

Forever's Kiss  
An Original Novel  
By John Whitaker

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For Norma



## CHAPTER ONE

Four bodies shared Clayton Atkinson's cell in the Catskill jail; one stretched out on the steel bench claiming three-quarters of its length, his body twitching as though responding to some unwelcome dream. Another slept on the floor breathing foul odors into the stale, motionless air while the third claimed what was left of the bench, elbows on his knees and face in his hands. He mumbled occasionally, but nothing Clay could interpret. The fourth body sat on the floor, an arm resting over his drawn-up knee. From the end of the arm a cigarette added a column of smoke to the disconsolate scene lit only by two naked bulbs outside the twelve-by-twelve cell.

'*Bodies,*' Clay thought. They were all middle aged. At some past failure they had stopped being men and drifted to that state where survival was more instinct than desire. They used to be stories he wrote that first year at the New York Sun.

'*Where the hell is Hilliard?*' he thought.

Clay had been standing for six hours in the windowless tank, wary of touching anything that might transfer a virulent microbe to his hands or the only Armani suit he owned. There was an odor of disinfectant, and in a moment loose from anger, it amused him to imagine an army of happily feasting microbes suddenly facing a surprise attack from the product's sanitizing properties. He imagined the head-to-head the battle would be brief with the microbes soon returning to their feast.

He shuddered and put his hands in his pockets just as the clanging of keys against a steel door echoed along the hall. A meal was unlikely at 4:00 A.M. The clanging announced hope.

Clay's interest in new experience had never considered jail from the inside perspective and he thought that unusual for a man at thirty-five. Between Special Forces postings he had done a stint escorting military prisoners, but those brief peeks through the bars only told him that *looking in* was the preferred view. For some, college included something in the unspecified curriculum—student protest, underage drinking—small stuff; but two years at NYU completing his Bachelors had passed him through untouched. He had to come home to find it, and he had Conklin to thank.

A seriously overweight officer waddled to the cell and studied the occupants. Settling on Clay he asked, "You the newspaper guy?"

"What gave me away?"

The officer unlocked the cell door and held it open. “They said you’re a smart-ass.”

Clay ignored him.

The officer locked the door and Clay followed him to a cage in the next room to collect his property. “Can we hurry this along? I gotta piss!”

“You had a toilet back there.”

He knew, and he would have used it, but he couldn’t remember if bacteria could swim upstream. He collected his watch, wallet and three hundred and twelve dollars, and followed the officer to the outer office. “About damn time!” he said to the gray-haired man waiting. Ernest Hilliard was one of the law partners the paper held on retainer. “Things are beginning to pupate on me. What took so long?”

Ernest gave him a sour look. “After that bashing piece you published a while back you’re lucky to have *any* lawyer talking to you. Most people are sleeping after a Tuesday midnight and in no hurry to rescue *you* from a brawl.”

“It wasn’t a brawl. He pushed me and I pushed him back. I was saving a lady from some really bad breath.”

“You *punched* an officer!”

“That’s an interpretation! It was a push! That redneck Conklin’s been bullying people since the fifth grade—smaller people! I always wanted a shot at him.”

“It’s battery on a police officer. If Edgar doesn’t pull some strings Judge Geez will have a shot at *you*!”

Edgar Garrison was Editor of the Catskill Daily Review—the one the law went to whenever an honored citizen’s name needed to be withheld from a compromising story. Clay thought he could count on Edgar. It wasn’t a lock; but Edgar too, had a thing about bullies.

Inside his car, Ernest made no move to drive. “So, tell me,” he said.

“They made me lay in the damn street to put cuffs on me.” Clay indicated the dirt he couldn’t brush away. “Look at this suit! This is my *best suit*!”

“I mean, tell me from the beginning.”

“The beginning,” he took a deep breath, “sure. I’m home. A little after nine—I noticed a patrol car’s roof lights in front of the house. I hadn’t heard any crash, like from an accident, so I went out to see what was happening. This lard-ass Conklin has the Walking Woman backed up against...”

“Wait a minute,” Ernest interrupted. “The *Walking Woman*—who is that?”

It suddenly occurred to Clay, he should quit trying to rescue women, either that, or accept the fallout with more grace. The jail thing wasn’t so bad; but those others...

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Armed Forces recruiters working the high schools had been drawn to Clay’s solid, six-foot-two-inch frame; and the SEALs almost signed him. In the end, it was Army Special Forces that fast-tracked his college toward officer training and when he was twenty-one, promoted him to Captain just in time for Desert Storm. He had been penciled in for Army Intelligence, but before that move could be made, a Kuwaiti teenager reshuffled his life with a knife in his back

The vibration from Allied shelling had collapsed a mud and timber roof on top of a middle-age woman. Clay and his Sergeant were digging her out, ignoring her dazed son approaching their rear from another room. Son had misinterpreted the scene and plunged a knife through Clay’s right kidney. Fortunately, the Sergeant’s rifle butt interrupted his second thrust.

The Army had groomed Clay for investigations, but then had to let him go after removing his kidney. Clay spent his recovery completing his Bachelors in Journalism at NYU. Then, the New York Sun took an interest and offered him a deal too good to pass—an associate at the crime desk. It was there, in the winter of his fourth year, he has his second encounter with an invasive knife.

He’d been downtown just after 11:00 P.M. when his pocket scanner displayed: *‘The Deli on Columbus above 60<sup>th</sup> Street is being held up by three unknowns in ski masks. Shots have been fired.’* The Deli was around the corner from his apartment; his late-night grocery supplier. Theatre traffic on Eighth Avenue locked like a trap above 54<sup>th</sup> Street so he ditched his cab and started to jog. He was late arriving. The scene was taped off and uniforms were scouring the neighborhood. EMS was inside the Deli treating somebody out of his sight. Then he saw Marty Reese, an associate at the crime desk, listening to a lieutenant conclude his account. The lieutenant turned and entered The Deli.

“Hey, Clay.”

“You’re fast on your feet.”

“I was at the Coliseum when I heard the call. I saw the perps running down Columbus and east on fifty-eighth. One dead inside, shot six

times—*six times*! Jesus! a Pakistani clerk. There's an old lady shopper with a broken arm. Did Harkness send you?"

"No, I was on my way home. I live around the corner—number thirty."

"Well, I'm done here—just gotta call it in."

"You want to catch a cocktail?"

"Not tonight, thanks."

Clay waved, "See you tomorrow." He turned east on 60<sup>th</sup> and crossed the street to his building. He could see a crowd in the lobby and decided to go in the basement entrance where an elevator would be easier to catch. At the bottom of the ramp he unlocked the steel door noting the corridor was darker than usual. He stepped inside and springs closed the door behind him. Then he saw the uniformed nurse in the shadows. What he really saw was the arm around her neck holding a bared, six-inch blade. Even in the dim light he could read her silent terror. She was Asian; probably early twenties, but with Asians he'd found it hard to tell; they seemed to hold their youth longer than others.

Behind her head, the tan craggy face of a Latino youth glowered with steely eyes. He wore a watch cap, which Clay imagined was a ski mask pushed up to his forehead. A soft whimper came from the nurse, as though she wanted to speak but was restrained by fear.

Thirty feet inside the door, the entrance corridor 'T'd at the main hallway that ran the width of the building. Storage rooms, a laundry, and a boiler room were spaced at intervals on either side.

"Turn and face the wall," the youth ordered in a whispered rasp, "or you get a fountain of this Chink's blood on your sweet-lookin' coat!" His accent was raw New York. "Turn! Hands on the wall!"

Slowly, Clay followed the order. "Okay, boss-man. I'm just a passer-by. Don't want any trouble. I'm turning, see, just like you said." Just then an older Latino in a watch cap rounded the corner from the hall and hurried toward them with a gun. He was bigger than the nurse's captor—at least six-feet.

"Another one," the new arrival said impatiently.

Clay felt the gun in his back while a hand checked him for a shoulder and ankle holster. Finding neither, the hand grasped his collars and pulled him away from the wall. "Walk ahead of me," the gunman ordered, facing him down the corridor before stepping back.

"Whatever you say mister—don't worry about me. I want *no* trouble." Clay knew his obsequious responses would crush the terrified

nurse. She probably saw his large size as hope for her survival. He felt sorry for her, but it was more important to reduce the tension his entry had caused. The scanner report had said there were *three* armed men. Where was the third? He started down the corridor when the girl's captor spoke.

"I should have the gun here at the door; where they come in."

"Shut up and keep doing this. You do good with a knife. So does Ramon. We still can't reach Spider."

*'This one is the leader and Ramon is the third,' Clay thought, 'and they're short on guns.'*

"Turn right," the gunman ordered at the hallway. Approaching the laundry room he spoke again, "Open that door!"

Inside the laundry room, two women leaned against the washers, away from Ramon's knife. He recognized one—Julia, from the fifth floor—an elegant older lady and not one to do laundry at midnight. She too, must have used the basement entrance. Ramon was cursing into a cell phone, apparently to an empty line.

The gunman nudged Clay toward the women and questioned Ramon. "He doesn't answer yet?"

"No! The mo'fo' ran out on us!" Ramon squealed, slamming the lid on the phone.

"He wouldn't! No way! Gi'me the fuckin' phone!"

Ramon handed it over and the gunman flipped the lid. "Stupido! he cried. "You got no signal! You ever used a fuckin' cell phone?"

Ramon looked confused.

"You got no signal. You have to go outside." Exasperated, he handed Ramon his revolver. "I'll do it. If they move, shoot 'em! Shoot the muthafuckers if they move!" He left the room.

With the gun now in his hand, Ramon's inflated posture appeared more arrogant as he surveyed his hostages.

Clay raised his arms, cowering behind them. "Please don't hurt me," he cried. "Take my Rolex—but please don't hurt me!"

Julia looked shocked. "Oh, my God!" she breathed in disgust—glowering at Clay. The other woman seemed to recover some stature and looked at the groveling Clay in amazement.

Ramon stepped closer, laughing. "Big man! Big hero!" he mocked. Taking another step toward Clay he tucked his knife in his belt. "Show me your watch, hero man." He held the revolver close. "Take it off!"

Clay hurriedly fumbled with the strap. Removing the watch, he held it back as though having second thoughts, plainly angering Ramon.

“Give it to me!” Ramon ordered, stepping closer. “Toss it to me or I’ll cut it from your fuckin’ fingers!”

Clay pretended a pair of practice tosses and Ramon reached out his hand from five feet away. Clay’s third toss released the watch into Ramon’s full attention, but Clay’s foot reached him first. The snake-like strike slammed the gun into Ramon’s ribs and Clay heard the whoosh of air leave the man’s lungs. The gun clattered to the floor. Ramon fell backwards with Clay springing after him. Clay aimed his fist and felt the cartilage tear from the man’s jaw. Ramon’s head hit the wall and he collapsed like an empty topcoat.

“Oh!” Julia exclaimed. “Well! That was quite an act!”

Clay ignored the pieces of his watch and picked up the revolver. “What makes you think I was acting?” he asked, flipping open the cylinder. “Damn! This thing is empty!” He went to Ramon’s belt. “Looks like we’re down to one knife apiece,” he muttered while taking the blade, *‘except that the other blade is held against a young girl’s throat.’*

“He’ll be back any minute,” the second woman said, caressing her laundry basket.

“He’s not the one I’m worried about. It’s too late for you girls to try for the elevator. Stand back where you were, against the washers. We’ll wait.”

Julia dug into her purse and came out with a cell phone. “This one will work,” she affirmed. “I’ll call nine-one-one.”

“Not yet,” Clay said. “Wait until we see if he made his call. I expect somebody else is supposed to pick them up.”

“Well, I’ll call my husband upstairs.”

“Lady,” Clay said firmly, *“put that thing away!* Don’t add any new ingredients to this stew. We have an edge right now and that girl in the hall needs us to keep it. Put the phone away and be quiet!”

Julia balked at being ordered, but did as she was told and joined the other woman at the washers. “Well, if my husband was here... he was with the O.S.S. you know; the original group that...”

“*Please!*” Clay hissed. “I can’t hear with you talking.” He removed his coat, dropping it on the floor.

Julia suffered her second affront with similar annoyance, but closed her mouth.

Barely half-a-minute passed before the leader returned. Clay met him with the naked blade to his throat. “Not a sound!” he ordered. He pulled the man inside and kicked his legs from under him. “Roll over—face

down!” Clay said, closing the door. He patted the man’s pockets and located the phone. Thumbing a button he read: “Last call at 12:09 A.M. lasted two minutes and nine seconds. Looks like you got hold of your ride.” He put his knee in the small of his captive’s back and turned to Julia, “Dial nine-one-one and give it to me.”

Julia retrieved her phone, dialed, and then handed it to Clay.

“*What is your emergency?*”

“There was a Deli shooting on Columbus and 60<sup>th</sup> Street an hour ago. Connect me with the officer in charge at the scene.”

“*What is your name, sir?*”

“God damn it—do as I asked—there’s a hostage situation here!”

The operator hesitated then answered, “*Just one moment please. I will try and connect you.*” She went away and Clay began counting the seconds.

“You’re breaking my back, man!”

“Shut up!”

“Give it up, man. Diego will cut her fuckin’ throat.”

“Diego, eh? Well, if he does, you can kiss your ass good-bye. You’re going to call Diego to join us back here, understand?”

“Let us go and we’ll free her.”

“Bad as you need a hostage, not likely.”

“*Lieutenant Bishop here—who is this?*”

“Were you the one talking to Marty Reese from the Sun a while ago?”

“*Yes! Who is this?*”

“Clay Atkinson—I work with Marty. Listen. Things are a little nervous here. Your perps are stacked up around the corner, but they’ve got a hostage. Do exactly what I tell you and the girl has a chance.”

There was silence on the line, and then: “*I have to call for a negotiator and...*”

“Damn it—I’m the negotiator! Listen to me! I’m sitting on one of them—another is out cold on the floor. The third one has the hostage.” ‘*The driver—Spider,*’ he thought. ‘*He’ll split when he sees the uniforms—three out of four will have to do.*’ “Listen to me! I don’t have a lot of time! Around the corner on 60<sup>th</sup>, at number thirty, there’s a down ramp to the basement entrance at the east end. *Do not try to come in!* It’s locked to the outside. Station some men around that entrance, out of sight behind the cars at the curb. Expect a man to come running out. He’s got a knife, but no gun. Now move it. You’ll have about three minutes to get in position,” he said,

and closed the phone. No point discussing it. The man would do it or miss his chance. Either way, he felt it was the best chance for the nurse. He stood up and nudged his captive with his toe.

“Get up, Boss Man! Keep feeling the sharp edge against your neck and call Diego here.”

“You ain’t gonna use the knife, man—you ain’t that cold,” the man said confidently.

Clay had imagined that might be an issue. Could he use the knife against a defenseless man? A fight was one thing, but when a man was helpless, it was something else. Clutching the leader’s shirt, he jerked the knife half an inch along the man’s neck—just enough to draw blood. The man cringed. “You’re not helpless,” Clay told him, his voice a veiled rasp. “You have a knife against a girl’s throat out there. That’s *your* knife Diego is holding! He’s just your flunky.”

Blood trickled from the short slice; enough to alter the leader’s thinking. “Ya!” he cried hastily. “Stop! I’ll call him.”

Clay raised the man to his feet and opened the door. “Do anything else and you’re dead, right here.”

The man leaned through the door. “Diego! Diego, bring her here—quickly!”

‘*Very good,*’ Clay thought. There was only silence. “Again!” he ordered.

“Diego!”

“I’m coming,” the cautious voice returned.

Clay pulled the leader back inside and held him against the concrete wall. With deliberation, he edged his hand and struck the man sharply behind the ear. He’d been taught that in Special Forces, but never had the chance to try it. ‘*What d’ya know?*’ he thought as the man crumpled to the floor. He closed the door to await Diego. ‘*He’ll have to push the nurse in front of him,*’ he thought, ‘*but how far?*’

The door opened and Clay caught only a flash of the nurse before she was pulled back to the hallway.

“Benicio!” Diego called urgently.

“Shit!” Clay answered. He moved into the doorway holding his knife for Diego to see. The man was backing away, drawing the frightened nurse with him. Clay followed to within three feet of her.

“I’ll kill the bitch!” Diego’s voice was a quiet scream.

As calmly as he could, Clay explained, “While you’re doing that, Diego, I’ll be killing you! You can’t kill both of us, and I’m the one with the knife.”

“Benicio!” Diego called again.

“Benicio is no longer with us—neither is Ramon. You’re on your own now and if you’re smart, you’ll cut your losses and split out of here while you can.” He inched closer to the pair. “Turn and run! Get free while you can. It’s your only good move. Be smart!”

Diego clutched the nurse tighter, his knife making a crease in her neck.

Clay inched closer. “She’s no good to you now, Diego. You kill her and I kill you. Is that what you want—to die for nothing? Run while you can! Run!” It wasn’t going as well as he’d hoped as Diego maintained his defiant stance.

Suddenly, Diego pushed the nurse at Clay and sprinted toward the corridor. He must have feared a chase because he stopped at the ‘T’ head and turned, raising the knife to throw.

Clay flung the nurse aside while Diego’s hand came down in a flash. He’d obviously had practice. Clay’s notebook took most of the thrust—but not all. The blade was deflected, but inches of it quickly disappeared into Clay just below his sternum. His reaction slapped the poorly seated blade to the floor. “Oh, shit!” he whispered, listening to Diego’s footfalls down the corridor. Only when he heard the steel door slam did he breathe his relief. He reentered the laundry where the nurse and Julia were locked together. “Are you okay?” he asked the nurse.

She seemed to recover. “I am okay,” she answered quietly. “Only my nerves are suffering. I don’t know how to…” She noticed the growing stain on Clay’s suit and it seemed to restore her instincts. She moved toward Clay. “You’re bleeding! The knife—you have to lie down,” she ordered.

“In a minute,” he said, pressing his wound. He examined the two men on the floor. “Watch these two,” he said, and left the room.

“You have to lie down!” the nurse called after him.

He ignored her call and went to the steel door and peered through the small, glass pane. He could see several uniforms wrestling with Diego, so he opened the door and called, “In here!”

The lieutenant appeared, followed by three more uniforms. “Are you Atkinson?”

“You did good,” Clay answered. “Yes. Two more, down the corridor to the right—before they wake up.”

