

THE GODS OF BELL

(29,643 words; 114 pages, double spaced, New Roman Font
By Robert Gately

PREFACE

“The Gods of Bell” was my first attempt at a novel and screenwriting. It’s a storyline that started out as just two guys goofing on the public between the hours of four and midnight. The storyline changed as I got feedback from gurus like Michael Hauge and Dave Trottier and the readers of my screenplay writing contests. Now it’s more like a ‘Sneakers’ tale than some kind of Peter Sellers humorous story that it started out as.

If I learned anything from this effort, it’s that writing takes dedication, passion and the ability to compromise. The dedication and passion I don’t think I have to give further details on. But I say the ability to compromise because, when I first started writing this novel, I spent every ‘free’ waking hour on it and it took me about a year to write. When I lifted my head out of the sand when I finished, I found that my world had changed and my wife no longer wanted me around. My first marriage was dissolved right after this endeavor and I promised myself I would never do that again. Today, when I write, I tell my wife about it and we discuss the ‘time’ I need to complete the project. Like I said, this was my first project, my first novel, my first achievement, so I hold this endeavor dear to me because of that, but it came at a cost. If I were to recommend to any writer some words of advice, it would be, let the people who live with you know what you’re doing and negotiate the time off you need to accomplish your task. Negotiate.

Having said the above, be assured that, when I wrote that, my employer at the time, (AT&T), employed “7,452 Smiths, 5,880 Johnsons, 3,934 Williamses, 3,547 Joneses, and 3,660 Browns, and that no institution employed more people except for the United States Government”. That statement was a direct quote about AT&T from Mr. Kleinfeld’s book, “The Biggest Company on Earth”, page 3. Although my first endeavor led with: “Federal Telephone

and Telegraph spent nearly three million dollars last year -- that's perfectly understandable considering that ninety percent of the employees are a bunch of assholes," today I lead with the Kleinfield's quote. I regret writing the toilet paper quote the first time around because everyone I came in contact with at work, maybe with the exception of one or two people, I loved dearly. I wrote it because it was 'cutsie' thing to write, not because I believed it. I got a lot of flack for writing it from people I respected and loved, and it was the only thing I regret ever writing except for the typos I make during the editing process - the little faux pas that pop out of nowhere that confound me at every turn.

Still, this is my first piece of writing artistry. I re-write it with a bit of nostalgia of days gone by, but I'm still proud of the accomplishment, and the steps I've taken since that 5th grade plagiarism mistake I made. So, happy reading,

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie Longley was sitting in the middle row of a half-filled courtroom in Nassau County, Long Island, NY. He was in his thirties and had an attitude because the man who killed his wife was on trial and it looked like he was going to get away with it. You could tell just by the way he sat. He was one of the rare people in this world who could strut while sitting down.

Sitting next to him was Al Blayer wearing a button-down shirt, tie, business all the way. A pad with the letterhead "Newsday" sat on his lap as did the morning newspaper carrying the same name.

Cordova, a short man in a suit, and his attorney, sat at the defense table adjacent to the Prosecutor who was impatiently strumming his fingers on the table.

All of a sudden, the judge burst through his chamber doors and the bailiff motioned for everyone to rise. The Judge appeared angry by the way he strutted in and slammed a set of papers on the bench where he sat.

"We are bound by law to Mirandize those we arrest," the Judge began. "Reading Cordova's account, and reading the officer's testimony again, telling Cordova his rights while pounding his head on the hood of his car is NOT Mirandizing a suspect. It sickens me to do this. The case is thrown out. Cordova is free to go."

The Judge banged his gavel, and Charlie just sat in silence. Stoic - hiding his anger.

At the bottom steps of the courthouse, Al hit Charlie with a newspaper and shrugged his

shoulder at the same time.

“How did this happen?” Charlie asked. A maggot kills my wife and he's got rights?”

“He's got a Godfather somewhere,” Al said.

Charlie stoically watched Cordova and a friend leave the courthouse. Cordova skipped down the steps while 'hi-fiving' his friend.

Cordova pointed to the car that just pulled up. “It’s my bro,” Cordova said, then added, “I’m staying with him tonight, maybe forever.” Cordova jumped in the front seat and hugged his brother around the neck. His friend jumped in the back seat.

On the court steps, Charlie took the newspaper from Al and wrote some numbers on it and handed the paper back to Al.

