy.

His relationship with her had never been easy. The events of recent days had made him realize that she had never been his. If only he could take back the foolish actions of the past....

Rebecca would soon be gone, his pharmacy was doing miserably, and the vicious gossip about him and Francis would soon be in all the coffee shops. There was no incentive to stay in the area.

Chicago...Charles had always dreamed of it. Perhaps there would be opportunity there for a brilliant young pharmacist. He would look into it, but first he needed to join forces with Brent to surprise Jason and Candace. After that, he needed summon up the courage to apologize to James and Mabel.

Jason and Candace had shown the way.

It was time for a new beginning.

Tara's Return
(Bonus story 3)

“Wilbur Smith was murdered one Saturday afternoon. Judging by the mangled appearance of the body, it had been an extremely violent murder.”

“Wait. Wait!”

Candace paused, irritated at yet another interruption in her reading. “Well, what is it?” She said more sharply than she had intended.

Tara stared at up at short figure of Candace. Tara was flat on her back on the couch. Her eyes were wide and covered with a melancholy mist.

“You forgot the beginning,” she murmured.

“All right, I’m sorry.”

Candace turned back a few pages. Tara liked to have this book read from the copyright information to the author’s biography in the back. Why? Who knew.

Tara coughed, deep rasping breaths. She was dying with every breath. Her cotton candy pink blanket was a cocoon of death. The Doctors had given her a week to live.

Candace sighed to herself as the very first page stared back at her. Palliative care was a noble duty, but it had its moments of hopelessness.

Life was so fragile and futile.

Candace felt her mind drift toward the memories of an eventful August. A summer of secrets...gone forever. All there was to look forward to now was the impending chill of winter.

Click click, the hands of the Grandfather clock hanging over the couch signified the passage of the hour. It was time to read about murder and so make Tara's life a little more bearable.

Candace opened her mouth and began to read through the story summery on the inside flap. After that, she soldiered onward through the fine print of the publishing and copyright information.

Tara loved every part of this crime thriller. Candace had

read it through at least five times since she had been introduced to it in August.

Candace stopped reading, set the book on her lap, and then spoke.

“Why do you like this book so much?”

Tara’s eyelashes fluttered and then she smiled. “I’m surprised you haven’t asked that before. Well, I like it because....” Her body trembled under the assault of another cough. “Nothing personal, it’s just something that I don’t want to talk about. I suppose it shouldn’t matter anymore...but it does.”

“That’s fine. I won’t push you. I was just curious, that’s all.”

“Yes, I suppose it is strange, isn’t it? Most people wouldn’t want to have the same story read to them five times in a row....”

Tara’s mouth twisted into a painful grimace, as if she saw the cloaked figure of death beside her bed.

“I’ll tell you next week. Now be a dear and please answer the door.” Tara’s skinny arm appeared from beneath the blanket, her index finger pointed.

Candace followed the finger toward the left. She had been so engrossed in her conversation that she had missed the knocking. It was obvious now that she was paying attention.

Her denim skirt swished against her legs as she walked.

A chilly blast of autumn wind burst into the apartment as Candace opened the door.

“Come in, quickly please!” Candace stepped back as a man stepped forward. “Now if you’ll please close the door. Tara can’t handle weather like this.”

Candace shivered as the cold tentacles of wind worked their way through her thin blue blouse. Then the door was closed and the wind stopped.

A tall and slim man with gaunt, pale features stood before her. His thin red lips stretched into a smile as he slithered from his long black overcoat. “Yes. I do know my own Mother. Thank you for your concern. You can leave.”

Candace turned to her client.

The man stepped forward and surveyed the tiny, sparsely furnished apartment. He tossed his coat to the floor, and then rubbed his hands together as if to warm himself.

“Yes, I know that your hour isn’t up. Don’t let that stop you

from leaving. I have some things I need to discuss, privately.”

“Bryan! You be quiet! This girl has been here far more than you have. What is your record? Once? Twice a year? You can afford to wait while she finishes her hour. It’s not that long. Go sit in the bedroom or something.” The anger left Tara’s face as she turned to Candace. “All right dear, you can continue your reading now.”

Bryan’s grey eyes looked lifeless. He stared at Candace for a moment and then shifted his gaze to the book that she held in her hand. He ran a thin hand over his black suit, carefully smoothing any creases.

“I was here in August. Remember?” Bryan stared at his mother for a moment, and then he shifted his gaze to Candace.

“Now, you listen. I said you can go. I’ll keep mother company for tonight. A little family togetherness is just what the Doctor ordered. I’d like to think so anyway.” His smile felt like the sun shining on a gravestone.

His voice took on a false tingle of heartiness. “Listen, I do appreciate what you do for Tara in these trying times. Volunteer work can be stressful, so why not take a little time to enjoy yourself with your own family. Please don’t worry about us!”

Candace was confused; she glanced at Tara for further instructions. Tara looked beaten, she seemed about to speak, but she remained silent. She leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

Click, click...The clock signaled the fading of seconds.

Bryan looked at his expensive gold watch. His face was darkening with the clouds of ill-concealed rage.

Tara waved a limp hand. “Listen to him....” Her voice sounded as if she meant the opposite. “I’ll be okay, but you better leave for the sake of family peace.”