The nurse caught up with him and insisted he lie on the floor. “We need EMS right away,” she told the lieutenant.

“That a bullet?” the lieutenant asked.

“A knife nicked me. St. Luke’s Emergency is around the corner—I can walk there.”

“Not on your life,” the nurse insisted, leading him back to the laundry room. She got him to lie on the floor and began rummaging in the basket of folded cloth. “I need a towel,” she told the hovering woman.

Clay closed his eyes feeling the pressure of the towel and listened while the three women furnished the lieutenant an account of their past hour. Julia’s was the most colorful with anecdotes about her husband’s wartime heroics that she was sure matched those of Mr. Atkinson. She paused long enough to gather the pieces of Clay’s wristwatch.

“I felt sorry for you,” she laughed, looking down at the useless fragments. “I thought this was a Rolex!”

Clay relaxed on the gurney as the medic strapped him in. “Laugh if you like,” he grinned, “but for a minute back there, it was.”

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St. Luke’s needed four hours to repair liver and stomach damage, and six days to monitor their work. Satisfied, they shipped him home to Catskill where his mother kept a careful rein on his recovery. He spent the weeks writing notes and essays and reviewing his situation which, he concluded, was not as far along as he believed it should be.

In the end, he resigned from the Sun and surrendered his New York apartment—deciding to freelance for the short article market, and the Catskill Daily Review.

Edgar Garrison, the Review Editor, liked a deal that didn’t call for a salary and offered Clay the empty desk in Roman Balfour’s office. This annoyed the Review’s leading columnist who, besides being his own number-one fan, had become used to his privacy. But he suffered the intrusion because Clay proved a no-show most of the time, appearing only to do research in the paper’s library and log his notes into the computer.

Clay did most of his writing at home or on the road and in three years he’d published thirty-one articles. One, bashing trial lawyers going into politics, had been submitted to the Pulitzer Committee and brought several New York agents calling. He knew it was too hot for an award but it had elevated his celebrity status around town—everywhere except the courthouse.

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Ernest Hilliard didn't do trial work, but he took exception to Clay's article on behalf of his fraternity. In the car, he prompted Clay to continue. "So, what about this Walking Woman? What's she to you?"

"She's just a neighbor, Ernest. She doesn't drive a car and walks everywhere she goes. Her name is Dianna Broderick."

"How did you get into it with Conklin?"

"By objecting to his damn roof lights flashing in front of my house. By inserting myself between them. He was being abusive. His attitude was frightening her. She doesn't bother anybody. She didn't deserve his attitude and I told him so. He pushed me away with his stick and—well, I pushed him back."

"He claims you punched him."

"He's a creep! He's always been a creep!"

"Is that what I tell Judge Geez?"

Clay relaxed and fell silent. He couldn't shake the coincidence of it coming at this time, just as he had been working up nerve to speak to her for the first time in his life. The incident might serve well as his introduction, coming to her defense, so-to-speak. *'At least there were no knives,'* he thought. *'Man, you gotta stop doing that!'*

Clay continued in thought, recalling Dianna, and that he'd seen her a thousand times without ever speaking. Even last night all his words had been directed to Conklin. He stared through the windshield, his voice falling near a whisper. "She's a neighbor, Ernest." His voice began trailing off. "She might be an amazing lady, but I'm not sure yet. She's been here all my life and I think I'm just beginning to see her."

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When he was growing up in the late seventies, Clay had often wondered about the woman who walked past his house several times a week with only a hurried nod to anyone she passed. Her trim figure had moved with such purpose, people naturally stepped aside rather than engage her. The few who took the chance were strangers on Broad Street—mostly men, because she always walked alone and was remarkably attractive. On her way to town she was usually empty-handed. Returning, she might carry a small package, some books, or a bag of groceries.

She was younger than his Mom and for a long time neither he nor his two buddies on the block knew her name was Dianna. Maybe they ignored it because calling her the "Walking Woman" so long, nothing else fit. Playing in the nearby woods, they caught glimpses of the man who lived with her—her husband, they said. He was sick and could never go out. They never saw

him up close. They could have sneaked around at night and peeked in the window; but they never did and, when Clay wondered why not—they'd peeked in everybody else's window—he imagined they gave her some respect, even then.

Houses at the top of the hill where Broad Street came to a dead-end were expensive, with nine or ten rooms and a great view of the Hudson River, all except the one where the Walking Woman lived. Her house set far back from the street among many trees. It was neat, but small compared to others along the top—only four rooms. At least, that's what they said. 'They' were the neighbors who got their information from delivery boys who went in the side door as far as the kitchen. Some days a maid would go in, or a doctor, but they never shared what they knew. There were a few family visitors, mostly out-of-town people who stayed an hour or two. Only one ever stayed longer; a young blond woman who usually came alone.

To Clay, the Walking Woman had become routine over the years—nothing unusual. Broad Street continued the way it always had. Searching out stories for his high school paper he had never imagined one could be rooted in his dreary, dead-end street. Editing the paper in his senior year drew in his search antenna and shifted him toward analyzing other writer's work. The change certified his interest in journalism, but allowed any possible Broad Street story to slip through the cracks. It fell a long way down.

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Ernest started his car and aimed it toward Broad Street while he continued his questioning. Clay answered, but his mind went elsewhere to locate the elusive beginning. Last month, he had been researching an old story when a small column-head had caught his eye for reasons he couldn't explain. It said: "Hilltop House Changes Hands." The brief article described the abandoned Lynch house. The small, wood-frame house from his childhood curiosity had been a gift to Dianna and Jason Broderick. Four gift rooms on a hilltop was luck regardless of their age and condition. He knew the Lynches were many and had lived in Catskill for over a hundred years, but he recalled they were not a family that could afford a hilltop house much less, give one away. His current project had recaptured his thoughts and he forgot the hilltop house article until the following Saturday.

He'd seen her so many times walking down the hill, but this time she brought that old article about the gift house back to mind again. Through the following week it played over and over like a song that repeats in the mind for no intended reason. It became plain that his irritation was echoing for

answers. It was none of his business, and there was nothing promising for the paper, but he had some time and resources were handy. *'Why not?'* he'd thought, if only to get rid of the nagging echo!

He'd dug into Jason Broderick's history first. Dianna seemed the principal player, but Jason's life began in New York City where he still had useful sources. Exhausting those, he'd been directed up to Albany and commuted there for nine days. They moved quickly, and soon toward the 'something improbable' that had hooked him. He'd continued on to the middle of the state where he spent two weeks energized by the promise of something so unusual, it only intensified his doubts. It was a strange and confusing time.

The end was clear enough—Dianna and Jason were together on top of his street—yet, everything he'd learned said they couldn't be. Something was missing between the end of his research and their life on top of the hill—something only Dianna would know. The years testified she had not been eager to reveal whatever it was.

One thing had changed. In his thoughts, she was now Dianna—no longer the Walking Woman—as though his month of study had breathed life into her, as well as doubt.

He'd always believed it was respect that kept him from prying. That had been easy—he'd never had to confront her. Now faced with the need to question her, he felt intimidated. It was something in her bearing; the purposeful way she walked that gave him pause, though it made no sense. He need only climb the hill and knock on her door.

He'd put it off a day—then another—and then came Conklin with his flashing lights.

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First signs of dawn were beginning to break over the top of the hill when Clay opened the car door in front of his house. "Thanks for the midnight run, Ernest. Give me a call."

"I'll talk to Edgar later," Ernest waved, and then backed his car around and drove away.

Clay remained on the sidewalk staring up the hill. He couldn't see her house, but she was there—sleeping probably, or maybe rising early to the daily tasks she'd sworn herself to long ago. Heavy moisture from the river made him remove his suit coat and lay it over his shoulder, hooked by a single finger. *'What's missing from this picture?'* he wondered. Training for war and big-city crime had left their imprint, and while not fully jaded, he'd been leaning that way. He didn't believe in the kind of sacrifice and

commitment he'd uncovered. In the short-term, perhaps—motivated by pride, fear, what people will think—in the short-term, perhaps. Time passes quickly, memory fades, and life always returns to, 'what's good for me now?' He didn't think that a bad thing, only pragmatic, the innate human need for *more* exerting its priority. *'But not you Dianna Broderick, or Dianna Malcomb. Were you born missing a gene that shames the rest of us?'* He went in the house to a shower and sleep.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was Saturday, and he was still working up his courage when he saw her again, walking toward town. *'Good God, man! Get some ass about you!'* he thought, watching her disappear around the corner. He couldn't pass this chance so he went outside to wait.

Two hours passed before she returned carrying a small bag from a drug store. He stepped in front of her. It was an awkward move, almost impolite. She halted, with only a curious expression.

"I'm sorry about the other night," he said. "I hope I didn't embarrass you." In all his life he'd never been this close. The beauty she radiated without makeup surprised him. Only her full lips showed a touch of red. Her skin was clear, with natural color; her hair tucked neatly under a small cap was light brown, showing no sign of gray. Only around her eyes had the years begun etching their message; but that was hard to notice because her eyes were large and clear blue, and now they questioned his gaze.

"Perhaps you know," he began, indicating the house over his shoulder, "I was born here—lived here most of my life. I'm Clay Atkinson. I do a lot of research down at the paper and I came across an old article about your house. I can't say why it intrigued me but it did, and when I started looking into it, I found pieces of a story all over the state—in Albany, Shands..." He felt he was babbling. "I really have to talk to you." He'd never felt so awkward.

Fleeting as it was, there was no mistaking that he'd touched a nerve when he mentioned Shands. Etchings of fear grew over her lovely face and

while he wouldn't admit being soft on a story, he was sorry. He felt responsible.

She skirted around him as though he'd raised a sword, and then hurried up the hill. "Please!" he called. "Please wait! It's important to both of us!" She looked back to see if he was following, but all he could show her was his bewilderment.

### CHAPTER THREE

Men began noticing Dianna Malcomb when she was thirteen, not only her peers, but also older college men. The casual contacts, not reinforced by association or introduction, were given some awkward excuse before she scurried away. She wasn't afraid of them. She'd learned what boys usually wanted from girls and elected to postpone that development.

She was the youngest of four girls smothered in Catholicism by deeply committed parents and teachers. Her uncle was a priest and one aunt was a nun in the Order of St. Cecelia. Her extended family would have made a congregation in any small town. Even in Syracuse they were well known to the church hierarchy—particularly the fund-raising arm. It wasn't that they had so much to give—there were so many of them.

The country was in something called "The Great Depression," though there was nothing *great* about it except the chance to pass from beggar man to leading citizen simply by finding a job. The supermarket was introduced to a neighborhood one pushcart or horse-drawn wagon at a time, the friendly driver offering his bit of this or that. There was ice, fruit, bread, milk, pots and pans, clothing new and used, scissors and knives along with the service to sharpen them. You could buy anything right in front of your house if you waited long enough.

Both of Dianna's parents were working teachers, but after the birth of Ellaine first, and then Theresa and Haley, her mother had to quit. It only meant one more hardship to overcome. To recover the lost income, her father began private tutoring for some of the city's wealthier families. Their modest, two-story home was a paid-for inheritance, putting the Malcombs

among the more affluent of those depression-era times. Still, they enjoyed only the difference between poor, and very poor. These last were the men who knocked on the back door hoping they might do odd jobs in exchange for a meal. If they had a family somewhere, part of the meal would be wrapped in a handkerchief and shared later when they got home. Dianna's mother always found something.

By the time dresses bought for Ellaine made their way down to Dianna, fashion had taken several leaps forward, but Dianna never complained. Everything was clean when she put it on and warm when it needed to be. Besides, her mother explained with praise: she was the only one who could supply the family with much-needed rags.

When she was seven, the age of reason recognized by her church, she felt threatened by the first of a lifelong series of events designed by the church to welcome her, and with formality, teach her the church rules of conduct and the penalties for breaking them. Flames ranked high on the church's list of penalties. The visions these imparted to her seven-year-old mind—flames licking about her young soul—had a distressing effect.

The initial event was First Communion, and to prepare she was to go without food and drink after midnight. She managed the fasting part but as the family prepared to leave for church, she hid in the attic until she knew it was too late to make the ceremony. The police were notified that a child was missing. They were still downstairs writing her description when she eased back into their world to much hugging and false admonition. Pleading with her to explain why she hid from such an important event, she astonished everyone in the room by explaining: if she made her First Communion, she would be eligible to go to hell. She wasn't keen on that.

Eventually she was herded through the First Communion function. Years later, recalling her initial rebellion, she couldn't imagine having that much nerve.

Her Catholic indoctrination had actually begun in the first grade at St. Anslem's. The nuns seemed mystical in their black attire, gliding over the floors while everyone else clunked along on feet. There was prayer and catechism every school day, confession, and a penance to do on Saturday and Mass on Sunday. While at first she hadn't been required to confess, it was necessary to go along to the church with those who did.

Her nerve and daring qualities dwindled steadily as years passed. In the resulting vacuum, a heightened sensitivity grew. By the time she was twelve, fun happened less frequently than she remembered and all that was forbidden by the church buried the last of her spontaneity. She became

cautious in her planning, deliberate in her moves, always aware of the jeopardy to her immortal soul by the threatening flames.

She was a superior student, filling the fun voids with genuine interest. She would expand homework assignments far beyond expectations while her siblings opted for games, or a favorite program coming over the newly purchased radio. Only two kinds of distraction interrupted those studies: a cat nudging her pencil aside to stretch out, and her wonder why she wanted Byron Wazniak to notice her.

Byron was a year younger and delivered the newspaper early in the morning, before she was awake. On the Tuesday evenings he came to collect payment she would hang around the front porch pretending to read a book. For reasons not understood, she wanted Byron to speak to her, while suppressing the fear that he would.

When Byron said she would hurt her eyes trying to read in the dark, she started the leap to her opportunity. The boy was quicker, hopping on his bike and disappearing around the corner.

Her interest in Byron faded without further event, but in high school she felt similar yearnings for other boys. It was no trouble getting their attention. One of them kissed her in the cloakroom; a kiss for which she was partly responsible. When it turned wet and sloppy she pulled away, drawing a forearm across her mouth thinking the whole thing kind of yucky. He tried a comeback, but she pushed him away with a frown and returned to class.

There was no dating. Sixteen was established as the age she might *think* about dating, but there was no guarantee. A boy had to stand inspection. Usually he was invited to dinner or a sit-down in the evening.

When Ellaine was old enough, and able to coax her selection home, Dianna delighted in watching him tremble. She never missed the meal, or the chance to pass along her own, usually negative opinion. Privately, she thought her sister knew how to pick them because none of Ellaine's entries were ever rejected. She now had an idea Ellaine would be the one to ask, if she ever had a question.

She was seventeen, in her freshman year at All Saints College when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Instantly, the country mobilized in a new direction. Everywhere, people of all ages were asked to do their part. Even little kids were energized to collect clothing, paper and rags, scrap metal and old tires, and were often recognized and publicly praised for their efforts. It made them blush, and it also increased their drive.

Girls from her neighborhood found jobs in defense plants. Everyone was propelled by the desire, *the need*, to do something to help the boys

overseas. She considered dropping out of college to find more helpful means. Like a swarm of bees, her family gathered to exorcise those ideas, insisting she would do more for everyone by completing her education. They were a powerful force she could not challenge.

Around the all-girl college it was *chic* to date a man in uniform. Many believed they could become educated and still help a serviceman's morale, in their way. More than a few gave their total effort.

It became routine to include the war in any life plans to marry, not marry, have a baby or not have a baby. Everything was fast, and accelerating. Families with members in the service hung small red and white banners in a front window with one blue star for every member gone. A gold star meant a member was killed. Tragedy introduced new depths as more blue stars were replaced by gold. It was unlike anything they had imagined—before they learned about war.

The following February she was eighteen, and joined the older girls at the dances organized by the USO for servicemen on leave, an experience that opened huge vistas and equally large pits. Avoiding the pits was the professed concern of the entire student body of this Catholic college; for an unwed Catholic girl to become pregnant was the moral equivalent of descent into hell. In fairness, hell would have been kinder.

It was against the USO rules to date the servicemen she met at the dances, so all of her dates in college were boys Ellaine served up from her job at the phone company. By Dianna's junior year she believed she'd been out with the entire company at least once. Most of her dates lost interest after being convinced she actually meant, "No!"

It was different with Neal Lively and Stanley Greenberg. Both were in their middle twenties and though they were athletes in college, the draft board found physical reasons to reject them. They behaved much as the others but there was a difference—she was attracted to them instead of the other way around. It was strange. It was she who increased the intensity of their necking. She asked Ellaine about it one evening as they rolled each other's hair in bobby pins.

"You meet some guy and the minute he kisses you, you feel yourself getting—well, you know—even if he's a lousy kisser. Him you'll want to teach, but don't ask me why. It's gotta be something animal."

The animal analogy bothered her, but Ellaine had been right about the kissing. Her growing curiosity made it hard to put off the further advances. Neil managed to undo her bra and slide his hand over her breasts—tugging lightly on a nipple. She could smell the wet between her

legs. She was tremendously excited and had not Ellaine mentioned 'animal,' it was probable she would have allowed Neil the first home run. The word came back as she was crawling closer to him. Along with it came the image of a satyr: the Devil's pet sent out to cloud the minds of virgins and deliver their penetration. She could feel the flames.

Neil had no idea what happened. At 3:02 A.M. he was stiff as a board and seconds away from his idea of paradise. At 3:03 he was out on her porch, shivering, and struggling with his clothes. They saw each other twice after that, but it was not the same.

The event disturbed her family routine of confession on Saturday and communion on Sunday. She made up reasons to attend a different Mass so no one would learn she did not receive communion. She was ashamed to reveal her behavior with Neil to her confessor. Without the priest's absolution, she could not receive the Sacrament.

Three months later, in a period of guilt and growing alienation from the church, the scene with Neil was replayed with Stanley Greenberg—except for two differences: His hand on her bare skin aroused her hand to move below his belt; to touch, and for a brief few seconds, hold what she knew was there. Her hand was in the flames.

The second difference was: The temperature on her front porch was not cold enough to make Stanley shiver.

She couldn't hide any longer, avoiding what she must do. If she died with this evil on her soul it would be the Devil himself taking her virginity before casting her into the flaming pit. As Saturday approached, her review of the confession she practiced caused periodic trembling. She struggled to regain control. She was certain the priest's anger would resound through the building, letting all know how near to hell she was living. Inside the darkened booth, she confessed her blunted yearnings.