“What’s this?” Al asked.

“You heard him,” Al said. “He's staying with his brother. That’s his license number. You’ll need it to find out where he lives.”

Al gave the paper back to Charlie. “You’re driving me nuts, Charlie. Stop!”

“You're the investigative reporter. All you have to do is make one phone call. What's the problem?”

“No problem,” Al said, “because I’m not doing it.”

While Charlie and Al headed for the parking lot, they watched Cordova’s brother peel out. Down the road a bit, an expensive Lincoln pulled out and followed Cordova.

“Whatever,” Charlie said, “I gotta go to work.”

Al handed Charlie a press pass. “Here! Mets opener. It'll get your mind off all of this.”

“But what if I don’t want to get my mind off this?”

Inside Cordova's car, his brother stopped at a light and waited for the light to turn green. While waiting, Cordova's friend lit up a joint, took a hit, and passed it to Cordova who in turn took a hit and passed the joint back to his friend.

"You don't get any," Cordova said to his brother. "You're driving." Then he threw up his fists in victory and said, "We did it, man." After the joy of victory passed Cordova said to his friend, "Hey, you call Jenko tonight, and see if he's got a deal." His brother explained to him that Jenko was no longer in the business because he was dead. It was Almquist who he had to deal with now.

They pulled up to another red light, and the Lincoln crept up next to them. Jack Nichols got out of the Lincoln, and Cordova slammed all the locks down on his side of the car. Jack, the strong, patient type, knocked on the window, politely.

The Lincoln's back seat window rolled down, and the sight of Senator Polston changed Cordova's defiant demeanor. He surrendered and unlocked his door, then moved over. Jack jumped in and handed Cordova an envelope.

The light turned green and both cars moved forward. Jack handed Cordova one envelope with an airline ticket in it.

"Sunday night. Be on it," Polston's assistant said.

Jack then handed Cordova another envelope. Cordova checks its contents. Money.

"Not enough," Cordova said. "This is shit."

Polston's Assistant reached for the glove compartment, presumably for a gun, but nothing was there. He pulled his gun out and shot the glove compartment, then turned the gun on Cordova's face.

"It's plenty," Cordova said, succumbing to his brother's pleas to do as Jack said, but he

was really more concerned about his car than his brother's predicament.

"Okay. It's plenty. I'll go," Cordova said. "No problem."

"Pull over," Jack said to Cordova's brother calmly, while also waving his gun.

Obediently, the brother pulled over as the Lincoln pulled up next to them. Jack got out of Cordova's car and jumped in the back seat of the Lincoln with Senator Polston.

While Polston's car moved past and made a turn, Cordova's brother shouted obscenities at Cordova about his ruined glove compartment.

In the Lincoln, Jack told Polston that Cordova got the message loud and clear.

While waiting at a red light, Charlie's mind drifted. He daydreamed about his pregnant wife, LOIS. It was a cold, wet night, he remembered. It just stopped raining and while they left their apartment for their usual nightly walk to the ice cream shop on the Boulevard. She laboriously breathed in and out. Charlie mimicked her, but reminded her that they could practice at home.

"I'm fine," he remembered her saying. "In our next life, you come back as the woman."

He also remembered dodging a puddle that night because it was drizzling the hour before they left the apartment, and wondered if it was a wise thing to do when his wife was pregnant. But they needed the exercise, at least that's what the doctor advised them to do.

Two police officers in a patrol car were down the street. Charlie observed another vehicle that was speeding down the Boulevard with two, young male occupants. One of the young men was Cordova. The two officers took off after them just as Charlie and his wife walked onto the Boulevard. Cordova turned into the side street. The cops follow them.

As the story went, while Cordova was driving, his friend was snorting cocaine from a

bag. The police sounded their siren and Cordova grabbed the bag, and hung it out the window, and scattered the powder into the wind. The friend yelled obscenities, but he had not a clue of what was going on because he was wasted.

While walking down the Boulevard, Charlie held Lois' hand and squeezed gently. He released his grip. While rubbing her belly, he said "I think I feel a fullback in there."

"It feels like the whole damn team is in there," she fired back.

Back in Cordova's car, he was steering erratically through a puddle as Cordova and the police burst into Charlie's view.

Cordova swerved around a patch of ice and headed straight for Charlie and Lois. Lois stopped as Charlie tried desperately to get out of the way. Cordova hit Lois while Charlie managed to get out of the way.