“Alright, if you’re sure...I’ll see you next week at the same time. You take care of yourself, okay.”

“I will. Now go and have a wonderful time with your husband. I’m sure he would appreciate it.”

Candace walked to the closet beside the door. She reached inside and then removed her coat from a hanger. She could feel Bryan’s eyes burning a hole in her back as she left the room.

Now she knew who had supplied Tara with cigarettes. A

pocket in Bryan's jacket had bulged with the distinctive shape of a cigarette carton.

Her footsteps clacked against the linoleum floor that lined the hallway. Her eyes hesitated as they rested on the entrance to Francis's apartment.

Candace moved on without hesitation. Francis was the past. According to Harvey, she was more miserable than ever. If it got any worse, she would need to be forcibly confined. Just as her husband Albert had been.

Poor Harvey...He had never realized that Albert's body had been spirited away that summer night, or the complications that had arisen from it. Not that it mattered anymore.

The door to the great outdoors opened easily, allowing Candace to escape, and then closing behind her.

Gravel crunched underfoot as Candace walked toward her small blue car. As she walked, she glanced at the book in her hand. "*The Murder of Lovers*," declared the blood red letters on the cover.

Why had Tara's taste in stories changed? The question still bothered Candace. All the other books Tara had asked her to read were heartwarming tales of pioneer women finding love and life on the prairie.

Candace pulled keys from the large black purse she carried around her shoulders. Her fingers unlocked the door of her small blue car.

The book had been expensively printed in hardcover. Len Ormond was the credited author. According to a splashy blurb at the top right of the cover, the book had sold over a million copies.

Candace sighed as she tossed the book onto the passenger seat. It was the fifth time she had begun to read it and she would continue to read it. It was her duty, not her desire.

She started her car and then shifted into gear.

The day had already begun its descent into night. Orange and pink splashed over the distant horizon in vivid hues. Away from the color, a few stars had already made an appearance.

Depression distracted her from the sky above. Her weekly palliative care visits had begun to drag her down, even as they encouraged Tara in her final days.

Candace felt guilty. She should be happy. Jason was good

to her, a baby was on the way, and her band was on the verge of a major record deal. What more could a woman ask for?

An answer to the mystery of Tara and her sudden attraction to a book of bloody murder would be one thing.

Candace reached over the car stereo and flipped it to the on position. Her head was too busy; she needed a happy song to lift her spirits.

"How have you been?"

"Fine." Jason muttered. He turned his head and fixed his eyes firmly upon the row of double chocolate donuts resting behind the glass. "I'd be even better if you got me a dozen of those chocolate donuts."

"Sure, I'd love to do that. I'm having a good day today. I passed my math test, and then I got invited to go shopping on the weekend." The young teenage waitress plucked out a dozen of the chocolate nuggets and then smiled.

Jason did his best to appear interested and alert.

All he saw was a smile revealed a mouth of crooked teeth straightened by silver braces. Jason glanced at the floor.

"Will there anything else?"

Jason forced his gaze back to the face of his biggest fan.

Spotches of red acne were scattered upon the face of the young, mischievous cherub. Strands of dark hair hung on either side of her face. Her innocent green eyes were staring into his.

She blushed.

"The total will be...be...be...."

Jason felt guilt creep over him. Perhaps he shouldn't have returned to this coffee shop. He was making the poor girl nervous.

"Here," Jason handed over the appropriate amount. "That should cover it. There's a bit extra for you."

"Oh thank you. You know Jason. I was wondering if I had offended you."

Jason's laughed. "You offended me? Why would you think something silly like that?"

"You haven't been in here since August, I think there were those two silly ladies arguing that day...And there was that

episode with the radio and Christmas music. You had to speak to my boss about it. Remember?"

Jason took the box of donuts that had been offered to him. For a moment, he could feel the girl's warm sweaty hand, and then he broke free from her grasp.

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't offended. I haven't been in, because...." Jason paused. "Well, let's just say that things have been busy. But I don't want to keep you from your work, so I better move on. I just needed some of your famous chocolate donuts. It's been too long between bites!"

"They are lovely aren't they. Well, enjoy."

"Thanks." Jason felt crazy as he left the bakery. He enjoyed the donuts, but he didn't need the idle chitchat with Vanessa, the waitress.

He had thought her infatuation would have died long ago, sadly, it seemed as strong as it had always been. He should have never intervened with her boss. That's what had started the whole process. Now he could be forced to give up his chocolate donuts if things didn't change.

What to do?

Candace sat in the living room. Her eyes were fixed upon a glowing computer monitor. Her fingers tapped rapidly on the keyboard. Her mouth exhaled slowly as she waited for results of her search.

What could she find out about Len Ormond?

A list of websites appeared. The top results were typical fan sites, blog posts, and promotional bumpf. Her fingers shifted the mouse pointer over the appropriate button, and then she pushed it. More results appeared. Near the bottom of the list, she came across a line of news articles.

One article claimed to have discovered that Len Ormond was a pseudonym and the other had dug up the tidbit that Len or whatever his real name was, had been arrested for plagiarism and then sent to prison.

Why prison? Candace leaned closer to the screen, searching for an answer in the confusion of text.