The priest's gentle questioning and soothing advice, along with only a slight increase in her usual penance brought her incredible relief. Also, there was an instant of wonder. If that was all there was to it, why hadn't she gone all the way? It was an instant of such brevity as to be impossible to measure.

Her graduation from college was attended by every member of her extended family that now included a brother-in-law and a new niece, Ellaine's baby. Her sister had married a columnist for the Post-Standard. The celebration was well into the next day, amplified by the end of the war in Europe. Her father couldn't forget his daughter's achievement and every hour

he searched her out at least once to hold her close for long seconds. Then, she would be handed back to the crowd.

Her family expected she would begin graduate studies toward a Masters, but she took them by surprise revealing a letter she'd hidden a month ago. It was a job offer from American Airlines in New York. On a lark, she'd sent an application six-months before, and forgot it; imagining they had done the same. Receiving their reply, she was overjoyed at being accepted. She didn't know a thing about airlines. She'd never been on a plane.

American didn't need her to fly. There was a shortage of reservation personnel; the posts abandoned by girls who had put off marriage until the war ended; until *any* war ended. The surrender in Europe was enough to melt their holdout.

At first, she was overjoyed. Second thoughts dampened that excitement. New York City, alone! She could still think about it; she had time. She'd tell Ellaine, but nobody else. This time Ellaine was not so helpless. Having had a look at how the present differed from her dreams, Ellaine felt qualified. "Since Cheri arrived I can't imagine a better place for me and I'll never give it up, but if I'd had the opportunity you have, I would have jumped with both feet. Think of it! New York—all the great people and events. The whole world begins in New York and you can be a part of that happening."

Dianna got the message and slowly eased herself into the picture Ellaine painted, adding a few hopes of her own. After graduation, she would go—and she did.

On the 6th of July, a beautiful and newly graduated, twenty-one-year-old girl from upstate took a train to New York City and joined thirteen others at Idlewilde Airport in a class on how to wear a headset and arrange travel times for the ever-growing flying public.

American owned the building where two and three trainees shared an apartment. After training, they would have six months to make other living arrangements. Besides the small salary, trainees were issued script they could spend in the restaurant and for living necessities at the airline's commissary.

She took many deep breaths. She enjoyed getting to know her roommates—Lisa from Marlboro, Pennsylvania, and Daphne, from Brunswick, Georgia. Lisa was her age and Daphne, a year older. Both were attractive causing her to wonder if it was a company rule. Neither was

Catholic, but it didn't matter. This was part of getting beyond that world which had, until then, absorbed her whole life.

She remained apprehensive about the real New York City, but elected not to worry for at least six-weeks when her training would be complete. Then, primed and uniformed, she would take her seat *in* that real world. She felt like a chick pecking from inside the shell.

Academics were her second nature, and it gave her both pleasure and security to help her new friends. They didn't need much and soon all three felt as if they owned the place. In their third weekend, Lisa suggested going into the city to see it close up—window shop, and watch the crowds. Their airline IDs let them ride free in the company limos and they could catch one back at any hour.

Dianna felt her customary doubt, and then shook it away. It was a great idea! Deciding to go took five seconds; what to wear took three days.

They were a stunning trio exiting the limo in front of the Waldorf-Astoria. Dianna's heart raced with excitement staring up at this hotel landmark she'd read about many times. She could nudge it with her toe, and she did.

They decided Times Square was the place to be and after consulting their map and learning it was only eight blocks, started walking, enjoying the attention of every male they passed. A few circled behind them and opened with their best lines, but the girls just laughed. The boys soon realized easier pickings were elsewhere and chose not to waste time with an unpromising pursuit.

The young women continued happily, finding their destination more bright and bustling than they had expected. Military uniforms were everywhere—some they didn't even recognize. Music and invitations promising ecstasy met them every twenty feet. There were arcades and music halls, theatres, restaurants, bars, and more uniforms.

Arriving in front of the Taft Hotel they decided to have a drink in the lounge. They chose a booth where they could see, and retain some privacy, but that didn't last long. The waiter who brought the three gin-and-tonics mentioned four gentlemen two tables away paid for them.

"If we accept," Dianna said, "they'll come over."

"Who cares? We're leaving after this," Lisa said, waving her greeting.

They came, laughing. All were naval officers in khaki uniforms wearing wings and colored ribbons. Three squeezed into the booth and the fourth pulled a chair to the end. The youngest appeared to be at least twenty-

three or four. They were polite, so the girls accepted the company and peppered them with questions, answering as many about themselves. They were back from carrier duty in the Pacific and that was all they could say about it. The red-haired was an Ensign. The others wore the two full stripes of Lieutenant.

Despite the girls' suspicions, the boys were as interested in jokes and laughter as they were. They were not even sore when the girls chose to leave without them. To demonstrate their lack of hard feelings, the boys ordered a second round. The girls accepted after remarking the drinks were not very strong. The guys seemed glad just to meet some pretty girls.

Finishing their drinks, the girls said good-bye and chose the ladies' room before the street. Lisa claimed to be sufficiently refreshed and said she'd wait by the door.

On the street again, the Friday night crowd had doubled and was twice as attentive. They played in an arcade for an hour, squealing over every success, had their pictures taken with all three squeezed in the quarter booth, succumbed to a pizza sizzling in a storefront window, and then decided on a nightcap at the Astor.

This time it was three businessmen who expressed their joy at meeting three pretty girls and no, the girls could not continue the party in their suite. The girls had two nightcaps, and then hit the limo stand out front, agreeing they could not have had a better time.

Dianna was all work during the following two weeks, except for the letters home every other night.

On Thursday, Lisa called her aside for help—with a boy. She'd given their number to one of the Navy fliers they met in the Taft and he'd called her for a date: tomorrow. Problem was, he had a friend they had not met—another flier just back from the Pacific and could she ask one of her roommates to come along?

“Rick said he's really a neat guy. Daphne is flying home for the weekend. It's gotta be you, Dianna. It's not that you're last choice—it just works out that way.” For Lisa, it seemed worth pressing.

Dianna was a ‘No!’ She was a definite ‘No!’

They waited in the lobby. It was ten-past the agreed time when the boys arrived in a taxi, one of those long cabs with the plop-down seats. Rick was out first wearing the same laughing face Dianna remembered. He kissed Lisa on the cheek and turned to his friend, Alex, and completed introductions.

“Oh, boy,” Dianna muttered, hoping she hadn't said it aloud. Lisa was also impressed but not so much Rick would notice.

"Hope you girls haven't seen Coney Island," Rick said. Neither had, and Rick instructed the driver.

Alex would be twenty-six, next month. He was not quite six-feet and with a medium build he made a uniform look twice as good. Most striking were his eyes—dark and set back under thick black brows.

*'His lashes are longer than mine'* Dianna thought.

In the cab, Dianna noticed that below Alex's gold wings were three rows of colored ribbons; some with little stars attached. The black epaulettes on his shoulders held three gold stripes, though the middle one was thinner than the other two. Dianna figured he was more important than Rick who had only two gold stripes. She didn't want to question it, but made a note to learn more when she could. Without realizing it, she was already planning to see Alex again.

She had a confusing time: thrilling to the Coney Island experience while failing all attempts to read Alex's feelings about her. *'Oh, God, what if he doesn't like me?'* His warm laugh didn't happen often. He was quiet, and kept space between them. Was he disappointed and eager to get away? He said he was having fun but could she believe him, or was he being a gentleman? Rick kissed Lisa goodnight—a long kiss.

Alex took her hand, smiling, and thanked her for coming. He said nothing about tomorrow, the next day; nor did he offer a phone number. Later, she had difficulty getting to sleep.

Monday was a disaster with an eight-second attention span. Her concentration was blown. In every five-minute segment she heard the first dozen words of the instructor and then missed everything else, over and over as the hours dragged. There were no tests and she thanked God. She tried not to project her miserable mood and fortunately, her overtime studies helped. They allowed her to attend classes and accomplish nothing.

Tuesday was worse because he still hadn't called. Rick had the number. A guy was supposed to call after a date and say what a wonderful time he'd had, and ask how soon they could do it again. He'd been a gentleman. She was sure he knew the protocols. Still, he hadn't called.

Wednesday she was exhausted; determined to put Alex out of her mind and get back where she was supposed to be before it was too late. In desperation, she did. Thursday was better. She learned nothing, but it was better. Friday rolled into the weekend and she declined to join her roommate's weekend plans, claiming she'd fallen behind and had to study.

"It's him, isn't it?" Lisa questioned. "Rick didn't call either and you don't see me moping around."

It wasn't the same. Lisa wasn't in love with Rick. There it was, loose from her mind. It had to be! He'd filled her waking moments as nothing ever. Not even her telepathy made him call and she had no idea how to reach him. She longed to see him, feel his arms around her, kissing her; while her imagination opened to unfamiliar territory.

Monday was better despite her impulse to return home. Tuesday was almost okay and by Friday she'd forgotten about going home, convinced she'd make it for American Airlines.

Daphne begged her to come with them for the weekend, to Lisa's home in Pennsylvania. They had a swimming pool, tennis court, just like a country club. Dianna couldn't consider it. She knew how far back she'd fallen. The girls were disappointed but left in high spirits. Dianna went to the books and stayed up until after 3:00 A.M.

On Saturday she was back into it by eleven, having showered, had coffee, cereal, and the luxury of not having to dress. She began to make sense of her work the previous night. There was a knock at the door and she grabbed her robe.

"Hi, Hon. You got any blades that'll fit my Gillette?" It was Peggy from down the hall.

By five, her stomach was crying, but studying so well, she stuffed a cookie in her mouth and continued. There came another knock. She should have told Peggy to keep the blades. Her robe cord trailed behind as she opened the door and for a second she was busy gathering it. Turning back to the open doorway—it was *him!*

"I would have called but I didn't have your number. Rick and I were separated unexpectedly." He made no move to enter, but stood, appearing nervous but relieved, as though a long journey had come to an end. "I missed you," he said softly.

*'How can it be?'* she thought, again and again in the following time. *'Is it real? Yes, it's real, but how?'* The world she knew, all she had expected and prepared for was suddenly as an afterthought slipping away to an obscure recess of her mind while kaleidoscopic dreams she had never dared, fantasies she could not know, flooded her with joy she had never imagined. They were together. He had come for her and with a magic wand of three soft words dissolved all her pain, doubt, and longing—even the memories.

*'How can it be?'* she thought, that Dickinson, Millay, Lowell, Browning, all whom she knew so well, had failed to prepare her for the confluence of emotions exploding within her at the mere touch of his hand. How could they write of love so wondrous that she'd been filled with awareness; satisfied when closing the book; yet fail to convey what she was now discovering minute by minute; hour by hour? *'How can it be?'*

They had two days of endless nights before he went back to war. Through dozens of letters to the love of her memory she learned the poet's dilemma. She wrote dozens of pages, but V-Mail confined her to one. It didn't matter. Even after dozens of pages there was still much more to say and never, never had she come close to revealing the true rapture of her heart.

She and Alex were together when Japan surrendered and she knew then, she'd have him forever. There would be no gold star in a window for Alex. She thrilled to a million joys—but not for long. Alex transferred to Pensacola, Florida as an instructor. Within a week, a rattled student sheared the tail section of Alex' trainer and both died in the crash. After years of war, Alex didn't survive the peace.

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In her tormented mind, Dianna recalled the names of every priest and every nun who had come into her life. They were a queue: the images single file, silent, and nodding slightly to her as they passed. They didn't smile. She needed them to smile. Stern was not going to make it with her; they should know that after all those years: stern always meant tears to follow, sometimes loud and convulsive sobs.

There was Sister Marguerite. She couldn't be stern if threatened with hell, but she wasn't her rollicking self. She just looked, without emotion, and glided past.

Everyone was in black—their expressions questioning. It was a long line of black figures disappearing over the horizon, all coming to see her; to see what she was making of the life for which they had spent years preparing her.

There was an end to the black. Color followed; not bright color—dull color. Her family was coming, all of them. Her mother and father filed past, her sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. Something was strange: they were not questioning as the black ones had. They crossed themselves as they passed. They appeared to know. They couldn't know. *Nobody* knows! Should she shout to them? Should she tell them everything? How could she? How would it sound? What would they do?

*'Hey! All of you! I loved him! I loved him with all my heart and he loved me. You have to understand that. We loved each other! We were going to marry when he returned. It was going to be forever but he was killed. He's dead! I can't help that! He's dead and I'm going to have his baby!'*

## CHAPTER FOUR

*'Yes ma'am, that flight arrives in Seattle at 11:21. Yes sir, we can confirm that for you. No sir, that flight is completely booked. We can book you on 525 arriving two hours later. Would you like to make that reservation? Yes ma'am, your dog will be on the same flight.'*

It came easily to her, without effort. The training had been good. They were a near-perfect match, she, and American Airlines.

It had gone so fast—so very fast. It was over while she was higher in the clouds than he had ever been, higher than anyone had ever been. It

was everything she'd hoped for and dreamed about—everything! It had gone so fast—so very fast.

“Lunch break, Dianna,” Lisa announced fixing her lipstick. She'd elected to stay in New York when training was complete while Daphne had chosen Atlanta to be closer to home.

Dianna was secure wearing the headset. That was her other self; the one of steel and foam and electric wires—that one was no trouble. The one sitting across the cafeteria table from Lisa was something else. She had no plan for that one.

“You have to, Dianna. I've known him all my life. He delivered *me!* and he delivered me *of*—two years ago. I never told you.” Lisa was pleading.

Lisa was not Catholic. She wasn't raised in a cocoon of liturgy, piety and dogma, with flames licking about her soul. Lisa could never know how impossible her plan was. She had no idea of the pains of hell—no concept of forever. Two lives would end—one murdered and the other beyond redemption.

“As soon as it shows, you'll be fired. You know that.”

Dianna knew. She thought of their son—perhaps their daughter—playing in a yard somewhere as she recalled her childhood long ago. She'd come to the door and call the child for lunch. What would Alex think if he knew her options? What would he tell her?

“When you go home, what then? From what you said about your mother, she's a guaranteed suicide—guaranteed!”

It was true. Her mother could never imagine this, not in all her years. It could kill her.

The girls returned to their stations and she again welcomed the security of the headset.

A week passed while she imagined a huge gray door inching closer to shut. Soon the opening would be too small to pass through and the decision would be made without her true consent. She needed more time. Should she talk to a priest? She'd spare herself that, imagining all he would say. There was no more time. There was no other solution. There would be no redemption.

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On the bus returning from Marlboro, Lisa took her hand. “How do you feel?” she asked in a whisper.

*‘What did she ask?’* Dianna wondered. *‘Does she mean physically? Could she care about my soul? Does she know anything about the soul?’*

*Does she know some things can never be removed, and deny any hope of heaven? Can she imagine living her whole life knowing she has no chance to be saved?*' Lisa was so good, truly wanting to help her in the only way she knew.

It was done. There were no options, no decisions, no lingering matter of life and death. Tears welled in her eyes and she threw herself against Lisa. Silently, the girls rode on; the bus engine droning through nighttime miles, its tires snapping at every seam in the road. Lisa's arm held Dianna, her hand gently patting.

As though awakened in a different life, a strange and threatening time, she drifted through months without anchor or destination. Withdrawing from friends, she longed for the love of Alex; surrendering to strangers encountered while shopping or dining; men who took her quickly and went away, sensing a gulf they could never cross. How many were there? ten? She couldn't remember. Were there more? Only two were given added regard; but in the end, they too, opted for less complexity.

She stayed with American, feeling the need of home but not daring the chance they would read it in her face, in her manner. They knew about Alex, and about their plans to marry. His death could explain her melancholy but she feared the penetrating gaze of so many brilliant people. Even at Christmas she excused herself with the demands of holiday traffic, promising a visit after the rush. Then it was June, and her excuses had been squeezed dry.

She gave American three weeks notice and declined her last opportunity to fly free, choosing the train that offered more time to prepare.

Home was all she remembered except for Cheri who was now fat as a pumpkin. The family absorbed her as expected; their sympathy restrained to avoid reopening wounds that appeared to be healing. Questions about plans were allowed to end with her uncertainty. There was no pressure. For that, she was grateful. She would just hang out for a time. She'd saved some money. She'd take a little time and something would catch her eye. She was also grateful there was no attempt to match her with every available man.

Ellaine saw Dianna's return as the recruiting of a babysitter. There wasn't a scarcity, but she could count on her sister to be available in an emergency.

Dianna panicked when Ellaine asked. It hadn't occurred to her she could be alone in a house with a baby. "No!" she answered too sharply. "Ellaine, I can't."

*'Oh, God!'* she thought. She was upset and Ellaine would know. She had to recover. "But wait," she stammered.

"Is something wrong?" Ellaine quizzed.

"No! No, nothing. It's just that I promised a neighbor I'd help her cram for a math exam." That wasn't going to do it. "Wait! I'll phone her and see if we can juggle the time." That might settle her sister, but there was no getting out of it.

She arrived at Ellaine's, noting her sister betrayed no suspicion. That part was done. If only she can suppress her anxiety. Steeling herself, she managed; and when Ellaine and Claude were out the door she went to the nursery and collapsed in a chair next to the crib.

It happened on the street, in a grocery store, even on a bus; wherever there was a baby. Sight of a carriage caused her to tremble until she forced her attention elsewhere. The visceral responses had diminished over time, but the residual affect lingered, making her aware of a long, disquieting road ahead.

Alex would appear sometimes. Did he know? Could he see how their joyful delirium crashed with his plane and burrowed deeper even beyond? Would he forgive her? Would anyone forgive her?

She wept again, quietly, while Cheri slept. A book would take her away and she would be fine, for a while. Then, a movement in the crib, a whimper, would bring it back. She begged Ellaine to return.

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They knew she wasn't herself and attributed the down times to the loss of Alex. Among her sisters and girlfriends there was occasional envy for the love that could yield such pathos. All felt Dianna had aged beyond her time and their concerns bubbled-up weekly; when she avoided their Saturday and Sunday communion rituals.

She let them believe she was questioning God's purpose in taking Alex, but they were not satisfied to let her work things out alone. They took every opportunity to attempt reinforcing her faith. It was tedious, and she was cross with them on several occasions. Gradually, they backed away from the subject but continued to observe closely.