Seconds later, Charlie was bending down over Lois. Her face was covered with blood. Charlie screamed. He knew she was dead and he screamed his torment and banged his fist on the pavement.

Back in present-day, Charlie was sitting in his car at a red light. It had already turned green, and the car behind him gave him the horn, which snapped him out of his trance. He moved on and pulled into a telephone building parking lot. Hanging on the outside wall of the building was a telephone in a circle which was made of iron, a pre-divestiture symbol that boldly hung there.

Charlie walked into the building like he owned it. He worked in this building for a decade and Connie, his colleague, who worked for the local company on the first floor, walked in after Charlie.

“Hey, Connie, how's the local bizz doing,” Charlie asked.

Charlie and Connie both flashed their badges to the guard.

“Fine, Charlie. How's long distance doing?”

Charlie gave Connie a 'thumbs up' sign and walked to the elevator and Connie headed for the door marked ‘New York Telephone Switching Room’.

It was early afternoon, and Charlie walked out of the elevators on to the third floor where he worked at the long distance telephone office simply known as the FT&T testroom. Charlie barreled through the door, passed by channel banks and carrier equipment, and walked into a room of multiple rows of message testboards, as Charlie called them, where Clarence, Charlie’s boss who ran the day and evening tours, sat at a desk.

Jimmy, who worked with Charlie on the carrier side of the business, had arrived ahead of Charlie, and sat at the testboards with his headset on pretending to be working.

“Charlie, we gotta go over the index before I leave,” Clarence said.

While Jimmy kept Clarence and Charlie in view, he snuck a talk/monitor cord into a jack of a trunk group labeled, CHICAGO. Through his headset Jimmy heard a woman say, “I miss you sweetheart.” And then a man from Chicago said, “Oh, I miss you too, honey. This class is really boring. I wish you were here.”

Jimmy quietly flipped the Talk/Monitor switch to the talk position and softly burped into his headset. He waited for a response. He got none

Charlie noticed Jimmy goofing on the public and he threw Jimmy a dead pan stare that told him to 'knock it off’.

“You run the Newark group over and over tonight,” Clarence said. “Maybe a dozen

times. That should bring the index up. I'm more concerned about the noise index and the Newark Group is our quietest group, so we should do okay this month if you do what I ask. But don't tell anyone you're doing it. If you said I told you to do it, I'll deny it. Time to leave. You got the helm."

"Okay Clarence. Have a good night."

"You too." And then Clarence left.

In the meantime, Jimmy was still listening to the conversation. Taking the sound cue of the exit door closing, Jimmy flipped the talk key and let out with a loud, disgusting burp this time.

The Long Island woman said, "My God, Fred. Are you feeling okay?"

The man at the far end, which was Chicago, said back, "I ... but ... what the ...!" He was simply confused as to what was going on. Besides, there was no way he was going to convince the woman that he didn't burp.

The sound of the exit door opening prompted Charlie to yank the cords out of the circuit that Jimmy was on.

"Knock that crap off, knucklehead," Charlie said just before Mary, in her twenties, entered. She appeared very upset.

"My machine is going crazy downstairs. I'm getting stuck senders from LA."

Stuck Senders probably meant there was a carrier failure somewhere between Long Island and LA.

"YOUR machine," Jimmy echoed.

"From four to midnight, it's MY machine," Mary retorted, "And don't YOU forget it. Knucklehead!"

Charlie pulled out a cord, flicked a toggle switch at that bay, and "locked out" the circuits that were flashing which were labeled 'Los Angeles'. Now no one would be able to select, or try to select, those circuits any more.

"Thank you," Mary said. "So, how did it go today, Charlie?"

"Not good. He got off on a technicality."

As Mary and Charlie conversed with each other, Jimmy plugged into another circuit. Only Jimmy could hear the voices through his headset.

"Yeah, I think you're screwing around on me," the man said. "I go on a business trip, and you're not home when I call. Where the hell were you? Oh, you say to the mall to buy me a present, but should I believe that. Really?"

"I was at the mall buying you a birthday present. Take a pill, Damien."

"Hmm. Maybe I should beat you like some other husbands do."

Jimmy took off his headset, held it at arms length to make it appear that he was in the same room as the woman but lying down next to the woman. Jimmy flipped the talk/monitor switch to 'talk' and whispered, "Hurry up, sex-muffin. Dump this guy and get back into bed."