The writer of the article seemed surprised at the harsh sentence. The evidence had been weak at best, yet Len had been sentenced to a heavy fine and a jail term. Most cases of plagiarism simply resulted in fines or lawsuits, why had prison been prescribed in this instance?

Candace knew that she should be studying something useful. Her nursing course should be the priority, but there always seemed to be more interesting things to do than ponder theories.

Not to mention the situation facing their band. A few months ago, in August, their manager had received an offer from a major label. The question now was...were they willing to sacrifice over two hundred days a year for touring?

Since Candace was about to be a mother, she was reluctant to make the commitment. Other band members sympathized, but were obviously attracted by the opportunity for success.

The deal had been offered on that one condition. They must play a minimum of two hundred shows a year, or nothing. Given the ever-declining record sales hitting the industry, the deal made sense. However, the question remained, was it worth sacrificing her family for success?

Candace felt numb as her fingers tapped the keyboard.

"What's wrong?" Jason had entered the house in that quiet catlike way of his. He leaned over her shoulder and planted a soft kiss on her cheek.

Candace swiveled her office chair to face her husband.

He wore blue jeans, a casual white t-shirt, and a smile.

"What can I say? It was a long day."

Jason walked to the couch and then flopped down into it. He leaned back into its leather embrace.

"A long day? Well, I'm listening. In fact, I will do more than listen. I, the incredible Jason, will attempt to solve your problem. As always, the first problem solved is free."

Candace laughed. "Are you sure?"

"What can I say, that's why you married me. Isn't it?"

"I don't know. I thought I married you because your buddy Brent cooked up some wild scheme to bring us together. The amazing thing is that it worked. You're one lucky guy."

"I know. That's the reason I'm going to accept the job as

best man at Brent and Rebecca's wedding. Brent did a lot for me, the least I can do is stand up for him on his big day."

"Yes, you keep mentioning that. You haven't come down since they surprised us. I wish I could say the same."

"You aren't happy for Brent and Rebecca?"

"Of course I am. It's just, well, I have other things on my mind. Should I sign or should I not? Tara is another thing, she gets worse every week...it's just too much sometimes."

Candace ran her fingers through her long strands of gold.

Jason turned serious. "I understand. I shouldn't have been so glib about it. It's just that I hadn't heard from Brent for months and then he shows up with a fiancée! It's amazing, exciting...Well, what can I say that you haven't heard already? Why don't you tell me about your day."

Candace swiveled. Her fingers typed rapidly, sending the computer into standby mode. Even as she worked, she talked.

The tragic story of Tara unfolded without visible emotion. Some tears fell as Candace revealed the depression that had come to haunt her as Tara wasted away.

A slight smile returned to her face as the mystery of the book was presented.

"It seems ridiculous to be so focused on something like that while she's dying, but I can't help it. I love a mystery. It distracts me from the pain of reality. The question now is...why was Len Ormond thrown into prison for plagiarism? Normally, that kind of thing wouldn't merit jail time."

"Len Ormond? You're looking for Len Ormond? Allow me."

Jason leaned over the edge of the couch, searching through the magazine rack with his fingers. Eventually he found the paper he was looking for and then began flipping through its pages. After a moment, he stood and then carried the paper to his wife.

"There you go. Plagiarism and other charges...There was more than one charge apparently. I remember thinking that his lawyer must have been pathetic. None of the charges had much evidence, but a jury convicted Len of every one of them. Here, read the article yourself. I remembered reading it awhile ago...Check it out."

"I suppose that is why it's good to read the local paper. If I

had, I would've known."

"The internet isn't always the best source for news."

"Apparently not...." She mused as she began to read.

Jason rambled into the kitchen and opened the faucet. He was obviously about to tackle the stack of dishes in the sink. The sound of water running and splashing collided with the ticking of a clock.

The sound of water ceased.

Soft classical music began to play from a radio in the kitchen. Occasionally, Jason would whistle to some of the more melodic parts.

"There I'm finished."

"Did you learn anything?" Jason called from his position before the sink. Dishes passed through his hands and into the tray beside him.

Candace left the computer in the clutches of the morphing pink triangles bent on saving its screen.

"Well, I learned that there were more charges than plagiarism. I suppose that is why they opted for a prison sentence. Otherwise, there isn't anything unusual. Now I'm even more puzzled about the connection between Tara and Len. I think I'll try to corner Bryan if he shows up next week."

Candace pulled a dishcloth from a drawer in the wooden cupboard. She pushed the door shut with her knee.

"I'd guess the obvious. Tara is Len. She wrote the book and now she wants to relive her success as she's dying."

Candace picked up a plate and began to dry it.

"I'd agree with you, but the paper says that Len is in prison. Tara isn't in prison."

Jason placed another wet plate into the tray.

"You have a point. I guess there is also a mystery there. Now how is Candace the great going to solve this one?"

"Her son Bryan should know. He's a hard character though. I don't know if I could get an answer from him. Maybe he doesn't even know. Maybe Tara went to school with Len and she's been infatuated ever since. Maybe she just likes that kind of story, and I never knew it. I need something lighter to think about. That whole situation is depressing."

"Maybe I should tell you my problem."

"Is it an older woman?"

Jason chuckled. "A younger one actually." Candace looked surprised, and then began to smile as her husband continued.