She couldn't focus on work. She had no idea where to apply. Teaching was open to her, but she couldn't concentrate to develop a plan. Instead, she volunteered everywhere she could: the YMCA, Salvation Army, the Sisters of Charity, even the Cub Scouts; anywhere there was a need for extra hands. At Christmas she used most of her savings buying presents; forcing serious consideration of her finances. Afterward, owing to a large

and understanding family, she put off that worry. She was buried in tiny gifts: stuffed flowers and animals, bath soaps, shampoo and colorful scarves. All had money inside their wrappings: over four-thousand dollars. Could God be letting her know He still cared? She dared not wonder.

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Haley was older by two years and had, on two occasions, betrayed her belief that Dianna owned the greater beauty. It was never an issue, but the potential couldn't be dismissed. For almost a year, Haley had dated an older man who worked for the state. Ron Oliver wasn't that much older: in his middle thirties. Dianna liked him a lot. She liked his lively humor, and the way he was obvious about caring for her sister; never giving her cause for lingering doubt. She liked the way he made a joke of being a gentleman, to draw attention away. When he held her chair, it was because floors were always slippery. He opened the car door because he didn't want Haley scratching the paint with her nails.

Haley didn't believe her luck and constantly talked about things she would do after Ron moved on—in front of Ron, of course. Ron only laughed.

Ron was easy to talk to and after several sessions lasting hours, Dianna reluctantly withdrew from him before Haley imagined an ulterior motive. It bothered her, because Ron was bright and interesting. He seemed truly concerned about her future; rather, the fact she had no plans for it. Besides, she hadn't the inkling of an ulterior motive. She might talk to Haley about it.

“They're hiring where I am,” Ron mentioned one evening at the dinner table. “How would you like a job helping kids who really need it?”

“Oh, Ron!” Haley blurted. “What a terrific idea! Dianna, you should see this place—it's interesting as hell.”

It began like that, and though she wasn't keen, she questioned Ron and eventually agreed it wouldn't hurt to take a Civil Service exam. It could be useful.

She took the exam without promises. That was the easy part. She had a test-taking gift. Commitment was something else. Ron eased that part along on a beautiful Sunday, driving the sisters on a tour of the grounds at Shands. He parked at the school building and showed the girls inside. It was modern and clean, smelling like every school she'd known.

“The youngest here are ten,” Ron explained. “The oldest is seventeen. All have committed crimes. Many are throwaways by their parents and unless somebody does something now, they'll be in the system

the rest of their lives. They come here angry and know little except how the courts work. We try to teach them something they can use when they get home.” They entered an empty classroom and Ron waved toward the seats. “It has to be something you want to do because you care.”

Dianna saw how much Ron cared and continued to be impressed by him. She needed something soon and this could be challenge enough to keep occupied. There was something else. Shands was a closed society—like another world—a complete entity where nothing from her past would overlap. It would contain only what she chose to bring with her. At Shands, her longing for Alex and the wrath of her God would still be suffered, but with fewer reminders. She dared not hope for more.

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Aaron Weiss was impressed by Dianna’s academic achievements almost as much as her appearance. The former was good, the latter was bad. She was too young and too exciting to imagine. While he was nearly immune, as Assistant Superintendent he was bound to intercept any influence that could disrupt the order of things. Dianna was a ticking bomb—at least that was what he told his wife.

It wasn’t only inmates that Weiss considered. He presided over a closed community of employees. A beautiful, single woman in the midst of his over-the-hill crew could re-energize many and provoke their wives. There was nothing he could do. She’d passed all the tests; the opening must be filled. His heavy hand signed the letter notifying Dianna Malcomb of her employment by the State of New York; the Director of Academics would require her presence on September 7, to prepare her assignment.

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A week of orientation with too many references to violence nearly ended it all. She was not assured the violence probabilities were minimal; she’d seen some very large inmates. Ron helped her relax enough to continue, but it took effort she’d never before had to extend. There were new rules of deportment and dress, security issues, and the constant need for vigilance. The institution was a cocoon: a self-contained village with few interruptions from the outside world. Her assigned class was referred to as Junior High; as irregular as she could imagine.

Nineteen adolescents ten-to-fourteen straggled in her first morning. Without exception, all bumped into the first desk in the room, their heads unable to turn away from the new teacher standing by the blackboard. Only one murmured “Wow!” too loud. Roy Lamberson was ten-years-old and four-feet-one-inch tall with coal black hair falling over his eyes. He saved

her day. She'd expected to be intimidated, but seeing Roy imagining an act too old for his years strained her face as she struggled to smother laughter. 'Thank you,' she thought, 'whoever you are—I really needed you!'

Ron and the Print Shop instructor, Olaf Bengt, alternated a weekly car-pool. She was invited to share the gas. They talked of nothing but the school the entire round trip; no world events, no hometown scandals, only the latest at Shands. It thickened the insulation she drew around her, but was no help with the deepening concern her family emitted over her avoidance of their sacred rituals.

The year-end holidays delivered their most intensive assault but she steeled herself—shut out their entreaties and hurried back to Shands. She was needed, as Ron mentioned, and she'd learned to care.

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Her first six months quickly vanished and apart from attention, there were none of the difficulties Weiss anticipated. Even the wives she'd met at internal functions were relaxed by her warmth and non-competing manner. And, there was her pupil.

The impish Roy had burrowed under her skin, prompting a challenge she couldn't resist. He laughed in a way that implied a secret he'd not reveal, even to her. She didn't understand how a judge found so much wrong with the ten-year-old he'd imagined Shands was the answer. She could only convict him of avoiding her class.

On a day in February she had enough. She stood in the hall outside her class, facing in at Roy extending a piece of paper toward her. "You already missed three classes this week and I'm getting sick of this," she scolded.

"But I got a pass to the hospital. I'm gonna give a pint of blood," he joked.

"You don't *have* a pint of blood!" she scolded. She heard footsteps approaching. Concerned she spoke too loud, she turned to see who might have heard. An older boy looked directly back at her. He was bigger than the inmates she was used to and a split-second wonder that he might be staff was answered by his clothing. He was just a bigger inmate. She turned back to Roy whose eyes followed the older boy to the stairway.

"That was Jason," Roy informed her. "He's a baseball player."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Jason Broderick was on the high end of average; a little brighter, faster and stronger, but not so much that he was admired for it—just enough to be seen as different. He mixed well despite a shy manner, but there were never close friends or constant companions others enjoyed. Unaware of that joy, he didn't suffer loss. Alone, his imagination filled the empty hours. He had great imagination.

His father, Edward, had been a baseball player with the Cardinals, brought to the pros by a classmate when both attended Columbia University. His mother, the former Jenny Lynch, grew up in Catskill and went to New York to become a nurse. She'd met Eddy in the Emergency Room after that one had slid head-first into second base and had his hand spiked by the shortstop. They were married seven-months later.

Jason arrived between two sisters: Barbara, two years older, and Norma, a year younger. A three-story house in Bay Ridge with the smallest front lawn in the world was home in those days, but it was not to last. While his classmate went on to baseball fame, Eddy's asthma worsened and he never rose above the Cardinal's minors. Eventually, when Eddy was diagnosed with tuberculosis, the family left Brooklyn for the cleaner air of the Adirondacks, but Eddy's treatment was too late coming. In those days, even prompt treatment often failed the patient. Eddy was thirty-three, and Jason seven, when they last saw each other.

Jason didn't understand the ending. He and Eddy hadn't the time to grow as one might expect. He could never recall making an emotional connection—a *father* connection. His father was a man who came and went like his uncles Cliff and Steve. When he was four and five, and Eddy was

not on the road, there were a few ballgames at Ebbets Field, being stuffed in the cannon at Fort Hamilton Park, or rowing on Prospect Park Lake. When he was six and seven, his father was never around. Those two years Eddy spent in Gabriels Sanatorium allowing only brief encounters at visiting times. The last of those visits also failed to connect the father and son.

Eddy sat up in bed, talking—no tubes or wires—nothing unusual to the eye, but everyone knew this visit was different. There was no fuss or emotion, but this visit was different. When Jason said goodbye, he felt sorry. Still, he couldn't make the contact that identified grief for impending loss. He knew he wasn't going to see his father again, but sorrow was all he could feel; grief was missing.

Shortly afterward, he felt more tangible effects of his father's passing.

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Eddy's insurance barely covered the sanatorium bill. That meant a difficult time for Jenny—managing a house, three children and a nursing job. After moving back to a small apartment in Catskill, her plight continued to deteriorate. She needed to further lighten her load and believed her least painful option was to board Jason with families willing to take him for what dollars she could afford. Soon, Jason began to wet his bed causing two 'boarding houses' to rescind the agreement. Jenny's final option was to place eight-year-old Jason in a Catholic boarding school in Albany, thirty-five-miles north. She didn't know that 'placing' a boy in LaSalle was usually done by the juvenile courts. That fact, along with the severity of in-house discipline, was withheld from parents willing to pay a boarding fee.

Jenny believed her well-intended decision should not affect her son's direction toward unsoiled destiny; the good Brothers would see to that. She had no reason to suspect that something unseen, something unexpected, could alter Jason's direction toward another, quite different destiny.

For Jason, it was bad from the first morning. In the dormitory shared with forty-five others he was awakened by a stick struck heavily across his legs. His wet bed was a crime discovered by an elderly Brother making rounds.

He withdrew, even from the other boys, and remained apprehensive—fearful of the next discipline. It might be because of another wet bed, failure to participate, or a broken dish. All were crimes that required the application of a discipline stick smartly and without hesitation,

especially from Brother Albert. The Third Division supervisor was a rotund German with a thick accent and a roll of fat in back of his neck.

Albert enjoyed his half-dozen bed-wetters. His punishment routine, besides the wake up stick, began in the evening when the boys undressed for bed. Each boy who had suffered a previous night's mishap had to stand by his bed, arms folded, while the others relaxed with books or listened to "I Love a Mystery" or "Fibber McGee and Molly" on the radio. The guilty must stand from eight o'clock until lights-out at ten. Then, Albert called them to his corner bedroom one at a time and laid them across his lap. He raised the nightgown to expose a bare backside and delivered as many blows of his stick as he felt appropriate.

They yelled, and that might have been the other part Albert enjoyed. Jason discovered that if he bit back the impulse to yell, not an easy thing for an eight-year-old, he would suffer fewer strokes. But Albert always made up for it; like the time Jason watched the older boys in the adjacent yard: Eight to eleven-year-olds played in the Third Division yard while twelve-to-fifteens played in the Second. It was forbidden for any boy to leave his assigned yard. Separating the two yards was a white line painted on the concrete with a six-foot, chain link fence stretching along one-half of its length. The second half had only the white line to mark the separation.

Jason stood, leaning against the post at the end of the fence, watching the older boys' game. With the afternoon sun at his back, he noticed a large shadow approaching from behind, rapidly growing over his own. While trying to identify the growing shadow—suddenly, a blow to his head sent him sprawling into the Second Division yard, and for a few seconds he lost consciousness. He was aware of being picked up by his shirt collar and swept back to his assigned yard. His crime, Albert screamed, was having his foot on the white line separating the two yards. Albert didn't need much.

Hating the fat German came easily to Jason, but without the intensity one might expect. It wasn't a boiling type of hatred, with explosive properties. It was just there, like his shirt—with him, but ignored most of the time.

One evening, the Donnelly brothers were brought to the dormitory. Days before, they had lost both parents in an accident and had no other relatives. They were good looking boys, but very pale; the youngest was seven and the older, nine. They stood together, not daring to move. Their eyes didn't seem to focus and stared straight ahead.

Like a predator, Albert sensed their vulnerability and began a pattern of abuse specific to the brothers. He never missed an opportunity to lash out at a Donnelly, orally or with his stick, and like frightened birds, the brothers tried to shrink their image to a less noticeable size. They couldn't hide from Albert.

Jason watched this rancor develop, and tried to extend himself as a friend for the only time at LaSalle. He felt sorry for the brothers. When they recovered from their dazed condition, he found them gentle in manner and obviously brought up with love and attention—nothing wise or smart-alecky. He liked them, but helping them deal with Albert was beyond him. He couldn't defend himself.

By the time the Donnelly brothers completed their first month at LaSalle, the intensity of Jason's hatred for Albert was cranked to the top notch. Though he was now ten, still, there was no way he could touch the fat German.

In the two years Jason was 'boarded' he received more than two hundred 'disciplinary' lessons, and three visits from his mother. Each visiting time he showed her the welts left by many sticks; but Jennie imagined they resulted from games and athletics. Maybe she didn't believe the good Brothers beat kids with sticks. Maybe she couldn't afford to believe it.

Jennie might well have packed her son in a canoe and sent him down the Hudson River. The parenting bond wasn't in the cards dealt to Jason. He never understood what he'd done to deserve LaSalle.

It was after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor that his mother remarried—to an Albany man—and Jason was brought back into the family. Everything was different: the school, the house, and the man. Jason was disoriented and uncertain of his role. The new stepfather was a lot older than his mother and long settled in a rigid routine. He was a good man, but neither Jason nor his sisters could appreciate it at the time. He was a day-shift machinist for the New York Central Railroad with an iron routine. For 36 years he'd awakened at 6:30 without a clock, dressed, fixed a breakfast and packed his lunch. Then, he drove to the West Albany Shops, parked, bought a newspaper at the main gate and headed for the john. Arriving there, he'd select an empty booth and sit for half-an-hour to read his paper and relieve his bowels. So rigid was his routine that years later Jennie remarked, "If Chan is five minutes late for work, he'll mess his pants."

Their house was a large Colonial with US Route-20 in front, and vast woods, swampland, and sand hills in the back. It was that great, out-back-place Jason escaped to at every chance. With nobody around, he could imagine *and be* anybody he wanted. A 'hero' was a favorite thing and he imagined Germans and Japs in every ditch, behind every tree and dune. These enemies he easily dispatched after school and on weekends with terrible weapons he fashioned in his basement from scraps of wood and tin. He fought World War II alone, because up and down US-20 for a mile in either direction, there were no troops his age.

Down the road, Fick's Rollatorium was a favorite place when he was on leave from the war. It was at Fick's most of his curiosity about girls developed, beginning with his attraction to Tracey Dwyer and Marie Connell. Marie was a roller skater, and being three years older at fourteen, gave him no attention at all. Still, even her slightly crossed eyes couldn't diminish whatever unknown it was that drew her to his interest. He knew she went to Hackett High, and he'd heard the rumor that Hackett girls 'did it.' However, the details regarding 'it' were fuzzy.

Tracey was a classmate at St. Margaret Mary's. Her interest, also was centered elsewhere; not on any boy in particular, just not on Jason. Still, he liked the way she looked without understanding why.

His experience with gender difference was more accident than education. Magazines displaying full color genitalia were far down the road as were the videos demonstrating their functions. A kind of movie was popular at male gatherings and while amateurish in production, the lack of frills could be observed only by one with an inflated sense of art. The activity was everything expected. Older people heavily guarded these black-and-white films. To see one required more planning and stealth than most eleven-year-olds could manage.

Then, there was National Geographic that occasionally displayed the bare breasts of African women. Often, these breasts were his only clue to gender. From his sexual viewpoint, there was an unreal quality to those women, as though they were not of his world.

When he was eleven, he saw his first nude woman in a grease-stained, black-and-white photograph mashed to the rear of a cellar drawer full of Chan's tools. She was no beauty even by his callow standards but her sagging breasts and black triangle were where he'd imagined. He recalled his second-grade attraction to Marion Gilmore, who had sat near the window in class. She had something—a beauty that drew his eye. Still, he never imagined her breasts or realized their lack of development. He felt nothing

for the overweight woman in the black-and-white photo, except a flash of sympathy. She must have believed she was beautiful to pose like that.

While the photograph evoked little, a door was opened and left slightly ajar. He noticed the girls in his comic books, making estimates of their maturity from the two conical arcs on their blouses and sweaters. Their bodies in profile brought his gaze to a halt, if only for a second. There was Betty and Veronica. They were older. The conical arcs were there, but he sensed sterility about them—as though nothing existed underneath their clothing. They were heads and necks, arms and legs. They were cute and active—sometimes funny—but never arousing. They didn't compare to one other he began to experience in his Airboy Comics. Not all World War II enemies wore uniforms.

Valkyrie was a pilot employed by the Germans, so he knew she was old enough to have everything she was ever going to have. She was slender, with long, raven hair, always flowing from the open cockpit of her super-plane; and she was often on the tail of the good guy, Airboy.

She was out to shoot down the hero, but it didn't matter. Jason liked her. Like Marion Gilmore, she had something that drew his eye but where Marion's quality was nebulous, Valkyrie's had a definite focal point other than her beauty. Her blouse, a deep plunging vee-front bottoming at her waist kept blowing open in the wind. It was open, but frustrating in its lack of revelation. Seeing the pale color of her skin in the area inside the vee drew his imagination to the texture of it.

Fueling this erotic flight was a small line drawn inside the vee; a short, upward-curving line indicating the bottom of a single breast. He was fascinated that so dynamic a girl should have such a tender place as part of her anatomy, but he couldn't recall where he learned it would be tender. Sometimes he turned pages back and forth, closely examining the length of each breast-line, until he found the longest one. There, he might linger a few moments allowing his imagination to draw the blouse back farther. Sadly, neither the length nor the curve of the line was ever quite enough to reveal her nipple—not even to his imagination.

His growth was two years ahead of his age, and helped his acceptance in the older crowd he preferred. Times were still energized by the war; masses of people were constantly in motion. The bus and railway stations processed huge crowds of uniforms, mostly saying good-bye, leaving tearful women overflowing with emotion. Younger men were joining the

service and being hurried along their way while girls at the Roller Rink yearned after them. Even the raw recruit was already a hero.

Jason envied that attention, and cursed that he was born too late. Nobody was impressed by his kill-count out back, in the woods and sand hills.

It wasn't the uniform that prompted him to join the Boy Scouts the day after he reached twelve; it was something to do in the real world. He knew some of the boys from his school, but another group from School 27 made up half of Troop 45. Leaders of the '27 group were the Nimmer brothers, Chris, the older, and Joey. Their parents were Catholic and contributed regularly to the Parish fund drives and Sunday collection plates.