Loud screams from Damien emanate through Jimmy's headset. Jimmy started to laugh but reconsidered when he saw the disdain look on Mary's face.

"Frank's laid-off, Charlie. I can't afford to lose my job. Get James to stop it. Why does he do that, anyway?"

"Because he's an only child."

"What's with the pissy attitudes?" Jimmy asked.

"My children like eating every day," Mary said. "They've gotten used it, okay!"

"Yeah! So, what's your point?"

“Come on, guys,” Mary said. “All long distance phone calls from Long Island go through this office. A few complaints about some jerk breaking in on conversations to some city in another State and ... it won't take a genius to figure out who's doing it.”

“The phone lines get crossed.” Jimmy said. “It happens all the time. It's a New York Telephone problem.”

Mary's face tells all.

“Jimmy, stop, okay?” Charlie said. “Mary's right. It won't take a genius to figure it out.”

Jimmy pulled out of the circuit and continued taking noise measurements with the overhead meter.

“I know I promised to stop, Mary, but I need to do something,” Charlie said. “It's important, so don't give me an attitude. Okay?”

Charlie motions for Jimmy to follow him.

Charlie walked over to one of Private Line Testboards which was a few yards away. The boards were set up similar to the message boards and the wall were lined with hundreds of private line circuits that are visibly tagged with such names as IRS, Reuters, Banks, and the MOTOR VEHICLE BUREAU which was the target that Charlie needed help with.

As Jimmy, Charlie, and Mary walked into the area, Charlie turned to Jimmie and said, “I need to find an address for me based on a license plate number.”

“So, I goof on the public,” Jimmy responded, “and this is a bad thing. You want me to help you break into the Motor Vehicle Bureau, and this is okay to do?”

“Shut up and just do it. This is different.” Jimmy rolled a portable test equipment bay to the PC that was standing by the Private Line Boards and he hooked the cords between the pieces

of equipment with precision, as if they had done this many times before. Charlie grabbed a trouble ticket, filled it out and put it on the hook next to the one of the circuit bays.

“I don't believe you two numb-nuts,” Mary said.

Jimmy plugged a cord into a jack on the board whose tag read "MOTOR VEHICLE". Charlie hit the return key several times. A query response appeared on the screen.

“You need a log-in ID,” Mary said, “and a password.”

“One doesn't need a password when the session is already up.” Charlie said. “All you really need is a dumb terminal and VT one hundred emulation.”

Not that Mary understood, but she watched Jimmy type in the word "HELP". A series of options scroll down the screen. He selects "4" which is a "PROFILE" option. A form appears. The cursor rests on LICENSE PLATE NUMBER.

“It's not gonna to take a wizard to figure out what's happening here.” Mary said.

“What sex would the wizard be?” Jimmy asked.

“Up yours, pinhead,” Mary retorted. “I'm not having a PMS epiphany here. We could ALL lose our jobs if you get caught.”

“Cordova was released today,” Charlie said. “He's staying at his brother's apartment and I need to find out where that is. Don't worry. We're not going to get caught.”

“And we're doing it for a good cause,” Jimmy added.

Charlie retrieved a piece of paper from his pocket, and read the license plate number to Jimmy as he typed that number into the computer. After a beat, Cordova brother's name and address appeared on the monitor. Charlie scribbled down the address.

Clarence entered from the back area, out of Charlie's view. Mary coughs - a warning to Charlie that is ignored. Jimmy coughed. Startled, Charlie turned around.

“What's this?” Clarence asked. “What are you guys doing?”

Charlie grabbed the trouble ticket he had filled out before and told Clarence it was garble on the Motor Vehicle circuit. Clarence then wanted to know what the jury rigged stuff that Jimmy was using.

“Garble on Motor Vehicle circuit,” Charlie said.

“You have a twenty-thousand dollar PAR machine right here,” Clarence said. “Use it. And leave the Newark run on my desk. I'll figure out the index tomorrow.” As he turned to leave he bumped into Mary. “Shouldn't you be downstairs minding the shop?” Clarence asked.

“I just came up to see what happened with Charlie today in court.”

“Yeah, well not very good, I'm afraid. Okay. Color me gone.”

With that Clarence left the three of them. Mary waited until she heard the door opened and shut down the hall, then said before she left, “My heart can't take this crap! Color me gone too.”