Jason outlined the actions of his number one fan. He told of how he had intervened to allow Christmas music to be played in the coffee shop, after that, he related the heartwarming results of his heroism.

Candace giggled. "Oh my. Poor Jason, now you're going to have to miss out on your chocolate donuts because of a silly schoolgirl. What shall we do?"

"I don't know. I hoped you might have an answer."

"We seem to get involved with the strangest people...and events. However, I think you're going to be on your own this time. Don't worry about it. She'll forget about you in a few weeks."

"That was more than a few weeks ago."

"Oh, okay. Hmm...Well, then I don't know what else I can say. Just ignore it. She will move on. I used to be just like her when I was that age. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried." Jason's mouth twisted into a crooked half smile. "What am I? Vaguely amused? Yes, that would be more an accurate term. I just don't want to encourage her."

"Well, then keep going back for your donuts. She'll soon realize that you're a miserable old man."

Jason burst out laughing. "So the truth comes out! I didn't think I was that bad most days! Now I know what you really think."

Candace's laughter began to duet with Jason's. "Well, that is an entertaining story anyway. You cheered me up. Now, I have another problem for you to ponder."

"Oh what is that?"

"Well, you know this one already. Should I stick with the band if they sign on to do two hundred shows a year? The deadline is almost here."

Jason put another stack of dishes into the sink. "I don't know. Personally, I'd like to have you close to me. I know it's selfish, but I'm being honest about it. I know you've put a lot of work into the band and you deserve to reap some of the rewards. Which direction are you leaning?"

"If it wasn't for the fact that I'm pregnant, I would sign. You could travel with us. We'll need a touring bassist anyway."

Still, I can't have our child growing up without parents. Life on the road wouldn't be the best...."

"When do you need to know?"

"Next week."

"Whew! That is close. Who knew you would have another big decision so soon. You didn't leave Kathy that long ago. Well, maybe...maybe..." Jason sighed. "Maybe I just don't know what to say. It's a big commitment."

"I guess we'll have to pray some more."

"I suppose so, and then we'll see what next week brings."

"Oh, it's you Candace! I was so looking forward to this day!"

Candace was hesitant as she entered Tara's small, sparsely furnished apartment.

"I was looking forward to you reading some more of that book. I hope you remembered to bring it back." Candace held up the book for Tara to see. "Yes, I did remember! How was your visit with Bryan last week?"

Candace walked through the small kitchen and into the carpeted living room.

Tara held her forehead as she fell back on the couch.

"Bryan is always so impulsive. I would have preferred to have you stay but sometimes a woman has to sacrifice for the sake of family peace. Bryan started out as a child you know, always hiding and playing spies. He still hasn't grown out of it...It gets annoying sometimes. Well what can I say? I won't be here much longer, and he is concerned. He's started coming by everyday. What else could a mother expect from her son?"

"What does he do for work?"

Tara waved her hand as a cough racked her thin body. "I don't know. He won't tell me. Like I said, he always was a strange one. I think he works with the government, but I don't really know what he does for them. He never told me."

The discussion progressed along this track for a while and then the focus returned to the book. As requested, Candace opened it to the appropriate page and then began to read from where she had left off the week before.

Despite her personal feelings, Candace grew intrigued by the extremely violent, but well written story unfolding before her eyes and through her mouth. No matter how many times she read it, the mystery still grabbed her and pulled her in. Her voice picked up speed as she flipped through the pages.

Eventually the clock signaled an end to the reading.

Candace closed the book firmly as she stood from her seat beside the couch.

"My time is up, so I suppose I'll have to leave. I don't want to get on Bryan's nerves, do I?"

A smile graced the pale, sickly face of Tara. "Don't you worry about Bryan. Sure, he's all matted fur and growls on the outside, but inside he's just full of fluff and stuffing. You just let me handle him. I told him a few things last week already...."

"Okay, I will remember that! But, unfortunately, I still have to move on. Time doesn't wait..." Candace knelt to embrace the older woman. "I hope you stay well."

"You stay well yourself. You have your big test tomorrow. don't you?"

Candace stood, withdrawing from the embrace.

"Yes, it is a fairly big test."

"I thought so. The work of a nurse is important." Tara winked. "I think young women need to follow their dreams. Don't let anything, including an old woman, get in your way. You need to get home and study."

A vision of the impending contract deadline flashed through Candace's head. For the sake of friendship, the band had decided to decline the contract if Candace gave the word

Candace's smile was tentative at best. "I'll try my best. You take of yourself now. Don't forget to take your pills; the homecare nurse won't like it if you forget again." Candace paused. "You forgot something, didn't you?"

"Me? Forget?" Tara looked shocked.

"Yes. Didn't you say that you would tell me why you liked the book?"

"I did, didn't I?" Tara turned her head toward the back of the couch. A bitter chill seemed to have settled over her face. "I just don't want to talk about it. There is just...just...too much history. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course, I didn't want to push you. I'm just curious, that is all. Sometimes my curiosity gets the best of me." Candace's voice was soft and polite, but the message didn't seem to be getting through. Tara was ignoring her.

Candace stared down at the book in her hand. Pondering the same question as she had the week before.

Why did the book fascinate Tara so much?