Jason pursued the Scout programs with fervor, studying the exercises and lessons, gathering all the required elements for advancement. Troop 45 was newly organized and the top rank was only Second-Class-Scout, of which there were four, then five after Jason passed his tests. He was determined to be the Troop's first, First-Class-Scout, and after cramming the required learning and assignments, he presented himself at the home of the Scoutmaster, Evin Clancy, to be examined.

Clancy was surprised; skeptical that one of the newest members of the Troop should be so soon ready for the highest rank. Nevertheless, ratcheting the testing up a notch, he put Jason through the required paces, which the boy passed employing all his resources.

Jason was thrilled by his success, but soon after he was privy to a lesson in politics, which at the time went over his head.

The Nimmer boys' father was not happy about his son's ranking behind one who's Parish contributions were nothing compared to his own. He suggested to the Scoutmaster—his fellow Catholic contributor—that his older son could be ready to pass to First-Class, with a little help.

It was true. With a little help from Clancy, Chris was quickly promoted to the Troop's second First-Class-Scout and the event was welcomed as much by Jason as any other.

A few weeks later the Scouts were asked to create a knot board, displaying as many familiar knots as board space would allow. There would be a judging, and prizes awarded.

Jason spent hours in his cellar preparing what he believed would be a winning example. The board he chose was the size of his school desk-top; and he painted it blue to better contrast the white clothesline he used for the

knots. He used silver brads to form each knot precisely, and then taped the identity carefully underneath.

Completing the board, he thought it lacked something, and lingered on it in the following days. Finally, he fashioned ornate corners for the board from thin aluminum, and with some pride, delivered his work to the Troop on the night chosen for judging. It was put on the wall with the others next to a board three times its size.

Jason was impressed by the larger work. Not only was it bigger, the Nimmer boys had used a smaller type of rope; heavy cord that allowed three times the number of knots Jason had presented. He was sure he had the winner until seeing the Nimmer's board. He was awarded Second Prize; and he was okay with that; the Nimmer's board was impressive.

Several weeks later he overheard Joey, the younger Nimmer, mention that the board was his Dad's idea—the size and the design. He and his brother just made the knots from a sailing manual.

Jason saw his Second Prize award dissolve, and wondered if the Scoutmaster knew. Could Clancy believe the Nimmer boys capable of such a great piece of work without adult help? Had Clancy been careful not to inquire?

Jason tried to put the matter behind him, but it kept tapping him on the shoulder, demanding he take some action to restore his idea of fairness. It was persistent. In the end, he took the Second Place board from his bedroom wall to the cellar and destroyed it with an axe. The act didn't satisfy him. He couldn't think of the Scouts without a tremor of disappointment. It was several days before he thought of quitting. When the Friday meeting time came around, he went as far as the door, stood a moment, and then turned away to seek his older friends. He didn't go back. He felt older, but he didn't like it.

His older friends were less complex; they didn't give him much attention. Out and around, they could take him or leave him. If he was present, it was okay. If he wasn't, nobody was sent to find him. The arrangement was fine. He had to graduate next June and most of the older guys had quit school to go to work, or hang out at Kresge's or Walgreen's. He couldn't hang with them and stay awake during class; so, joining them was left up to him. Besides, the money he saved from a paper route and picking vegetables on Gerard's farm had to be carefully managed. Older guys had more expensive ventures and keeping up his end was a growing problem.

Weekends would be okay. He followed mostly, lagging a little behind. They talked a lot about sex and getting laid—especially the guys in uniform. It seemed a part of their military obligation. Jason listened, but with no personal experience his understanding had huge gaps. Through little effort of his, that was soon to change.

The December night was cold and Jason had just passed thirteen when his first female contact opportunity fell in his lap. He met her in the balcony of the Leland; a theatre infamous for casual, brief encounters. She was fifteen and knew a lot about necking she was eager to share.

When the last show let out, they walked together up Howard Street where a lone car was parked in the middle of the hill. At this hour, it would be parked for the night so they decided to continue their necking inside, out of the chilling wind. Slipping into the back seat, the girl soon indicated her readiness to go all the way, if he wanted.

He imagined the time was as good as any; it would give him something to share with the others instead of listening all the time. They began the rearrangement of clothing.

When the girl removed her pants, it was apparent to his olfactory sense she had not been near a bathtub for some time. The unfortunate result terminated both his ardor and the experience. His excuse that it was later than he realized, was hastily given.

Exiting the car, the confused girl went up the hill while he went down, toward Pearl Street. He wondered how long the odor would remain in the car's upholstery; and if the owner's wife would crack her husband's skull imagining him the guilty party.

So, that was what the uniformed guys were talking about. Well, not for him. He wondered if one had to go through a war to become used to a smell like that. By the time he turned up Pearl Street toward his bus stop, he was through with sex—for good.

He graduated the following June—third in the class. The rank was unexpected from one who never opened a book outside the classroom. He imagined they'd made a mistake.

When Japan surrendered in August, he followed his older friends to Farley's: a drag-out bar on South Pearl Street where the celebration was wild. He'd heard that Farley's served anybody who could get money on the bar. It was a rumor he wasn't sure he wanted to test, and it took several minutes to crank up the nerve. They could only refuse, what the hell! Everybody was celebrating; nobody would care. "Bacardi and Ginger," he told the blank

faced bartender. He'd heard Victor order that. He didn't know anything else. Bacardi it was—six of them.

It might have been six; he couldn't remember. His only awareness was of daylight, and a head that could not possibly be his. He was home, inside his tent behind the garage—with no memory of how he got there. His head was pounding and the rest of him, nearly paralyzed.

It was unlikely his absence had been discovered. Nobody would wait up for him, especially on a roller skating night. Chan would leave for work early on Saturday, and his mother could imagine he was sleeping late. All he had to do was get to his room without being seen—but had he closed his bedroom door? He couldn't remember. He didn't want to move.

He lay, listening to the birds and sounds of traffic from the highway. He heard Sally McAmmond from next-door call out a greeting. His mother must be in the yard. Then he heard footsteps on the gravel and his mother's voice calling to see if he was in the tent.

Anxiety overcame his condition when he realized he didn't want the truth of this situation known. He told her he'd decided to camp out for the weekend.

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If Jason's life were being recorded by keepers of heaven's gate, the alcohol and lie would mark this morning as a waypoint, before beginning a new page.

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Jason's wracked, physical condition improved instantly. There was no hint of guilt. He was amazed how quickly the first big lie to his mother rushed out of his mouth—how it left a strange feeling of triumph, and relief that it went over so well.

Recovered from his first hangover, he felt a heightened interest in running with his older friends; an interest not equal to his earning limitations. Also, great strain was put on his creativity when questioned by his parents. He began taking money from his mother's purse to make ends meet, only two or three dollars at first, but later, fives and tens. This too, ended badly.

Alienating his parents slowly eroded home life and led to his first appearance before a juvenile judge. He was given a 'talking to' but LaSalle had taught him the wisdom of "Yessir" and "Nosir" to authority figures hoping to make a point. That was it—just talk, about stealing money and staying away from home and a description of probable consequences. It made him pick his spots with greater care.

Whether a waypoint or not, teaching himself to drive by close observation ushered in a new set of complications that began with the duplicate set of keys he had made for Chan's car. The keys had seemed necessary but he had no use for them until he met an older girl at Swinburne Park who needed to deliver a package to Albany Hospital. As he'd hoped, she was impressed by his offer to drive her; Chan's car being parked only a few blocks away. He'd have to return it to the same parking space, but that shouldn't be a problem as long as he got it back before the evening shift workers began filling the empty spaces. He was sure he could do it and said he'd pick her up in an hour. He needed time to smooth out his shifting and clutch work. Bouncing her around from every street light wouldn't be very impressive.

The car was where he expected. He needed to put the seat forward, noting its return position. It took longer than he figured to smooth his shifting. When the girl slid into the passenger seat, smiling, he redoubled his effort. She was impressed, and when it was over she promised to see him again—in the park. It was great!

Now, he had to get back to the same parking space. It was only three o'clock and the space was still vacant. He readjusted the seat, locked the door, and walked away smiling at the perfect end to a stirring adventure. By this time, the girl was an afterthought.

There were other adventures, and like the money from his mother's purse—it was a matter of time. The parking space was taken by an early arrival and there wasn't another one even close. He promised the judge it wouldn't happen again. It was what the judge wanted to hear. He was released from the hook.

His continued freedom soon presented other, different opportunities. Visiting his aunt in Scarsdale, he noticed several check books discarded in a wastebasket—remnants of a closed account. This was like seeing dollars swirling around in a toilet bowl. Jason retrieved the checkbooks and thanks to some obliging merchants back home, he was able to afford a three-day spree with all his older friends.

This one toughened the judge who acknowledged the restitution and determined probation—the official kind—was finally merited. The next mistake meant Shands; the State Institution for delinquents Jason had heard about from boys waiting their turn before the judge.

The end of the war raised emotions to a peak as the men began returning home. Activity at bus and train stations swirled at shoulder-to-

shoulder capacity. Jason was fascinated by the drama and romance of tearful reunions. It deepened his frustration for being left out of the greatest event in human history. He would never know that feeling of returning home to loved ones after strife and separation; of racing to be greeted and held in a long, tearful kiss. He believed it was the most romantic event possible—an event he was denied. Searching for ways to be included, he found only one—riding the trains.

Chan's long employment by the railroad earned him, and his dependent family, free travel anywhere on the New York Central line. A railroad pass kept in a dining room drawer would verify this to any Conductor taking tickets. Soon, Jason enjoyed the hectic bustle of Grand Central Station—waiting for the next train back to Albany. He was traveling among all those uniforms, eating with them, listening to their stories and watching long-awaited reunions at every station. It was as close as he could get to participate, and it almost seemed enough. He'd catch another train going west to Buffalo and return by the next schedule, enjoying every moment.

When high school beckoned in September, he refused to go and boarded another train for St. Louis. Along the way he was questioned by police who were not satisfied with his answers and telephoned his home. Given the corrected version by his mother, the police put Jason in a shelter in Terre Haute to await further disposition, which, in the end, was a free train ride back to Albany—on his pass.

Rather than involve the court this time, his mother took him to a psychiatrist who admitted him for observation. They observed for six weeks. For her effort and expense, Jenny was told—under the influence of sodium amytal—Jason revealed a strong resentment toward her for trying to be rid of him after his father died.

It was winter when Jason returned to the Roller Rink, Farley's, and his older friends. There were arrangements afoot to get him into high school but before they developed, another adventure blossomed.

On a February night after skating, there was the usual gathering at the Waldorf Cafeteria at State and Pearl. It was not yet midnight, but enough boredom had set in when one of his friends suggested stealing a car to liven up the night. Jason couldn't imagine this and was moved to withdraw. A few dollars from his mother was one thing, but a car was serious stealing. He didn't like it, but chancing it seemed better than backing out. They'd be in it together—he'd be with the guys. It could be exciting.

They located an old Pontiac sedan with keys and the five piled aboard. They were not heading anywhere in particular, just hoping to spot some girls; but the car heater didn't work and soon, getting warm was more important than girls. The buses had stopped running at 1:00 A.M., so his friends took turns driving to their homes, one by one. Jason was excited that soon it would be his turn to drive. The last of his friends got out, wishing him a good night. It *was* exciting, but behind the wheel at last, there was nobody to be impressed that he was driving a car. Then, he spotted Willie Stark shivering on a corner. Willie probably didn't know he'd missed the last bus. This could be his chance to impress an older guy.

He pulled over and offered Willie a lift. No sooner had Willie closed his door than an Albany Night Squad Buick blocked their path. Willie spent the night swearing his innocence to detectives who didn't know the meaning of the word. In the morning they let him go but it was another court appearance for Jason, this time with police escort.

The judge said, "Shands"—for an indefinite term.

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It was reasonable to believe; after so many potholes in his road, Jason's shot at unsoiled destiny was far off the mark. While seldom more than serious stupidity and bad timing, his behavior was about to reap its consequences.

## CHAPTER SIX

In middle March, patches of green and brown were just beginning to appear through the snow when Jason's handcuffs were removed at Shands. He was led to a three-story brick building with white trim; driven right up to the entrance. He'd expected walls—fences, at least.

Inside, the acrid odor of alcohol and disinfectant identified a hospital more surely than a sign. The Trooper who removed his handcuffs explained: "They'll keep you here a couple of days, delouse you and check your health to see that you don't contaminate anybody."

"There's no walls," Jason said, puzzled how this hellhole he'd learned of from former inmates kept anybody confined without walls or fences.

The Trooper flashed a wicked laugh. “Rottweilers are more effective.” He laughed again, motioning Jason to a bench along the wall where several inmates waited. “When you think about running, think about a big chunk of fat being torn out of your ass—then think again. Best advice I can give you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jason answered. The Trooper had been okay on the drive, sharing his cigarettes. When he headed for the door Jason called, “You going to bring me home when I’m done here?”

“Not likely,” the Trooper laughed. “By then I’ll be too old to drive.”

“Yeah, thanks again!” *‘Joker,’* he thought, looking around. *‘I won’t need you to drive me home. If I can’t outwit a dog I deserve to be here.’*

A guard sat on a stool across the hall, attending the bench sitters. “Just wait your turn,” he told Jason without emotion. “No talking.”

*‘No talking! Jesus! How long does that last?’* He continued scanning his surroundings, returning the gaze of two brown-clad boys slowly mopping the gleaming linoleum. A female in white crossed the hall barely glancing in his direction. *‘Females,’* he thought. *‘I didn’t think they had females here.’* He wondered whether any were young.

The guard left his stool and went to the doorway where the nurse disappeared. Jason couldn’t hear what was said. Then, he felt the nudge to his side.

“Where you from?” the black boy asked in a whisper. He appeared to be younger than the others.

“Albany,” Jason answered in a like hush. “Can’t we talk in this place?”

“Yeah, but not where we at—an’ when the hack say not to, ‘less he go off some place.”

“What are we waiting here for?”

“I gonna get cough syrup. You gonna get scrubbed.” The boy found some humor in that, and then faced front when the guard headed back to his stool.

The guard from the hall was now his personal escort and directed him to the Clothing Room. Two sets of the same brown garb he’d seen earlier were pushed to him over a counter. “These should fit,” the inmate worker said. “If they don’t, trade with somebody. When you get stuff that fits, stencil this number in them so you get them back from the laundry. You’ll get a temporary locker upstairs, and a coat and gloves when you leave.”

Jason took the card with his Shands ID# 8322 printed on it. His watch and the six-dollars he carried went into a manila envelope and his shoes into a pile in a corner. Watching the shoes, he suddenly remembered. “Wait a minute,” he called. The boy behind the counter looked blank. “Can I have my shoes back a minute?”

“What for?”

“I keep a twenty stashed under the insole—you know.”

The boy looked around at the shoe pile. “Ah! Too late now! I don’t know which shoes are yours.”

“They’re right there, on the side,” he pointed.

The boy turned back to Jason and slapped a pair of black brogues on top of the clothing. “These are your shoes now. I got no time to look for the trade-ins.”

“They’re right there,” Jason insisted, pointing to the leather around his twenty-dollars.

The boy took a half-step back from the counter. “I got no time I said.”

Jason rebuked himself for not expecting this act; further, for betraying his stupidity by mentioning the twenty. He set his hands for a jump over the counter, catching movement of the guard’s baton from the corner of his eye. He checked his impulse at the last second, and then gripped the clothes bundle as though it had been his only intention. His act played well. The guard relaxed his posture and the clerk’s face continued blank as he passed over white socks and underwear, canvas slippers and a long, white gown. “Put these on. Wear them in the hospital until you get turned out.” He pushed a rolled towel toward Jason. “This is yours too.”

Jason took the towel, toothbrush, and new bar of soap to round out his worldly possessions. The procedure reminded him of his first day at LaSalle. ‘*Jesus!*’ he thought. It seemed like yesterday. Taking his bundle, he leaned toward the clerk and whispered, “I’ll remember you.”

“Hey!” the clerk turned to the guard. “He just threatened me!”

The guard approached Jason with a frown. “You want to be a wise ass?” He waved his baton. “You want your skull opened up on your first day?”

Jason clung to his bundle. “No sir.”

The guard poked his stomach with the baton. “Well move on out of here and no wise shit, y’hear?”

“Yes sir.” Too many of Brother Albert’s teachings had gone to sleep. He *knew* this score; what to say and how to act. ‘*Forget that bastard!*

*Stop drawing attention to yourself like some yokel.*' In the end, he knew *he* should have remembered the twenty. When his anger cleared, he could not wish away one problem. It would be cold running cross-country, and he'd been given no coat.

In the next hour Jason was deloused and scrubbed, needled and certified non-contagious before putting on his gown. Then, his guard herded him up three flights to a solarium echoing with voices. He unlocked the heavy door and motioned Jason inside. "Do what you're told and don't make any trouble."

Jason entered the room and heard the door being locked behind him. Another guard, older and very fat, with as red a flush as Jason had seen, sat high on a chair at the far end of the room. Twenty or more boys in white gowns and slippers socialized over cards, magazines, and conversation.

There was an audible lull as sharp attention turned his way to calculate the probability of a threat. When none was perceived, the noise and activity resumed.

"Hey, you!" the fat guard called, "you there!" There was no mistaking who was being called.

A tall inmate approached Jason from the side, as if bearing a warning; then, in afterthought he turned away. Jason carried his things toward the guard who began making a show of twirling his baton.

"You come into a new area," the guard said, "you check in; you understand? you understand? You check in with the guard. What's your name?"

"Jason Broderick."

The guard set his baton aside and prepared to write in a small notebook. "Spell that." Jason did, and the guard looked up. "What's your number?"

He remembered the card he'd been given, and read it aloud. The guard added the information to his note and returned the book to his pocket. "You check in, y'hear? an' don't forget!"

"Yessir!" Just like LaSalle.

"Benedict!" the guard called.

The tall inmate who had altered his approach now responded. "Yes, Mr. Czyka."

"Get this guy a locker."

"Yes sir, right away."

Benedict motioned Jason to follow. Out of earshot of the guard, he said, “I was going to warn you the porker’s a stick man—any excuse. Then I decided you’d figure it out.”

“A stick man?”

“A fuckin’ sadist. He likes to rap on you with the stick. There’s a few of those bastards around. What’s your name?”

“Jason.”

“I’m Ben. Where you from?”

“Albany.”

“Buffalo—this your first time?”

Jason was puzzled. “What d’you mean?”