“Where's the recorder?” Charlie asked.

Jimmy reached into the cabinet and retrieved the recorder and suction cup. Charlie grabbed them and said as he rushed off, “I went to dinner, if anyone asks.”

Charlie set off on his journey to Cordova's brother's house. When he got there he parked his car curbside, got out of the car and scurried across the lawn to the side of the house. He peeked through the window, and saw Cordova's brother sitting on a sofa smoking something.

Soon afterwards Cordova came walking into the living room from the kitchen. Charlie stuck the suction up on the window and listened for a few seconds of broken English, then Cordova said, “Here, tomorrow night ... kilos ... smack ... give me a hit.”

Charlie tried to reposition himself and made a noise. He took the suction cup off the window, and slowly snuck away.

Suspicious, Cordova looked out the window but saw nothing.

The N-E-W-S-D-A lettering dominated the inside wall. Charlie rushed in and noticed the missing letter. He made a couple of turns and walked right over to Al's desk as if he had been there before.

"Listen to this," Charlie said. He pressed play and all that could be heard was some muffling sounds.

"So." Al said.

"Drug deal. At his brother's place."

"How do you figure that?"

"What do you mean," Charlie said. "It's all right there. 'Tomorrow night'...'smack'. I heard him say eight o'clock."

"I didn't hear him say that."

Charlie slammed the desk hard attracting others in the room.

"That piece of shit killed your sister. Where the hell is your ... your ...?"

"You're embarrassing me," Al said. "So shut the hell up and sit down."

Charlie sat down, and Al reminded him that a lot of people got hurt when Lois died, not the least of which was her. "We all find ways to cope. We move on with our lives. Move on with yours, Charlie."

"I can't. Lightning strikes once per customer, Al. I'll never have another relationship with another woman like that again. Not like I had with Lois."

Al thought for a bit, then massaged of his face and neck as if he was frustrated as hell.

“I investigated Cordova after the accident, remember?” Al asked, “He was connected to three bank accounts. One to Senator Polston. I was this close. How could electronic records vanish like that? Tell me that.”

“That’s why I went to Cordova’s house. To find out.”

“Well, you didn’t find out, did you?” Al reached for his telephone book.

”You give me nothing but grief. What's the brother's address again?”

Charlie reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Al picked up the phone and dialed.”I know this DEA agent. Maybe he can help.”

Al’s attention was streamlined to the phone. A secretary answered and he introduced himself and asked for Detective Leary. Then he cupped the phone. “Maybe I can make a deal with these guys. I give 'them this info, I get the exclusive. Pulitzer, here I come.”

“Always an angle,” Charlie said.

“Don't be condescending, Charlie. You sit in that TELCO building goofing on the public all night. You’re lucky you still have a job. Look at you. You're a mess. You need a woman in your life. It's time, you know. It’s been over nine months.”

Someone answered the phone at the other end, and while Al introduced himself again, he swung his chair around giving Charlie his back.

Back at the telephone building, on the third floor, Charlie was on a ladder taking register readings at a bay He marked the readings in an index measurement book.

As usual, Jimmy was listening to a private conversation between two women this time. Jimmy took notes on a half-tag while he listened.

The woman at the near end said, "Are you telling me size doesn't matter to you?"

"No. I'm just saying my Cosmo Man should be six foot, black hair, blue eyes, a tight butt and his penis size? Hmm, six inches is plenty."

Jimmy hooked a cord into the ring generator and pushed a button. A ring sound was sent on the circuit and was heard loud and clear by both women. The women, confused, stuttered a bit before Jimmy repeated the step and sent out another 'ring' sound. The women laughed this time, but still wondered what was happening. Jimmy repeated the steps again and flipped the talk/monitor switch to the talk position.

"Hello," Jimmy said, sounding groggy as if he had just woken up.

The women remained silent for a beat, then laughed.

"What's so funny," Jimmy said, still sounding groggy. "Wait a second. Is this Joyce? Are you pulling a fast one on me?"

"No. No," one of the women said. "You don't understand. I'm Helen from New Orleans, and Jackie is from Queens. Our phones must've gotten crossed, you see and, ah ... you appeared."

Charlie, knowing exactly what was going on, cursed Jimmy out while he climbed down the ladder.

"You sound cute," Helen said. "How old are you?"

"How tall are you?" Jackie asked.

Jimmy, reading from his notes, said, "I'm six foot tall. Got black hair, blue eyes and a six inch cock."