The slim figure of Tara trembled as another round of coughing possessed it. Soon her time on earth would be complete. Perhaps the secret would die with her; perhaps it would be better if it did.

"Go on now...you need to follow your dream." Tara said finally with a voice that wavered with exhaustion. "There's nothing for you here."

"Okay then, good bye." Candace's caught sight of a red cigarette carton peeking out from the edge of Tara's pillow. She opened her mouth to speak, but then thought better of it. The cigarettes had done their work, what could be gained by confiscating them now?

Candace walked from the apartment.

The gentle hum a passing car greeted her. After that there was only the steady chirp of crickets to pollute the chilly autumn night.

Candace breathed in and then exhaled a cloud of vapor. Winter was only weeks away. She shivered. So many problems remained to be solved. What to do?

The manager needed to know tonight.

Footsteps crunched through the gravel.

Someone was behind her, following her... Candace picked up her pace. Her car wasn't far now, she should make it.

A thin white hand grabbed her shoulder. She spun to face Bryan as a jolt of fear charged through her body.

Jason stood outside the coffee shop. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his blue jeans. A blue hooded sweater was pulled over the upper half of his body.

He took a breath and stepped into the warm, tantalizing

smell of fresh baked bread. It was almost closing time and the coffee shop was nearly empty.

At the other end of the room, he could see Vanessa busily removing loaves of day old bread from the glass case. Luckily, there were still some chocolate donuts available.

Jason charged forward, intent on his prize.

As he neared the glass case, he noticed James standing off to the side of the room.

James wore black cowboy boots, blue jeans, a clean blue shirt, and a new cowboy hat above it all. His eyes were fixed upon Vanessa as she worked.

Jason was startled. James? Well, he was only twenty-one, the age difference between him and Vanessa wouldn't be too extreme. Whatever. Jason didn't care.

Vanessa turned toward him, completely businesslike.

"What can I do for you?" Her voice was flat, and her eyes kept flicking toward James.

"I'll have the usual." Jason said, smiling at her.

Vanessa ignored him as she reached for the necessary number of donuts to fill the order. Candace had been right again.

Jason made a mental note to tell his wife the good news.

Bryan seemed dejected, his eyes were listless, and his hands drooped into the pockets of his long black trench coat. His eyes of grey pierced Candace's soul.

"Mother hasn't got long has she?" He said softly in a cultured voice.

"No, I suppose not." Candace said vaguely. She wasn't supposed to discuss patient health. Not even with family. Her job as a palliative care volunteer was only to comfort clients during their final days on Earth.

Bryan's thin red lips moved with precision. "Don't bother with that professional vagueness. I've seen death before. I know it won't be long. That's why I've come home. Mother hated it that I kicked you out last week, so I decided avoid your appointment this time. I know my mother loves to have you read to her." Bryan lowered his head. "That is why I'm here. You asked about that

book. Yes, that one in your hand. Mother gave you a brush off a few minutes ago, didn't she? I thought so. She figured she would, so she told me to wait for you here. I was supposed to apologize and tell you the truth. Mother doesn't have the courage to tell you herself, but she promised to tell you, so she sent me. I don't think it's necessary to discuss family business with you, or anyone else. Therefore, the next time you see Tara, I don't want you to mention the fact that I didn't tell you anything. Is that clear?"

Some of the words slid so softly from his lips that Candace had to strain to hear them. Her eyes didn't miss the almost constant movement of Bryan's eyes.

"What if she asks me?"

The toe of Bryan's black dress shoe kicked at the gravel. He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat.

"She won't ask. The less she talks about it, the more she likes it. You should be the same. If she does ask, lie."

Candace stared at the figure in black before her. His face was hard, his frame was obviously athletic, and his attitude was one of someone used to being obeyed.

Naturally, the fuel of her rebellious streak combined with the flame of her curiosity and exploded.

She clenched the book tighter in his hand as she spoke.

"You're talking to the wrong person if you think I'm going to lie. Now, you either tell me, or I will walk back to the apartment and get the story from the source."

Candace glared at her adversary.

Why was she so obsessed about a simple book? The answer was simple. There was a mystery, and where there was a mystery, Candace needed a solution. There was simply no other option.

Bryan's surprised laughter startled her. "Oh my, you are a determined little firecracker aren't you?"

"I'll thank you not to call me little." Candace's frustration was boiling out. There was no turning back. The metaphorical cliff was behind her. Now there was only a long fall beneath her feet.

Bryan looked bemused. He stuck his pinky finger into his left ear and wiggled it for a moment. As he removed his finger, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I generally don't meet people...like you. But,

then you've never met me before, have you? You don't know me..." Bryan seemed to find this amusing.

Candace shivered as a gust of wind wafted over her bare arms. She should have worn a sweater along with her blue jeans. A red tank top wasn't nearly enough for weather like this.

"No, I can't say that I've met you before. Now, will you tell me? You might as well; I've already suspected the truth. It won't make much difference if you don't want to tell me."

"Oh. Is that so?" Bryan chuckled. His arms were crossed across his chest. "Is that so...." He repeated.

Candace began to head back the way she came. Tara's apartment wasn't that far away.

Bryan stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"You are brave, aren't you? You realize that this parking lot is deserted. You realize that I have a gun in my pocket." Bryan pulled a large handgun from a pocket in his trench coat.