“First time at Shands.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Take any one of those,” Ben said, indicating several open lockers in the long row. “You don’t need a lock. Nobody wants that crap. What’d they get you for?”

“A car.”

“Only one?”

“They thought one was enough. What about you?”

“I’m a cat-man.” Ben seemed to take pleasure in the term. “I sneak into people’s bedrooms and take the wallets right out of the pockets and purses. It goofs me. Really gets me high, watchin’ the dumb fucks snore away when I’m leaving with their shit.” He laughed. “I only wish I could hear ‘em tryin’ to figure it out the next morning.”

Jason closed the locker and joined Ben on a bench along the wall. Ben was taller than he, but slim, with hawkish features and a full stubble of black beard. “How old are you?” he asked. “None of my business,” he added.

“No sweat. I’m seventeen—over age for this place, but I’m getting out in three months. Got a hernia lifting hay bales.”

“Hay bales?” Jason said. “They got a farm here?”

“Five of ‘em. One of ‘em is for pigs. Jesus! Don’t let ‘em send you there! The stink’ll knock you dead. Takes months to scrub off.”

“How long do guys usually stay here?”

“A year to eighteen months if you don’t cause trouble. This is my second time. I got three years in this shithouse. Boy! am I gonna fly pretty soon, y’know?”

*‘A year to eighteen months—it might as well be life,’* he thought. He couldn’t suffer confinement that long, especially in a place with no walls or

fences. Somebody must be crazy. He lowered his voice. “Does anybody ever escape from here?”

Ben glanced around. “Sure. Two or three times a month somebody gives it a shot. Most don’t make it.”

“Why not?”

“They got no plan. They just run with no place to go. A lot of hills and woods out there but it’s all farm country. Farmer sees brown clothes and hurries to ring the man. They get a reward. They’re like Shands watchdogs—all around—for miles.”

“But some guys get away.”

“Some.” Ben too, lowered his voice. “You plannin’ a skip?”

Jason stared at the floor a moment. “I can’t stick out a year in a place with no fuckin’ walls. I don’t know. I probably will.” Then, responding to another stress, “Where’s the john?”

Ben pointed down the hall. “On the left.”

“I’ll be back,” he said, and started off.

A husky, black kid moved to the adjoining urinal. “You new, huh?” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. Just got here.”

“I see Benedict easin’ into your case. That’s Benedict mo’fo’k’n Arnold! Careful what you say. That mo’fo’ gonna rat you out to the man.”

Jason was surprised. “Why would he do that?”

“That’s his mo’fo’k’n job—shakin’ out new guys that’s plannin’ to skip.”

“I thought he was a patient. He said he had a hernia.”

“He got no mo’fo’k’n hernia—he just a rat. They keep him here to check out new stuff like you. Just watch what you tell him. They protect him. Goin’ up-side-his-head is worse’n hittin’ a guard—watch y’self.”

The boy zipped his pants and went to the sink. Jason followed. “What’s your name?” he asked. “I’m Jason.”

“Niko,” the boy answered, and left the room.

Jason dried his hands, slowly. He’d already mentioned skipping; that he couldn’t last a year. Blabbing that could carry a price. He cursed his second round of stupidity and resolved to tighten his grip on where he was.

Ben was leaning on the fat guard’s chair when he returned; it was obvious they’d had a conversation. The guard’s hostile stare followed him to his seat; an indication Niko had been right. Ben walked to the bench, laughing as though he’d heard a joke.

“What’s funny?”

“He’s tellin’ me about his old lady.” Ben continued laughing. “Can you imagine somebody so bad off she thinks he’s a lover? Almost makes me sick thinkin’ about it.”

*Play the dummy,*’ he thought. It wouldn’t do to brace Ben with Niko’s warning. “I see what you mean—scary. Say,” he thought to change themes, “when I was on the throne, I got thinkin’—it might not be too bad—I mean, hanging in for a year. I might even learn something.” *‘Don’t make it too thick,*’ he thought.

“Only thing you’ll learn is—it’s smarter to steal ten cars than just one. You’ll learn *that!*”

At the far end of the room a boy banged a metal table with a large serving spoon. “Supper,” Ben said, indicating Jason should follow. He did, through a hallway making mental notes along the way; scanning windows to learn what was outside; and doors with signs to where they led.

They arrived in a small cafeteria where two guards supervised the serving of Spanish rice, huge chunks of bread, tea, and a molasses cookie. The inmates had moved as a group going in, but when each boy finished his meal, he was free to return to the solarium on his own; a brief, unsupervised moment Jason tucked away in memory.

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Outside the hospital, thirty to forty inmates lived in each of the twelve block buildings that dotted the thousand-acre Shands facility. A name from the Zodiac identified each one. The “Bunkers”, as they were called by the inmates, were designed as two-story structures; however, the bottom story was built below ground; a cellar, where inmates entered from above and spent most of their non-scheduled time. With no windows or doors, security could be relaxed. Fresh air was circulated by machinery.

The top floor; the ‘daylight’ floor above ground had a small apartment in one corner for the resident overseer and his wife. The rest was a theatrical set mainly for show; a furnished stage where visitors and investigators might be soothed by the evident homelike conditions. Except for those occasional callers, or an air-handler breakdown, nobody ever went to ‘daylight’ without dust rags and a mop. The kitchen was an exception. Inmate ‘trusties,’ supervised by the overseer’s wife, prepared the food and lowered it by dumbwaiter to less-than-trusty inmates who served it cafeteria-style.

‘Housemother’ was the affectionate title given the female half of the live-in couple; but only if she was a fair and considerate overseer. Unloved, she would be the ‘Bunker Bitch.’

The resident couple was assisted in control and security by pairs of guards from neighboring towns who worked eight-hour shifts. These guards also led columns of inmates to and from school and vocational assignments. There were no walls or fences around Shands, and walking in the open where escapes were possible, guards needed to be watchful for any developing plan. When an inmate decided to run, the guards could not leave the group to give chase. A runner had a fair chance of getting lost in the countryside unless he was run aground by the 'skip-chaser' squad. These men were employed in other duties until an alarm was given. Then, they mobilized vehicles, dogs and horses in minutes to begin the chase. They had the routines and geography down good enough to bring back nine out of ten runners. The more successful runner who made it past the skip-tracers was left to the State Police, also well educated by experience.

Shands was Alcatraz prison to the inmates; whether he came from a slum tenement or a Mayor's home. It was confinement in a place *not* their home territory. It was restriction on their movement and activity, denial of gender interaction, obedience to authority; and if a boy dwelt on all the things Shands wasn't, the impulse to skip could be strong.

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Assistant Superintendent Aaron Weiss had a quick eye for reaction to his words. Noting little from Jason, he continued. "You're young, and a year seems like a long time. A year will be gone before you know it. We've got plenty here to keep you busy, and even teach you a thing or two."

Aaron knew that trouble percolated in every moment, around every corner. Since his appointment, he viewed court reports with enough doubt to shift his reliance to his instincts. He interviewed each new arrival one-on-one to make his judgment. The boy facing him across the desk was not radiating warmth and cooperation.

"Skipping out will add six months to your stay; at least, six months. Boys that skip usually steal things along the way—clothes, cars, whatever. Each item adds more time." He paused to take the temperature. "Time can add up quickly, and when a boy becomes too difficult for us, we ship him to Elmira—walls, towers and guns—hard time. There, they start over with their own calendar, and they do their counting in years, not months." He riffled papers in a folder in front of him. "This paperwork indicates a rather bizarre intelligence. Frankly," he sighed, "I sense trouble for both of us, but you'll be treated just like all the others. You'll get to name your own game. If you get out of line, my job is to *react* to whatever cards you play. For your own

good, I hope you'll use some of that bizarre intelligence and *use* this time to your advantage."

Jason knew the message and he was grateful for it. For his meeting with Aaron Weiss he had to leave the hospital. For that, they'd given him gloves and a coat.

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"She's the head nurse," the fat guard told him back in the solarium.

"What does she want with me?"

"How the hell do I know? Follow him," he said, indicating the young boy who had delivered the message.

On the stairway, Jason inquired further but learned nothing except what was printed on the door he was told to enter: 'HEAD NURSE' in bold, black letters, and: 'R. Doyle, RN,' in a corner below. He followed the young boy to nurse Doyle's outer office where another inmate worked at a desk.

"You Broderick?" the inmate secretary asked.

"Yes."

"Take a seat." He held a button on a box in front of him and spoke. "Jason Broderick is here." He released the button.

Rosalind Doyle was returning folders to a cabinet when Jason entered. She nodded to a chair at the side of her desk. Older men thought her beautiful with dark, close-cropped hair. Younger men would think her attractive. Her clear, pale skin suffered nothing from the sun in thirty-four years, and she'd sworn it never would. Her starched uniform was off-the-rack and revealed nothing intimate about her figure, but hinted that it might be good. Below her knee-length hem, her legs supported that probability and Jason was pleasantly impressed. She seemed 'interesting,' and he remained quiet while she returned to her desk and the open folder.

"I don't see any violence in your record," she said, turning several pages, and then looked up sharply.

*'Is she disappointed?'* he wondered.

"That's a good thing," she continued, "but there's something else I have to know. Are you planning to run the first chance you get? Unfortunately, I can only believe you if you say yes."

It appeared that Ben had gotten her ear. "Then why ask?" Jason dared.

"Because I need an answer. If you say no, and *then* you run, I'll know you lied to me—that I can't trust you."

“Does that mean, if I say no, you won’t believe me but you’ll trust me?” He thought he saw the faint beginnings of a smile. She appeared to be thinking.

“How would you like to work here, in the hospital? They say, it’s the best job in the place, but I wouldn’t know. You’ll be an orderly, and study nursing technique. We get the best food—probably more freedom than most.”

“What kind of freedom?”

“Well, you don’t get to go dancing in town, but around the grounds you’re mostly on your own—walk to the library, the gym, church.” She looked again in her folder. “How old are you—fourteen? Is that right?” He nodded. “You look older.”

“Gets me in the bars,” he said.

“Not for a while,” she answered. Then, “I forgot to mention one thing. All our boys make parole on their first call. That means you’ll be out in a year.”

Nurse Doyle painted a fetching picture, and he wondered why she’d chosen him for the plum she’d described. *‘Maybe she likes them young,’* he thought. He’d heard that some women did.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Sounds cool.”

“Splendid.” She closed the folder and leaned toward him. “There’s just one more thing. You haven’t answered my question. Will you run at your first opportunity?”

“Hell, no! I mean, no—of course not. You made the place sound like a resort.”

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Jason found it bearable for six days. Nurse Doyle hadn’t exaggerated about the food and alone, he’d made two unescorted trips to the library. He’d also noticed a common thread among the seven other boys working as orderlies. They were all blond and good looking. While none had offered salacious tales, two had panted over the prospect of Nurse Doyle’s attraction to handsome young boys. Jason didn’t need that fantasy to develop, and elected to forego his place on her list. On a night too cold and rainy for dogs to be effective, he went over-the-hill—literally.

He’d never had to escape before, but dozens of war movies had made him conscious of do’s and don’ts when moving through enemy territory. Ben had warned him about the farmers seeking rewards. He wondered how much he was worth to them.

In the dark, he made his way through fields, stopping fifty-feet short of the country road that led to U.S. Route-20; twelve-miles farther south. Out of sight, he watched many cars pass; *too* many for a rainy rural road. The Shands alarm must be out. He began to shiver as the cold rain crept in around his collar. He pinched it tighter and began jogging in place to diminish the chill.

The run card he'd played for Aaron Weiss carried a specter of second-thoughts. Why had he done it? He didn't know. Without walls and fences, confinement seemed a joke, inviting him to go. Didn't they know that?

He continued exercising for several hours, until traffic eased to an occasional vehicle. He guessed it was near 2:00 A.M. He made his way to the asphalt and began jogging south, more for warmth than progress. He jogged backwards much of the time, watching for cars that could be skip-chasers who hadn't given up. Before the headlights could pick him out, he'd jump in the ditch until the vehicle passed, then resume his pace. The rain had let up and it was during one of his waits in a ditch that he imagined himself the skip-tracer hunting down a runaway. He would cruise the road slowly, as quiet as possible; show no lights to let his eyes adjust to darkness, just as his prey. Without those thoughts fresh in mind, he would not have been listening so intently two-miles farther along; would not have heard the Chevrolet in time to dive to the ditch. In the reversed role, he too, would have cruised slowly with lights out, but not in the high-revving whine of second gear.

Dawn was breaking when he reached Lafayette. It prompted his first thought of what rain and ditch mud would do to his hope for a ride. Hitchhiking had been his main transport for years. His blond hair and clean looks let even women feel comfortable picking him up. He was seldom passed by more than half-a-dozen cars. Then, his pants and shoes were not wet and caked with mud.

Approaching a gas station, he slipped into the men's room and bolted the door. Quickly, he removed his pants and rinsed them in the sink, and then wrung them out as tightly as he could. Struggling into the cold fabric he heard footsteps approaching. Someone tried the doorknob. He froze. There was knocking on the door.

"Hey, in there," a mature voice called. "This room's for customers. Let's go in there!"

*'Be cool!'* he thought. "I'm sorry, mister. I just couldn't wait 'till I got home—I been sick lately."

His intruder appeared to consider that. "Well, hurry it up." And then, "Do I know you?"

*'Shit!'* The guy was making a case of it. "We just moved here couple of weeks ago."

"Well, hurry it up. I got customers."

Buttoning his pants brought on more shivers but wrinkles were better than mud. At least the pants were all one color. "Coming out!" He flushed the toilet and opened the door.

The man waited, looking unsure at Jason's wrinkled pants. "I don't recollect seeing you. Where'd you move to?"

Jason walked past the man, motioning toward the highway, still three-hundred-feet away. "Down the highway," he said easily, "the old Kennedy place. Hey! Thanks a lot." The man couldn't know everybody. He continued walking with a backward peek to see that he wasn't followed. The man continued watching as he returned to the front of the station. Jason lost sight of him and hurried to the corner. The man could be calling police at that moment.

He chose the western side of the traffic light, where cars would stop on red. Depending on the degree of sorrow he could exhibit, it offered a slightly better chance. He was glad the man at the station couldn't see which way he'd gone. He put on his best forlorn expression for the five cars waiting for the green. They were unmoved and pulled away with the change. He wondered how close the State Police were billeted. For a main highway intersection, they had to be close. A second half-dozen cars queued up on the red, but were no more open to sharing than the first group.

*'Damn the nosey bastard,'* he thought; wondering why people couldn't mind their own business. *'I just used his lousy shithouse. It wasn't even clean!'* Again, he wondered how long it would take the Trooper.

The light was green when a late-model Buick streaked underneath with the horn blowing. Jason turned to see the car pulling over past the intersection, and the driver waving him to come. "Yikes!" he called aloud and raced to the Buick; expecting any second to see the black-and-white Ford with a red, flashing light. He slipped into the leather seat and closed the door. "Thanks, mister."

"My pleasure, son." He was middle-age, slightly overweight with thinning brown hair. His face seemed friendly. "Been drivin' all night and figured I was ready for a hotel or somebody to talk to—keep me awake."

"Well, that's my luck, I guess. How far you goin'?"

As the Buick approached the crest of the next hill, Jason saw the flashing red light of the car he'd expected, hurrying in the opposite direction. He breathed easier with the shadow of the Trooper now past.

“That guy’s in a hurry,” the driver said. “He’s not after you, is he?”  
*‘Is he joking?’* Jason couldn’t tell. “Don’t know why he would be,” he answered with a laugh.

The driver then joined the humor. “I guess if you robbed the bank you’d have your own car, eh?”

“Or a bicycle, at least. Say, how far you’re going.”

“Going all the way to Boston. What about you?”

“Albany,” Jason answered. “Just to Albany.”

“That’s too bad. I was hoping for company all the way.”

“Maybe somebody else up ahead will be hitching.”

The man seemed to settle his disappointment and briefly scanned Jason from head to toe. He lingered a second on Jason’s muddy shoes. “You live in Albany?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What brings you up this way?”

Jason remembered the best lies always floated close to the truth. “I go to a boarding school I don’t like, so I’m going home.”

“A boarding school,” the man repeated. “I guess that explains those institution shoes.”

With his travel problem apparently solved, Jason tried to relax, but something about his situation kept him uneasy. The man wanted somebody to keep him awake. “What kind of work do you do?” he asked. The man appeared in thought. “I say,” Jason began again, “what sort of work you in?”

The man thumbed over his shoulder to suitcases in the back seat. “I sell lingerie—wholesale, to the big department stores.” He appeared in thought again. “That school,” he began, “they just let you walk off like this—no bus ticket or anything? How old are you?”

Jason didn’t like the direction of the wake-up chat. They’d only gone about twenty miles; not far enough from the active State Police. He needed more miles. “I’m seventeen,” he said. *‘Stay close to the truth. Make a story out of it.’* “I didn’t tell them I was leaving. I left a note in my room. They’ll just phone my folks to expect me. This isn’t the first time I took my own vacation.”

“I see. What’s the name of your school?”

He hadn’t expected this, and nothing near the truth would help. *‘Pick a name! Any name! Make it religious.’* “St. Bartholomew Institute,” he managed. It might go over.

“Well, St. Bartholomew sounds like quite a place. I’ll bet you’ve got ‘em stirred up this morning.” The glance he passed Jason had just enough mockery in it to reveal doubts.

*‘He doesn’t believe me, but he doesn’t seem to be upset’.* In the quiet, Jason imagined the man had problems of his own; then, the Buick slowed and turned into the drive of a large Colonial that advertised ‘Rooms For Rent.’

“What’s here?” Jason asked.

The man parked and turned off the engine. “I’m feeling too tired to go any farther.” He turned in his seat, letting his hand fall on Jason’s thigh. “Let’s catch a nap for a couple of hours.” Then, he looked startled. “Your pants are wet,” he remarked. “How did that happen?”

He watched the man’s smile broaden, deliberately keeping his hand in place. “I’ve got to keep going,” Jason said. “My folk will be expecting me.” The man squeezed his leg.

“We can get those pants dried off inside. You’ll be more comfortable. C’mon.” He removed his hand and opened the car door. Jason opened the door on his side and stepped out. Instead of following the man to the house, he walked toward the highway.

“Hey!” the man called after him. “Where ya’ goin’?”

Jason called over his shoulder, “I’ve got to keep going, I told you.”