Charlie appeared out of nowhere and pulled the cords down. "I'm right in the middle of doing something very important for Clarence," Charlie said. "And I don't need Mary on my

back. Can't you wait?"

Charlie left, but then he came back and said, "I gotta go. Cover for me."

"Yes, my Lord," Jimmy said sarcastically. "And come back soon. We'll be waiting for you."

Charlie pulled behind Al's car which was parked across the street from a beat-up DEA van. Charlie ran over to Al's car and jumped in the passenger's side.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Al said to his brother-in-law.

"I couldn't miss this," Charlie said.

Al's attention was diverted to a pinging sound off Al's side of the car. Agent Leary was out of the van and was throwing M&M candy from across the street. He walked over while Al rolled down his window.

"Who the hell is he?" Agent Leary asked.

Al didn't know what to say, so he told Agent Leary, so he told the truth that Charlie was his brother-in-law, and he was there to back him up. Leary mumbled a few obscenities while Al rolled the window back up.

"Don't say a word," Al said to his brother-in-law. "Be invisible."

At Senator Polston's Long Island office in Patchogue, Lynn Ragona, a well dressed, and an attractive woman, sorted letters at her desk in the reception area. A Harvard Master Degree in Sociology hung on the wall above a UPI monitor/printer, lending to the appearance that this was a professional office. Glass partitions separated the remaining two rooms where Polston and Jamie were busy on the telephone. Jamie hung up while Senator Polston, lifted his feet up on the

mahogany desks while sitting in a leather swivel chair. Still talking on the phone, he waved to Jamie through the window to come in.

“Yes, sir,” Polston said into the phone. “He's going to El Salvador. And believe me, he won't be talking to anybody after tomorrow. Don't worry.”

Polston hung up the phone just as Jamie entered his office. Polston picked up a newspaper and threw it on the desk.

“Make sure Cordova gets on that plane,” Polston said. He pointed to the paper where the headline stated the vice president was about to resign because he had cancer and, if all went according to Polston's plan, he was going to get that job.

“Keep your eye on the UPI. I want to know what's going on at the capital.”

As Jamie left, Lynn entered and handed Polston a folder.

“A day care center is being condemned,” Lynn said. “A demolition crew is scheduled to tear it down tomorrow. A condo is going in. Problem is the day care company needs two more weeks to find a new place. The comptroller is playing hard ball. They want them out now.”

Lynn handed Polston another folder. “Papers on the demolition company. Lofano Construction. Call Smitty. He'll fill you in.”

“Okay,” Polston sighed. “Is there anything else?”

“No. Nothing, except it's late.”

“I know,” Polston said. “Thanks for waiting for me. I'll drive myself tomorrow.”

Back at Al's car, he and his brother-in-law heard pinging sounds again. Al rolled down the window and wanted to know what Agent Leary wanted this time.

“We'll give it ten more minutes, then we move,” he said.

Just as he said this, a car pulled up in front of Cordova's house. Two men got out. One man carried a large attaché case. The two men were greeted by Cordova and escorted in.

Fire engines raced from down the street and whizzed by with sirens blazing. This prompted the DEA agents to exit the van with Agent Leary leading the way. "We're going in," Agent Leary whispered into a radio-phone he was carrying.

A young boy walked to Cordova's house which caused Agent Leary and the other DEA agents to bend low to the ground so they couldn't be seen, Cordova answered the door and yelled at the boy, then pushed him away and closed the door. After a beat, the door opened, and Cordova pulled the boy inside.

Right after Cordova closed the door, Agent Leary said rather loudly into the phone so everyone on site could hear, "We can't wait. Let's go. Move it."

Four men came to the front porch from different angles. Two of the agents went around to the back of the house to cover any escape route. The others appeared by the bushes on the front lawn and ducked behind them.

Leary walked over to Al's car and told Al to stay put until he waved at him and Charlie. Agent Leary continued to coordinate the break-in, silently motioning to the others to the front door. On his count, they broke into the house. After a beat Charlie and Al heard loud noises, then shots were fired. Al grabbed a camera from the glove compartment then got out of the car along with Charlie. They both ducked behind a nearby bush and watched the action unfold. Cordova burst through the front door of the house with a gun in his hand. He ran across the lawn towards Al and Charlie

An agent shot at Cordova and missed. Cordova shot back wildly. Then, Cordova got shot from behind just as Al snapped a picture that would become a Pulitzer prize photo.