He twirled the gun a few times and then shoved it back into this pocket. "Don't worry. If I wanted to kill you, I could've done it long ago. Long ago...." Bryan's eyes looked into a distance only known to him. When he spoke again, his voice was strangely subdued. "Now, do you really want to know the truth?"

"Of course...."

"That book in your hand was the first and last book Tara ever published. She was so excited when it was released. She raised her hopes far too high. Not that it wasn't a best seller, it was! It sold well. However, most critics hated it, and Mother didn't take the negative reviews very well...and well...." Bryan's voice struggled and then strengthened.

"Eventually some agent that had at first rejected Tara's book, claimed that he had in fact written it. He had the early draft Tara sent in to prove it. Since he had more money, he could hire better lawyers, and because he hired better lawyers, he won his case. You'd think if he really was the writer, he'd be churning out more best sellers. The truth is, the writing world hasn't heard from him since. Meanwhile, my grandmother has lost all her royalties and snagged a jail term. She will never be able to sell a manuscript again. She should have copyrighted the thing before she sent it out. Who knew some jerk would keep her manuscript out of the thousands he gets in a year. Well, it's too late now...but

when I catch that agent....” His eyes gleamed with fire as they stared into the gathering night.

“At least they let her out of prison on compassionate leave. She can die in peace...it isn’t much, but it’s more than some people in this world get.” Bryan kicked the gravel violently, sending stones scattering in all directions.

“Now you know the mystery, happy? I’m sure you can guess why my mother would rather not discuss the book. Why she wants you to read it to her. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to her.”

Bryan was about to leave, but then he halted.

“Remember, you don’t need to spread this around. Tara has been humiliated enough....”

“Don’t worry, that is covered under official policy of the Palliative care program. Privacy is assured.”

Bryan stared at Candace and smiled.” You know what. I believe you. You’re lucky, brave, and maybe a little crazy. You’ll never know what you just did.” Bryan’s face returned to the look of strange bemusement that so puzzled Candace.

After a moment, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his trench coat and then began to walk briskly toward his mother’s apartment.

Candace stood alone in the cold. There was a brief flash of light as Bryan opened the door and entered Tara’s home.

Candace stared up at the thin sliver of the moon. Fast-moving clouds cast shadows upon it in steady motion.

Who would’ve guessed Tara’s secret?

And Bryan, what of Bryan? What was his real reason for telling everything? He had never been that talkative in the past, but perhaps what Tara said was true.

Maybe Bryan was full of fluff and stuffing. Even if he was, Candace wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley.

Candace’s head was weary as she opened a car door and then slid into the chilly interior. She closed the door, and then reached into the back seat for her blue and white sweater.

She had a test to study for and needed to get home.

The sweater slid over the top of her head and down her body. Heat began to be trapped against her flesh, warming her.

What to tell the band and their manager?

Candace felt a kick in her growing belly.

"I hope you understand." Candace whispered, even as the course began to clear before her.

She couldn't say no. Tara hadn't been broken by life. Even her own bitter experience hadn't stopped her from encouraging Candace to follow her dream. Candace would sign the record contract for her sake.

Jason would help her raise their child, wouldn't he?

Candace would ask him, and when he agreed, the decision would be final. Somehow, everything would work out.

God had opened a door that she had been knocking on for years. It was time to seize the day and rock the world.

Candace turned a key in the ignition.

Charles Meets His Match
(Bonus story 4)

Sweat dribbles from the air. The sun hangs overhead like an unwelcome light bulb scorching the dry earth. Residents are driven undercover by its muggy oppression.

Flies hovering over horse droppings on the road provide a faint buzzing noise to mock the stillness.

In the distance, through the heat shimmering in waves from the ground, a horse and buggy can be seen headed home.

Almost at the edge of the town, in the middle of William's park, is a flower garden. Once it was a concrete fountain, now it is filled with dirt and colorful flowers. On the south of it, there is a wooden bench designed to rest the bottoms of weary walkers.

Two of whom have just arrived.

Isaac Peters is a husky man with gray hair streaked in black, a straw hat perched defiantly on his head, and grey overalls streaked dark with moisture. Sam Dreidger is a rail thin man with a mop of hair bleached white. His rugged face shows all the signs of having needed a shave for the past few days. Otherwise, he is relatively clean and dressed in plain brown pants and a red wool shirt. As they sit comfortably on the bench, Isaac turns to Sam and smirks.

"So how 'bout we nail Charles today? He's always goin' through here on his way to work. I think he'll be an easy pushover again."

Sammy shifts in his seat. "All right, the Charles it is. Remember that pail of clear glue we sold him? I told him that it was chalkboard water. Yeah! Heh heh. Yeah I said it would sell great in that little pharmacy of his. I don't know if he ever tried it, but we sure enough suckered twenty-five dollars out of him. Anyway those are past glories, we don't need to dwell on those. You want to try the same bet as the last time?"

Isaac nods.

Sammy continues. "Yeah, we're on. Heh heh. Best one liner or scam to get a reaction takes the pot as always. Now, we

wait. By the way, how is your old grey mare coming?"

"That grey? Oh I sold her to them Mennonite types who live around my place. They're always lookin' for good horses."