“Wait!” the man called. Jason stopped, turning as the man approached slowly. He was smiling. “I’ll bet that Trooper *was* after you. What about it?”

“Not likely,” Jason answered. “I’ve got to go.”

“Well,” the man started, “I could make a couple of phone calls and, well, you know...”

He’d been through this before. The first time had taken him totally by surprise. He hadn’t learned that some men desired sex with young boys; and he’d listened intently to the driver describe a young farm girl’s encounter with a small horse; a tale carefully designed to arouse him. He recalled that it had, but before the situation could mature, the car reached his house. The driver had seemed angry, but he’d stopped. Later, Jason had wondered what might have happened.

Jason could have felt sympathy if he’d not been threatened. He faced the driver squarely. “2A-464,” he said, looking at the Buick. “That’s your license number, mister. You go make your calls and when a Trooper questions me, he might not like what I say about you, 2A-464. I think there’s laws or something.”

The man frowned, and then appeared to accept the stand-off and turned back to his car. Jason thought of following—a ride being a ride, but he

didn't. The man started the Buick and drove off. Jason began walking east, feeling the morning sun's effect, particularly on his wet pants legs.

He'd walked only six-minutes when a tractor-trailer stopped and took him the rest of the way without incident. He was grateful for the calm.

Going home didn't seem smart, but getting to home territory had been the extent of his plan. On arrival, even *that* appeared a hollow achievement. The temptation to stop at his house proved too great, and his mother talked him into surrendering. It wasn't difficult. Time in the tractor-trailer had revealed the realities of his fugitive status. At home territory, things didn't look so hot.

A painful thought chided him for giving up the soft touch in the hospital, for nothing. He recalled his word to Nurse Doyle, but felt no remorse. She had to take her chances just like everybody.

He was driven back to Shands with three others recently sentenced. For a short while he felt like the old pro, telling the new boys what to expect. The new boys were let off at the hospital while he was taken directly to the 'Taurus' building: the high security, close supervision, no smoking, no sports, no recreation, dirty work bunker reserved for Dunigan's road-gang. It was the only dwelling at Shands where a normal cellar and two floors above were open for use. There, his handcuffs were removed.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rebellious inmates on Taurus dressed in gray to distinguish them from the penitents wearing brown. They marched in double lines arranged by

height, to-and-from every dirty job at Shands. Talking was only allowed in designated areas and to address Mr. Dunigan, the resident overseer, or George Kirker, the sullen, borderline masochist, day guard.

Deprived of the niceties, Taurus inmates were required to practice sainthood by working hard, keeping the mouth shut, and obeying the rules for three or four weeks. Then, if they managed that, release—transfer to one of the normal bunkers was arranged. Inmates thought of Taurus as the stepchild of the Georgia chain gang, without the chains.

Jason made a closer connection with Taurus than with the hospital. Taurus was simple; expect no favor. There was no awkward uncertainty over staff motives.

Clifford Dunigan was in his early forties, a little overweight and grateful for his intelligence, dry sense of humor, and full head of sandy-red hair. He also felt lucky his attractive wife of thirty-three hadn't held out for rich and handsome. Donna managed the domestic affairs of the Taurus bunker aided by two resident houseboys.

Inmates sent to Dunigan's custody had already been judged and he didn't see it his place to add anything as long as the rules were obeyed. Each new inmate had his respect, which lasted until they crossed him. Then, it was a long pull back to his grace. He liked the way Jason did his work and kept his mouth shut.

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"You'll get bid out quick," his road partner said. The tallest on the gang, he marched with Jason at the head of the line.

"What do you mean?"

"Every bunker's got a team. The overseers bet heavy bucks on the games. They watch the hospital for any big guy comes in that might be a player—Taurus too. We're like, the talent pool."

"You play baseball?" Jason asked.

"I wish," Aubrey said. "They already know I don't so it means an extra week or two here. They'll bid you out first thing."

"They don't know if I can play."

"They don't know you can't—not yet anyway. You're big. They see that and they take a chance."

"Shut up that yapping!" It was the day guard, George Kirker.

Aubrey waited until the guard dropped back. "The bastard's a sadist; fancies himself worthy of better things. Don't worry. He only gets physical with the small guys when Dunigan isn't looking. I'm betting he's a wife-beater."

Jason planned to give Kirker a wide berth. Stuck on Taurus for an uncertain time, he didn't want to energize friction.

When three weeks passed and transfer was arranged, Jason knew he'd remember the many wrong ways to dig a ditch. There was something else—strange and unfamiliar. Perhaps it was only Dunigan's dry humor that set him apart; but Jason couldn't remember another adult he'd respected. It wasn't total respect, only a leaning in that direction.

His five-eleven, hundred-seventy pounds had excited four overseers to bid, but it was to Elbert Mason, overseer of Aries bunker that he was delivered. There was a private meeting on the rules.

"If you skip on me," Elbert began, "get caught and do your time on Taurus, I have the option to get you back. If you're a valuable athlete I might do that, and lay some extra heavy duty on you. If you're a klutz and I take you back, life will be punishing—trust me."

Jason nodded his understanding. "I had my skipping experience and it was nothing. I turned myself in. Maybe you didn't know that." It was what Mason wanted to hear. "I'm here, Mr. Mason—here to stay 'til parole time."

With that allegiance sworn he was turned out to join the others who lost no time testing his skill. He had a strong throwing arm so they put him at third base.

"What the hell is a Blacksmith Shop?" he asked, staring down at the work assignment he was handed.

"Hey, man, that's cool!" A boy who worked in the kitchen answered. Reggie Binoche was down from Canada and before he'd pulled the trigger, had believed that he had diplomatic immunity. "Otherwise I'da gave him a pass, you know. The motherfucker kicked me. I only shot him in the foot."

Reggie continued with his experience. "I was there a month before they made me a cook. It was cool. There's this little old guy with a great big head—he don't bother ya. He looks like a Lane but man! that motherfucker is tough! I mean, *he is tough!* I seen him practically throw one of those big farm horses on its ass—I mean, *right on its ass!* Horse nipped his leg while he was shoeing it."

Jason looked up from the paper. "Is that what I'll learn?" he asked, "how to put shoes on a horse."

"He'll teach ya. I almost learned."

"Where the hell am I gonna get a job shoeing horses?"

"There's other things—like welding and shit—making stuff out of iron. Hey, man, the little guy is *cool*. He don't mess with ya and that's big."

Another inmate from Aries shared his shop assignment and after lunch, showed him the way. Inside, the Blacksmith Shop had the look of an old, auto repair garage, with a rafter ceiling thirty-feet above the standing-timbered floor. Years of forge soot had blackened everything not handled on a routine basis—the ceiling and walls—and a rack of cold roll steel in the far corner. Four hooded forges stood in a line to the back; each with a rack of tongs and an anvil nearby. Spare wagon parts shared space along the walls with beautiful wrought-iron gates and doors awaiting completion or repair. It was the smell that stirred Jason. It wasn't offensive—only unique—the residue of burning forges, red-hot metal, and the natural deposits from a thousand horses that had stood for shoeing; deposits dried or swept away, but never quite eliminated.

Ed Young was near retirement after working the trade all his life; a trade that kept him one-hundred-forty pounds of sinew and gristle. The huge head Reggie referred to was crowned with snow-white tufts. He scanned the assignment sheet Jason delivered and then put it on his desk. “Mr. Broderick!” he said casually, “welcome to the vanishing world of the smithy.” His outstretched arms indicated his domain. “We keep the farm machinery and the horses running for what time they have left. You’ve been asked to help. There are no classes—no examinations. As long as you’re assigned here you’ll learn by watching me, and, when I think you’re ready—by doing.” Looking up at Jason, his gaze was direct over the top of rimless glasses, and his voice was calm and deliberate. He indicated the back of the shop. “The last forge back there will be yours to tend.” He signaled to another boy. “Mr. Bettis here will get you started.” With his welcome completed, he turned away to other matters.

By mid-afternoon, Jason was packing wet coal in his forge for the third time when he was surprised by a booming call from the front.

“Strike a blow!” Ed Young’s command thundered through the shop and Nathan Bettis rushed to respond. Ed stood at his anvil with tongs in his left hand that gripped red-hot metal. A tool in his right was positioned above it. Nathan had grabbed a sledge along the way and now held it ready to strike the tool. Ed nodded and Nathan began. With each blow of the sledge Ed repositioned the tool—the effect creating an ornate design on the red-hot piece.

Back at Jason’s forge, Nathan explained, “When you hear him yell like that, to strike a blow, just grab a sledge and do what I did.”

Jason was surprised. “Where did a guy his size get a voice like that? I thought he weighed half-a-ton.”

Nathan grinned. “Yeah, he got some lungs, ain’t he? He shakes the dust off the rafters. Just be sure you got control of the sledge. You fuck up his design, you better get out the way ‘cause he’ll throw that hot piece at you and he don’t miss.”

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Jason batted .428 through the summer and made only three errors. He’d learned to weld with acetylene, shoe a horse, and complete an ornamental iron gate for one of the staff bunkers. He got on well but kept to himself. That wasn’t a problem because no fewer than three others constantly vied for group attention with extravagant tales of sexual and criminal exploits. He enjoyed his solitude, but a nearby radio could ruin his day. He’d hear a song that evoked memories of a skating partner, the girl at Swinburne Park or another, better time. He’d become melancholy, each time more despondent than the last.

On an evening in September, hearing Jo Stafford sing "I'll Be Seeing You" was his Siren call and sent him down the road again.

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He knew it didn’t make sense, but why should it? Nothing had made sense for as long as he could remember; as though his life had been a mistake, or had somehow become entangled with the restless spirit of another. Or was he meant to be twins? one good and one evil—and the second body had been forgotten. Which body had survived to host adverse spirits in constant struggle for dominance? Which twin was he, back when it might have made a difference to know?

‘Stay a year and be released.’ Released to what? he wondered. He’d been there; there, where it had made so little sense he’d ended at Shands. Why suffer this sentence to return to that, bearing added shame?

His questions would resonate a year-and-a-half while he broke every promise, ignored every hand, and forced his keepers to be extremely pissed-off. Three escapes had brought him to the edge of tolerance and he knew he risked prison with number four—but it didn’t matter.

He had no trouble getting away and headed for New York City. Near Poughkeepsie he was picked up by a Vassar student who invited him home for dinner. He accepted, glad for the meal. But her parents, an overprotective pair, were not thrilled by the unkept stranger who had fewer answers than they had questions and Jason hadn’t had his first bite when the police came knocking. He knew better than to run. The girl cried, but it didn’t help.

It was dark, after hours, but Clifford Dunigan was his dry, humorous self unlocking the handcuffs—issuing Jason his gray clothing, a nightgown and towel.

"We've been expecting you, Broderick. How was the trip?" He finished the outfitting and led Jason upstairs, pausing in front of the locked dormitory door. "What can I say," he said. "I thought you were smarter than this; at least, smart enough to stay gone. I almost made a bet on you." He unlocked the dorm door and ushered Jason inside.

It no longer mattered he was the best third-baseman at Shands, or possessed intelligence, however bizarre—or gave every appearance of a bright, young collegian. The powers at Shands were finally fed up!

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Perhaps he needed the high walls to remove the option; to force him to complete what he now viewed as the penalty phase of his life. Nostalgia no longer moved him. His last run was prompted only by the opportunity. Perhaps he needed the walls.

In bed, he reviewed his calendar again. He would be released from Shands had he resisted that first run from the hospital. Subsequent runs had all been disasters. He'd imagined a far place, where nobody cared who he was or how he got there, and would let him go about his life. He considered his lack of luck could be a warning there was no such place. There would always be somebody too curious, too intrusive; like the cop at Hawthorn Circle who had taken him into custody, and the Vassar girl's parents; that the freedom he'd run for was illusory--merely a cage of different character.

He tried to imagine his reward for sticking it out. Still, it was returning to where he'd been. So, what had made 'running' for it seem reasonable at the time? Perhaps he *had* to return in order to begin anew. Perhaps, unmoved by nostalgia, it could be worth the wait. He'd taken all Shands could deliver and suffered only what he'd imagined.

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Six weeks passed before Elbert Mason decided to stick his neck out again. His afternoon guard had charge of the team and promised to keep Jason staked to the ground unless he was running bases. "I *know* we can hang another plaque on that wall," he'd insisted. It was a lot for Mason to pass—six years since the last plaque. Still, he didn't like it. Broderick had been trouble for everybody he touched and everybody who had touched him. In the end it came down to a plaque on the wall.

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“I’ve been thinking about sticking it out this time,” Jason told Dunigan. “Mason wants to pound me for skipping.”

Dunigan ignored the sticking part. “A pounding from Mason is the *best* you have coming. I *know* Aaron Weiss is working on Elmira! You’re lucky to have Mason take you out of here and give Weiss a chance to cool down. You’re a pariah! There won’t be any other bids. Aries, or Elmira—you choose.”

Jason accepted the transfer and reassignment to the Blacksmith Shop. There was no pounding by Mason, only the promised extra duty.

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Ed Young had mixed feelings about spending time with Jason that could easily be another waste. He liked Jason—the boy learned fast. When he’d skipped out, Ed had merely shaken his head. He was there to be a blacksmith; to pass on the skills. He didn’t like wasting his time and decided to learn where Jason’s thinking would lead if he was given another chance to run. His plan could wait a few days. He resumed Jason’s instruction as though the boy had never left.

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Jason became more relaxed thinking about his sticking idea. Six or eight months might be enough. It was a better feeling than searching every moment for a weakness in security. He liked the feeling and in less than a week, made his commitment.

Several days later, Ed Young asked if he could make it up to the school with the monthly vocational reports, *and find his way back*.

He was surprised and elated. Was the old guy senile—trusting him out of sight? The school was two-hundred yards away offering clear passage to Syracuse, Vegas, and Hong Kong. Could he make it back? The blacksmith couldn’t know about his new thinking. He liked the old guy and would not be at ease putting him on the spot. He could do it, but he wouldn’t be at ease.

Walking unescorted refreshed his resolve. Along the errand, the last of his doubt disappeared. He liked the new feeling of being trusted and glanced toward the Taurus bunker. He wondered if Dunigan could see him walking without an escort.

The school was the newest building at Shands; a long, three-story brick with the bottom floor half-buried. Stairs to all floors were in the middle and at each end. Jason had been escorted inside only once, to see the dentist. He entered at the south end just as a bell rang. Shuffling feet and closing doors sounded the beginning of classes. Watching the hall empty he

decided to explore, enjoying the idea that he *could* more than what he might see. He decided to walk the full length of all three floors starting at the top.

The top hall was empty except for a small boy at the far end talking to a woman. She must be a teacher. The boy wasn't entering the classroom and a discussion about it was heating. She complained he'd already missed three classes that week. The boy insisted he had a pass to the hospital.

He recognized the boy from one of the junior cottages, but he didn't know his name. Juniors were required to attend the school and only mixed with the older boys at sporting events. The squabbling pair ignored his approach.

Except for the nurses and the over-forty resident wives, women were scarce at Shands—especially young ones. Her face was turned away, hidden behind long, pale brown hair. What he *could* see was promising. She wore a two-piece brown suit with a skirt too long to tell much about her legs. He was startled by her perfume. He recalled fragrance from other times but it had never prompted the delight he was feeling. Delight dwindled, as it seemed he would pass without seeing her face. It could be the depth of his day. His father had passed on too much British blood to do anything tacky like bumping into her or concocting a question. He'd suffer his loss and recall her perfume, her soft hair and delicate ankles in moments he felt would be coming. He was three steps before passing when she turned to see the source of approaching footsteps.

Jason's visceral reaction was acute—unlike anything he'd known. She faced him a full second, betraying no thought or emotion. She had the largest eyes he'd ever seen. Her skin was clear, pale in contrast to full, red lips slightly parted as though in afterthought.

She turned back to the boy and Jason drifted on to the stairway trying to assemble rational thoughts to go with the disquieting encounter. Why had such a beautiful young woman chosen this of all places? Had the administration gone *bananas*? Perhaps they had no choice. The jobs were Civil Service. If she passed the test, she had to be hired. But her! Why this place of everywhere she could be?

He could still see her eyes when he reached the basement level, below his destination. The envelope he carried belonged on the main floor. Recalling his errand he returned there, delivered the envelope and left the building. Walking away, he couldn't resist turning to see where her window would be—top floor, next-to-last classroom. He could see it, and he could see her standing at what must be the back of the room. She faced inward toward

the class. He was glad of that, though uncertain why it mattered whether or not she saw him looking. It couldn't be a bad thing.

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Ed Young disguised his pleasure when Jason ambled back into the shop. Runaways had a negative impact on the last person in charge but the old man never worried about that; blacksmiths were not jostling one another for his job. He was glad he'd taken the chance; glad for Jason's sake. The boy seemed distracted, but it wasn't important. He wouldn't make a point of it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“So, that was Jason, and he's a ballplayer. How nice. What does it have to do with you and me?”

Roy's eyes followed Jason to the stairway, and then turned back to Dianna. “Nothin' I guess. I was just tellin' you.”

“Well, march yourself to your seat and don't let me hear any more out of you until you're called to speak. Turn!” she ordered. Slowly, Roy turned back to the class. “Go!” she said.

He was wearing her down and she began to glimpse the problem Roy's Judge had faced. The boy didn't respond to guidance. He seemed to determine his day getting out of bed; then, let nothing alter his plans. She took a book from her desk and went to the back of the room. *'You can't let him win!'* she resolved—for the twentieth time.

In mid-afternoon the bell emptied her room and promised a welcome forty-five minutes. She decided to spend it in the Staff Lounge with a cigarette.

Ron Oliver was at a table, reading a magazine. He looked up. “I was about to go by your room.” He kicked out a chair for her and she took it. “You look unstrung,” he added, striking a match for her.

“It’s not supposed to show. That kid has got me so—”

“You mean Lamberson?”

“I mean Lamberson,” she snorted. “I’m getting nowhere and he sees how easily he can provoke me—so he does, and I let him!”

Ron twitched his head. “Back off!” he said. “Ignore him for a week or two and see if he misses the attention.”

“Ignore him! He sits there with that devilish grin, daring me to inquire.”

“Ignore him! Look right past him. You can’t let one kid get to you like this.”

“It’s my fault. I took a sentimental stumble on my first day and never got up.”