Sammy throws a twenty-dollar bill into the space between them. The bill is promptly matched by one from Isaac.

A raven haired fifteen year old girl enters the scene and then kneels beside the circle of flowers. She is dressed all in black. Her fingers nimbly pluck weeds from the dirt as she ignores the banter around her.

"Yeah, they are the types who still like doing things the old way...I see them driving around town with their buggies. It sure brings back memories...Yeah. Heh heh. Maybe I should sell them a few of mine. The wife thinks we got too many horses around the place. She says they eat like pigs, and worst of all, we get nothing for it. Maybe after I win your twenty I can buy her a little something to make her happy."

Isaac spit contemptuously at the ground. "Pigs? How can a horse eat like a pig? Tell me that?"

"Who can hope to understand the ways of a woman?"

Isaac stares at his friend for a moment, then sighs as if resigned to his fate. "Who indeed?"

The two men meditate on this for a moment.

In the distance the tall thin form of Charles can be seen approaching rapidly.

"What do you think little girl? Is it possible for us men to understand your mysterious ways?" Sam smiles as the girl looks up at him with a murderous glare.

"I'm not a little girl!"

Sam chuckles. "Sorry about that. Yeah, I wasn't thinking again. What is your name?"

"Janice."

"A fine name. I have a granddaughter named Janice. She isn't as pretty as you though." Sam chuckles in a grandfatherly fashion and then winks. "Don't tell her I said that."

Janice looks flustered. She quietly turns back to her work.

Isaac sighs. "Now Sammy, you've gone and made her mad. There you see the problem of man. Communication! We simply don't understand women. Even small girls are beyond our reach. I've learned that a man's work is in out in the fields..."

speakin' of which, how' the son in law's barley coming along?"

"Good enough, I guess. Considering all the rain.

Remember that time I sunk my tractor up to the axle trying to get out to that field? You had to come and pull me out."

"Those were the days. Now we've been reduced to ponderin' flowers in the park. Sometimes life just sucks, don't it? We're like a bunch of old women."

"I don't know what you're thinking, but last I checked, I wasn't a woman. Isaac, is that sun getting to your head? Turn this way for a bit; let me see your eyes. Yeah, they are getting a bit wild, you better watch yourself. They say that sun can be a killer."

"They say everythin' is a killer these days...."

The moments idle away peacefully, serenaded by constant banter and bolonga. The girl in black continues to work, occasionally glancing up as a jibe is thrown her way.

Isaac is the first to notice as Charles walks by. He raises his voice accordingly. "Speakin' of beasts and women, check 'em out all slicked up, going courtin' I bet...I pity her father, I really do."

Sam shakes his head sadly. "Yeah. I heard they're engaged now. It's terrible to see the way young people act these days. "

Isaac cackles loudly and slaps his knee. "Really? Who woulda have thought it'd come to an engagement? Look at 'em, all educated at the university and come out to sell us poor folks drugs to take our minds off our miseries. He'll make a fine husband for someone someday...Too bad that day is so far off."

Charles pauses and clears his throat as he turns to face his tormentors. "Hello gentlemen." He mutters politely, doffing his cap.

"Good day to you!" The two cheerful looking, alleged gentlemen reply.

Charles looks suddenly unsure of himself. "So how is farming these days?" He mutters tentatively, staring at the ground as if looking for an escape.

Isaac balls his hand into a fist and punches Sam playfully as he replies. "Oh it's terrible, now we're tryin' to make out, but the wife says it will only be a few more days till we run out of food, then what? Not only that, the horses are eatin' like pigs, and the

pigs like horses, everythin' has gone to the dogs in a hand basket and nobody knows what's what anymore!"

The pharmacist is puzzled. "Horses like pigs, pigs like horses?" He mutters mostly to himself, searching the ground even more intently.

All Charles can see are the black ants crawling in the dirt around his dress shoes. Every one of them looks friendlier than his adversaries.

Sam guffaws. "Never mind Isaac, things are fine. Never been better in fact. Heh heh."

Charles scratches his head, looks at the morning sun and softly utters the words that he hopes will be his escape. "I suppose that is good to hear, good to hear indeed. Now it has been pleasant but I really must get to work."

Isaac plucks at his moustache. "Goin' somewhere special tonight?"

"Well you know that I have been engaged recently."

Isaac nods like a guru about to grant a morsel of wisdom to a supplicant. "You're sure lucky that you didn't head off to Chicago like you wanted to. Marriage ain't made for cities. There no one cares for no one else. And men need all the help they can get if they're married. Here in the country, my neighbors get stuck, and guess who's there? Not the wife, that's for certain."

The two farmers chuckle over some incident locked in the convoluted maze of their memories.

Janice completes her weeding, stands, stretches, and then walks toward the pool to the west. Disgust is evident on her youthful face.

Isaac stares intently at the Pharmacist and stops laughing, his face wrinkles and becomes very serious." So it is then, first it's a clear blue sky and now it's lookin' like rain...."

Charles fidgets. "Well I really should go, I...."

"Just a minute boy...You spent all that time in Liberal university, you would consider yourself an educated man, wouldn't ya?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

Isaac's face crinkles into an expression of worry. "Well you heard me mention it before, you probably thought I was pullin' one over on ya, but it's serious I tell you. Real serious. Can you

help me?"