Dash, the drafting instructor entered the lounge and joined their table—he appeared to have news. His first name was Bill, but he encouraged the use of Dash. He was a bachelor, and liked to wear polo shirts that showed off the superb physique he’d developed lifting weights. He’d let Dianna know he was interested on her second day. “Guess who I just saw walking without an escort,” he said. Ron and Dianna looked blank. “Jason Broderick! I wanted to check his pass but he was too far down the road. Maybe we’ll get in some overtime on a chase detail.”

“I think he’s back with Ed Young,” Ron said. “He must have laid a story on the old guy.”

“Jason, something,” Dianna remarked. “Roy pointed out a Jason up on my floor, earlier. Is he a big kid—blond? a baseball player?”

“Sounds right,” Dash said. “What was he doing on your floor?”

“No idea. He just walked past and Roy pointed him out going down the stairs.” She turned to Ron. “I thought he was staff until I saw his clothes.”

Ron got up from the table. “I better call Ed just to be sure.” He went to a phone on the wall and asked to be connected. “Hello Ed. It’s Ron Oliver—yes, thanks. Say, is Jason Broderick with you? He was seen walking without an escort and—yes, near the school. I see. What was he doing on the top floor?” Ron turned back to the table indicating he was on hold. Then, into the phone, “There’s no problem Ed. I’m just checking to see if he’s back in shop—thanks. We’ll see you soon.” He hung up and returned to the table. “Ed gave him a pass to deliver the vocational report.”

“That’s downstairs,” Dash declared, turning to Dianna. “What was he doing on your floor?”

“He didn’t say, and I didn’t ask. Isn’t he too old for this place?”

The men looked at each other. “He looks older,” Ron said. “I think he’s only sixteen—maybe seventeen, but I doubt it. Ed said he was just taking a walk—enjoying his moment of freedom.”

Dianna sighed. “I’ve got to get back.”

Both men rose and Dash held her chair. “A road company of Brigadoon is at the Rialto next week. I’ve got your ticket,” he said.

Dianna smiled, “You’re sweet. You’ll find somebody.”

“Not like you!”

“You should learn to recognize your luck.” She thought he was a beautiful man but had decided not to risk entanglements by encouraging the staff. “Be seeing you.” She turned to Ron. “See you at five.” Back at her desk, she puzzled over Roy, again.

Through the following week she practiced Ron’s advice and withheld all attention from her mop-haired problem. There were signs he was being affected but she couldn’t tell how. ‘*Another week,*’ she decided, and was rewarded in its fourth day. Roy raised his hand to answer a class question; his first such effort that she could recall. His answer was wrong, but to save his face she called on two other boys she expected would also give wrong answers. She chose correctly, but suffered guilt for her tactic. She couldn’t let him stand alone if taunting should follow. None did. When the bell rang, Roy was last to leave the room and she pretended not to notice, pleased with her small beginning.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jason had never had a girlfriend; the exclusive arrangement puberty often initiated—a girl from class or the neighborhood. There had been a few necking sessions with roller skaters. He'd walk them to the bus stop after the rink closed. Buses were scarce at that hour and usually it was a half-hour wait. At the deserted gas station cross the street couples found privacy sitting behind the pumps.

Jane Winslow had sat with him one night. She was two years older but didn't know it. He always added two or three to his years whenever it came up. He'd heard Jane was fast and wasn't surprised when she let him get right to the necking. With his arm around her, his fingers felt the seams of the bra strap beneath her arm. His breath came harder while he imagined where he might go from there. He let his fingers rest softly while Jane introduced new realities to his kissing technique and Jason was emboldened to inch his fingers forward until they rested along the side of her breast. The soft, round flesh yielded easily to the gentle pressure he dared. Jane's kissing ardor intensified and brought him a serious erection. He had no idea what to do next—even if conditions had favored something *next* to do.

There was another girl he'd met at the Leland Theatre; she lived in Rensselaer. They took the bus there after the last show and walked half a block to her house. She cautioned him to be quiet and gently opened the outside door to the cellar disappearing inside with a whisper for him to follow. The blackness was total and he stood a moment letting his eyes adjust. It

might have been a play room; it was hard to tell but there was a couch, and he joined her there. This girl also was two years older, but she didn't kiss like Jane. It was okay, but he imagined he might teach her some things. They were barely into the necking when the girl took his hand and placed it between her legs. The flesh above her stockings seemed to burn his fingers. She drew his hand higher to her panties and moved it back and forth in a massaging motion. With her skirt so high, he expected to be overcome as he remembered in the car on Howard Street. He was relieved when no odor reached him; rather, there was an odor, but it wasn't offensive. He couldn't identify it. He felt himself coming erect and moved to feel inside her material. She held him out, twisting and tossing her hips, continuing her back and forth motion a little faster. She continued controlling his fingers, her breath quickening until at last she clamped his hand between her thighs and buried her head on his chest. She remained ridged almost half a minute while her breathing returned to normal. He held her, wondering if she was okay. He recalled Dickey Rowe's epileptic seizure in the school yard during recess. It seemed like that, a little.

When distractions passed, he became aware that his own response had withered along the way, and the girl, resting her head on his chest indicated whatever had happened, was over. She confirmed this moments later remarking how late it must be; that she had to get up early; and how much she liked him as she led him toward the door. Walking back to the bus stop he wondered if he should call her. Then, he'd forgotten to get her number. At least he knew where she lived. Maybe he'd just drop by.

There was Tracey Dwyer, but they never even touched. She was the best looking girl in seventh and eighth grade and would be his choice if he ever went after a girlfriend—but he never did.

She had the largest eyes he'd ever seen, and they had looked straight at him, betraying nothing. He wondered if *his* eyes had revealed anything. She must be used to men gaping at her; or was it only boys that gaped? boys with too little style and experience.

The shop day ended and he returned to the Aries washroom to get ready for supper. He didn't join the banter about tonight's game with Virgo; he went outside and sat on the grass. He couldn't see the school; the laundry and cannery buildings were in the way. In his memory he again made his way along the hallway of the top floor—seeing the young woman at the far end come closer with every step. When she turned to face him, he held that picture as a camera shutter captures a chosen image. He sent his mind over every

detail—the flawless pale skin—red lips parted slightly, and her enormous eyes focused totally on him.

The vision wavered and he struggled to reclaim its clarity, and then shook his head to clear it. He shuddered involuntarily, and his skin prickled with concern for the hidden cause. He'd seen many girls and women, but none had left such an imprint. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to kiss her full, red lips. He wanted to hold her in his arms—capture her, and press her body to his own.

"Hey, Broderick!" somebody called. "Chow!"

The game with Virgo was lost in his priorities. He played well in a mechanical way. They won, but it didn't excite his attention. Instead, the cause of his earlier shudder had slipped through and forced him to review the attitude and events that had brought him to this place. He saw the person he'd allowed to develop—the one everyone else saw and dealt with—the one he'd let slide since LaSalle. The visions unnerved him for the first time.

The unsettling emotions recurred later that night as he lay in bed hoping to evade the conclusion being forced upon him. He realized he was ashamed of himself and it left a raw and depressing perception. There was no doubt, and no getting away. This Jason Broderick was not a misunderstood innocent—the prize he'd imagined through recent years.

Before sleep came, he was crushed by the reality of that young woman ever being drawn to the images he'd reviewed; drawn to somebody like him. It tortured him to know that only in a dream might he have what he desired.

There was no relief in the following days. The deeper he looked, the more despondent he became—vexed by immutable facts. He saw his name stricken from every worthwhile list on the planet and where it remained, there was a footnote of foul analysis. The young woman was frequently recalled, but involuntarily. With effort, he put her out of mind as though by doing so she would not see him clearly. He didn't want her to see him clearly! The need to expel her image was prompted by a surprising reality—that he could not deceive her—could not lie to her even in his imagination. Still, he longed for the memory of her and the fragrance of her presence. He became morose and those with need to be near him were giving him more room without knowing exactly why.

During his first few days at Shands, he'd learned the small Catholic Church on the grounds was named for St. Dismas—one of the three who were crucified on Calvary. He'd even attended a service there. Imagining how the church was named had never entered his head, but as he passed the building on

his way to the gym his glance was drawn to the sign spelling out the saint's name. His thoughts lingered on it, and then on Dismas himself. A thief, he and another had shared Christ's fate on Calvary. His last minute expression of sympathy for the one innocent of the three had won him a place in heaven for eternity. He'd been a thief all his life. Facing his last minutes, with no knowledge of any possible reward, he'd gained heaven with a chance remark.

Jason thought it better than a sweepstakes. Why, at this time, did he recall that story from his LaSalle days? Why glance at the church at all? It was a plain building. Nobody answered; at least nobody that was heard by anyone else.

In the space of half-a-dozen strides that afternoon Jason recognized his chance. Somebody up there *must* be watching. He was thrilled and excited by his discovery; the prospect of another chance. It *had* to be coming from up there! Nothing earthly could have brought it about. When his elation eased, it was replaced with unfamiliar humility that endorsed his conclusion about the source. Quietly, he whispered "Thank you" to the God he was suddenly, and surprisingly, eager to know.

Days passed while Shands' structured routine guided his body where it needed to be, issued words that were expected, and brought calm to waters where waves had tossed. His distraction became so evident that security went on alert, fearing another escape was developing. He noticed, but ignored the effects and withdrew from his surroundings to an imagined private place. He wanted time to examine Jason Broderick—the one hiding from the young teacher—undisturbed time to explore the unpleasant awareness he'd chosen to acknowledge. He wanted to face the disappointment he'd brought to others who had a right to expect more.

His reflections were punishing times no hickory stick or judicial sentence could equal. He made no excuse, nor did he turn away. When he reached the bottom he recognized a conniving bastard who had survived only by the tolerance of others. He would have quit one like himself much sooner. He shuddered, imagining the number who *had* quit him.

He couldn't get over St. Dismas who, in one unselfish moment, erased his whole misbegotten life and passed free as a bird into heaven. Dismas didn't ask for heaven; he didn't even know what it was. In the most stressful of all his times he'd only wanted the right thing for somebody else.

Jason didn't want heaven either—at least, not yet. He only wanted the chance to overwrite his loathsome image with behavior he knew he could master. He was certain. He'd known the right choice to every wrong move

he'd ever made. There had been no confusion—no uncertainty in his choices—he'd been deliberate and the memory held pain. All future choices would still be his to make; and *there* he found his hope. Dismas' time had run out while his own time opened to forever; or so he imagined. Could he be in a better place? Would he choose another place—away from her?

He continued in the routine with a peace so strange it made him apprehensive; doubly so when he realized the old restrictions no longer bothered him. He accepted the confinement, the security, and the time he must remain. He also realized the irony of being exactly where he needed to be to embark in a new direction.

Security remained tight, but he soon realized it was a good thing. They'd never believe his escape proclivity had been exorcised. If they knew, their concern would double with wonder and he didn't need that added scrutiny.

He continued to recall the teacher, no longer suffering the urge to hide. His dreams saw them together, alone and asexual. He believed God was engineering his fortunes and salacious desire seemed a poor expression of gratitude. It might even make Him angry. He dreamed only of being with her to enjoy her nearness—her fragrance. He dreamed in every free moment, passing on games, books and activities. Movie day was the best. He'd pass on the film and remain behind, undisturbed for three hours on the grass under a tree.

During the best of these times a dark moment intruded to mock his feeble dreams. Its effect was always a fierce rout of every fantasy; and anger that he seemed helpless against it. The young teacher had no idea who he was—that he was alive and in love with her. In her reality, he didn't exist. The fact hovered, and then passed to acceptance while he hastened to continue from the last of his magic moments before that dark intrusion.

*'That's got to change,'* he thought, but he knew it wouldn't. "You have to make it change!" he said.

"Make what change?"

It was Kenny, sitting next to him on the bench. He must have added voice to his thought. "Nothing," he answered. "I forgot something—was thinking out loud."

"Hmmm," Kenny puzzled, returning to his Western.

Meeting her was the only way. Toward that improbable end he anguished for three days before the idea came.

“How do you spell the name?” Jason shouted from the door of the blacksmith shop. He could get her attention if Calvin Wallace had the detail he needed. Twice a day Calvin’s supply truck circled the institution making deliveries and pick-ups. Gossip was a big commodity.

“M-a-l-c-o-m-b,” the boy shouted as the truck pulled away.

Jason looked around to see if anyone wondered why he needed that spelling, but he’d chosen a good moment to ask. The spelling vanished on the wind and he went back inside the shop enjoying a new excitement. He’d make a nameplate for her desk. It would be his reason to meet her and, in front of her every day, it might keep him in her mind. What could be better? He thanked his God for the gift of an exciting new purpose, and began rummaging for the broken whipple-tree he’d discarded last week. It was oak, and would trim to a neat, triangular block.

Between the drying of six coats of varnish, he cut two-inch high aluminum letters with a hacksaw, shaping them with files and a drill. These were fastened to the right of a small plate on which he’d engraved the word “Miss” with a tiny chisel.

Something unknown caused him to shudder. Why now, and not sooner? He paused in his work and went to a window that faced the school. *‘She can’t be married!’* he insisted to the specter; but convincing himself took several moments. The specter vanished, and he resumed his effort. *‘She can’t be married,’* he confirmed. Excitement returned, and was sustained through the finish.

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Ed Young was old but not senile. Jason may have thought his project went unnoticed, but Ed had cast enough glances to connect all the pieces. He could have warned Jason of his duty to report behavior inconsistent with the routine. It said that in the Employee Manual. Ed never finished the copy they provided; he’d been hired long before it was printed. He’d followed the change in Jason almost from day-one, and the nameplate had diminished all his concerns.

Jason approached him, unwinding rags from the project and placed it on his desk. “What do you think?” he asked.

Ed looked at the piece, and then at Jason. “I think I’m surprised,” he said. “You kept this so close to your chest the past ten days I expected you to smuggle it up to the school.”

Jason laughed. “That other guy would have done that.”

“What other guy?”

Jason shook his head, ignoring the question. “So, what do you think? Is it good enough?”

“Did you spell her name right?” Ed asked, turning the piece slowly.

“Yep.”

“Then, I guess it’ll do. She should like it.”

“I’d like to deliver it myself. How do you feel about sticking your neck out again and not call for an escort.”

That request was not a surprise. He nodded his approval and, with a wave of his hand conveyed Jason’s permission to deliver it unescorted. The pass he wrote explained the delivery of a ‘Shop Project’ to the school.

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Jason couldn't recall such excitement. Ed’s pass gave him official sanction. He was on the King's business! Then, his nerves began a staccato dance beneath his skin, and he was only half-way there. He could see her window, but only the dark glass.

As he walked, a pickup truck with two men came toward him from the school and stopped when he’d come abreast. “Hey, you! C’mere,” the driver called. It was Seymour Labovitch; the resident overseer of a Junior bunker. Jason didn’t know the other man. Both got out of the truck as Jason approached. Seymour called to the other man. “Isn’t this the son-of-a-bitch we get called out to chase every other week?”

“Looks like him all right.”

“What are you doin’ here boy? You headin’ for Albany?”

Jason had never come across Seymour, but he’d heard of him; a beefy-faced man in his fifties who had come to his job before a high school diploma was required. He’d been reported often for a heavy hand to his Junior charges. “I’ve got a pass,” Jason said.

“Oh, yeah! Well, let’s see it. What’s in the bag?”

Jason handed over his pass. “It’s a shop project I’m delivering to the school.”

Seymour studied the pass and turned to his companion. “Imagine that old fool Ed Young givin’ this asshole a pass to walk off.” He turned back to Jason. “Open the bag.”

Jason did as he was told.

“Take it out, stupid—take it out! What d’ya think I’m standin’ here for?” The companion seemed curious and moved around the truck to stand with Seymour. Jason unwrapped the nameplate and handed it over. A large grin spread over the man’s beefy face as he displayed the work to his

companion. “Looka here, Claude. ‘Miss Malcomb’! That sweet thing up yonder in the school. You make this, boy?”

Jason’s first impulse was to tear the gift from Seymour’s stubby fingers and race to the school; he held a legitimate pass. His second impulse overwrote the first and he did nothing. He needed to get away without a problem. Letting Seymour know he’d made the gift could create one. “Mr. Young put a time on that pass and I’ve got to get back before it expires.”

Seymour held his grin. “Well, don’t worry about being late. You turn your ass around and get back to the shop right quick. I’ll see the lady gets this. Don’t you bother yourself on that.” He began to laugh.

Jason reconsidered his first impulse. He was furious, searching his options. “I’ve got to deliver it,” he managed without revealing his growing hostility.

“Didn’t I just tell you not to worry about it? Now, get on back before I write you up for sass.” He let Jason’s pass slip from his fingers and flutter to the ground. “There’s your pass. Git on now, y’hear? before I change my mind and haul your ass to Taurus.”

Jason watched the two men get back in the truck with his gift. They sat, looking at him, waiting for him to move. He’d lost the exchange and with it, the introduction he’d dreamed and planned. Recovery was not in sight—not in this hour. Overcoming his rage he retrieved the pass and started back to the shop. The thought of Seymour on the same planet with his love was bearable—but in the same room with her, it made him sick.

## CHAPTER TEN

Minutes into her free period Dianna sensed someone in her doorway. It was not a warm sense. She looked up from her work to see the heavy-set man wearing a slight grin. She recognized him from staff meetings—one of the residents who had often smiled her way.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said. “We never met, but I’m Seymour Labovitch. I’m the resident on one of the Junior houses.” He stepped into the room, shifting a package to his left hand and extending his right.

Dianna took the hand lightly, but remained seated. “I recall seeing you at staff meetings,” she said with the slight warmth she reserved for the uninvited. “I’m Miss Malcomb.” She wondered what instinct had caused her to withhold her first name.

“Yes. Well, I been hoping we could meet some time. I worked here longer than most and like to think of everybody as my family if you know what I mean. I’ve been meaning to come by and...”

Dianna’s attention turned to the doorway as Ed Young made a brisk entrance. She’d met the old man several weeks before when Ron gave him a lift to and from the school. His car wouldn’t start and needed overnight repairs. She had been surprised by the man’s gracious manner that belied the uncultured, Old-West impression of blacksmiths she’d culled from the movies. Little of that gracious manner seemed evident at the moment.

“Seymour!” Ed called crisply. It was more command, than greeting.

Seymour turned toward the voice. “Ed!” he answered with uncertainty.

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