"Well, I am not really a farmer...."

Sam looks at Isaac with concern as he hurries onward, his voice quavering. "It's like I said, the horses eatin' like pigs, the pigs like horses...It's so messy that I don't know what to do anymore. You wouldn't have learned anything about that would ya? I mean, like any drugs that I could use to get things back to normal? I hate to bother ya, but it's been drivin' me crazy...."

Charles assumes his patent pending look of utter bewilderment. "No, I do not know of anything. That behavior is a bit puzzling. You say that the animals have started acting like each other? Very odd...."

Sam nods as if giving assent to a nuclear strike against China. "Yeah. It's a very serious business. Very serious..." His head stops bobbing.

Charles looks puzzled. He searches through the pockets of his grey suit, and then shrugs. "I do not have my drug guide on me so I cannot help you, but I can send the Vet over to your place if you want."

Isaac waves his hand carelessly. "Oh no, I wouldn't want to put ya to any trouble."

"No trouble. I would be interested in learning the reason for this odd behavior myself. I will call up the vet as soon as I get into the pharmacy."

Janice can be seen in the distance. She is unraveling a green hose behind her as she approaches.

Sam smiles, putting all his grandfatherly charm into the effort. "There's no need for you to get involved. I was an engaged man once myself you know. I know how it is, you just go on and we'll manage somehow. You need to enjoy any happiness that you can before the misery of marriage begins. You've got yourself a red haired Irish woman I hear...You know what they say about that kind of combination. Heh heh."

Charles is extremely impatient and insists not only on sending the vet over, but also on paying for the ensuing bill. He ends off his speech by wishing Sam and Isaac sunny rain free days for harvest. As a final, over the top flourish, he declares how his love for his fiancée will override all possible marital obstacles.

Isaac smiles and extends his hand. "Well thanks for

sendin' that Vet over and payin' for it. In these difficult times, every little bit helps. Good luck courtin' your woman. I hear that she may be a bit red haired, but she's a good country girl at heart. She's gettin' a good man. Now now, don't protest. I mean that from the bottom of where my heart used to be."

"Do not mention it, now if you will allow me...I need to get to my store. I need to be open for business. You understand. "

Sam sees the round going to his friend and raises his hand. "Hold on a minute!" He shouts as he sees opportunity slipping away.

"What now?" Charles looks more than a little annoyed.

Sam sighs. "Aren't you worried about that nasty weather? Walking to work through pouring rain can't be healthy. The sky is pretty dark already and it's getting more so all the time. Don't you think you should head back and get your car?"

The pharmacist bites his lip. "I will be okay. That storm is not moving that fast."

Sam wrings his hands. The picture of compassion, love and all that is right in the world. "Yeah it seems calm now. It's just, well if you keep this up you don't know what might happen...to your marriage."

Charles shrugs and toys with the brown hat perched on his blonde head. "I do not really know what you are getting at, but...."

Isaac gestures broadly. "Well, I dunno know how to say this...But the Mennonite legends say that rain can affect a man if he let's it get to 'em. They Mennonites say it affects a man's marriage if you know what I mean. "

Sam leans forward and speaks with warning in his voice.

"Just remember one thing when rains come in these parts, it could be next year before we get a little sun."

Isaac pauses for a moment then barges forward. "Or daughter!" He bellows with triumph.

Charles attempts a reply, stammers to a halt, then finally recovers himself enough to speak coherently. "Good day gentlemen, I really must be going."

Charles strides away as quickly as possible. His life had taken a turn for the better in the years since the run in with James and Mabel. The bitter past was behind. Even two crazy old men couldn't ruin his mood of optimism. His pace increases as his

mood brightens.

Janice kneels in the dirt again. Her hands shove a sprinkler into the soft earth. That done, she heads back toward a blue building beside the pool. As she walks, she mutters angrily under her breath.

The two old farmers cackle loudly for moments afterward.

Sam is the first to recover, gasping for breath. "We sure got him didn't we? Yeah the vet will have a good laugh yet about the cows eating pigs or whatever it was you told him. You sure take the pot today, especially for that zinger son or daughter line."

Isaac smiles as he gathers the cash from Sam's hand.

"This sure beats playin' poker. Who do you think it'll be tomorrow? Well, we'll see about it then I suppose. See you tomorrow Sammy, I gotta get moving. My wife'll bruise my tender hide if I don't get some yard work done today."

The sprinkler spurts into action, spraying water in an arc that slowly approaches the bench.

As the two men attempt to flee the oncoming flood, their chuckling fades. A blast of ice-cold water drenches their sweaty skin even as they realize that they have been glued to the wooden bench.

Screams split the morning.

Charles stops at the entrance to a footbridge, and then turns, doffing his hat politely.

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About the Author.

Kelvin currently lives and writes from the prairie clad plains of Manitoba, Canada. He has been published in, The Pedestal Magazine. com, Plumb Magazine, The Pen Point View, and many others. Acting, music, and strangely enough, farming are all part of Kelvin's adventures outside of the literary world. Awards include, winner of the compo10 song contest, 4th place in the Spinetinglers writing contest, among others. As you may have suspected, you can always read more at, www.kelvinbueckert.com