Cordova then fell to the ground. Dead!

Charlie crawled marine-style to Al. Charlie looked over to Cordova's dead eyes.

Agent Leary came out of the house and waved Al in. Al handed Charlie the camera then lit up a cigar. Charlie got up, kicked Cordova's body and then snapped pictures, as if the camera was a surrogate gun.

“Lighten up, cowboy,” Al warned.

Down the street, a fire truck came down the street with their sirens blaring.

In the house, one of the agents escorted an addict in the living room and shoved him on the couch. The boy had a needle in his arm, which a DEA agent yanked out, then escorted him to the corner of the room and shoved him into the corner. The boy slid down the wall and sat on the floor.

Just then Charlie and Al entered and they both noticed an opened attaché case filled with drugs on the kitchen table. Next to the case were lines of cocaine, a dozen pills, a pipe, and a bent spoon.

Charlie grabbed the camera from Al and walked to the bedroom where he saw a naked woman with track marks on her arm sitting on the bed. The walls were stained, and had cobwebs hanging down them. He took more pictures.

He headed to the bathroom where more filth greeted him, and where the smell cut to the marrow. Charlie tried to wave the stench away while he took more pictures, but the smell was so bad he had to leave.

He moved back to the living room and sat in a chair, emotionally spent. This was a scene he would never forget. He didn't know who was worse off- him, who would most certainly have nightmares over what he just saw, or the boy, who was rocking back and forth and mumbling

nonsense in the corner of the living room.

Meanwhile, at Senator Polston's office, Lynn peered out of Jamie's office windows at the fire trucks and emergency vehicles, which were racing by. And Jamie hovered over the UPI teletype while it was printing. He was reading the Slug Line which read: GULF WAR: RED CROSS SAYS IRAQ IS HOLDING 50,000 POLITICAL PRISONERS; then the next article started to print, and it's title read, WASHINGTON DC: VICE PRESIDENT WILL NOT RUN.

Polston meanwhile was talking on the phone. "Smittie," Polston said, "delay Lofano two weeks, that's all. Let me find a place for the residents."

"Senator," Smittie said on the other end of the phone, "Incentives have been paid."

"I've done business with Lofano before. Just tell him I'm making a request, Smittie."

"Okay, Senator." Smittie said. "I will."

Polston hung up and motioned through the window for Lynn to come in. Jamie burst into the office waving the UPI story. "Just came over the wire," he said. "The VP's not running next year. The President is considering three possibilities for replacement. Senator Neuberger from Florida, Governor Almquist from Texas..." Jamie gave a dramatic pause and then said with reverence, "And Senator Polston from New York."

Lynn entered the office with her coat on.

"That's what we've been waiting for," Polston said to Jamie, then turned to Lynn and told her that the demolishing company gave them a two week stay.

"Good. Can we go now?"

"We all can," Polston said as he got up and put on his overcoat. Sirens howled in the background, just as the phone rang. Jamie answered it as Polston waved his fingers across his

throat, basically telling Jamie that he was not there and didn't want to answer.

Jamie listened for a couple of seconds then said thank you and hung up.

"There's a six-alarm fire not fifteen minutes from here," Jamie told Polston.

"I don't do fires," Polston said.

"You do when you're running for Vice President," Lynn said.

"The ambulances are taking people to the hospital," Jamie said. "That's where the media is. You go there. It's a great PR opportunity, Senator."

Meanwhile, the DEA agents were busy inspecting Cordova's house. Charlie looked around the living room at the mess of drugs, needles, general filth, and the convulsing boy who sat in the corner of the room.

Al walked over to Charlie and told him that vengeance is sweet.

"What do you mean," Charlie said.

"Cordova is dead, and look how he was living."

They both look around the place. Charlie wanted to barf.

Al took a long look at Charlie. "What's with you?" he asked. "I thought you'd be happy. Cordova's dead! The neighborhood is a lot safer now, don't you think?"

Charlie took his time answering. "It's not how I thought it would be." Then he head nodded to the boy in the corner. "How old could he be? Fifteen?"

Al shrugged and walked to the dealer who was handcuffed to a radiator. He opened his pad and began asking him questions. Charlie got up and approached Agent Leary. "That boy over there in the corner," he said. "He needs medical attention."

Agent Leary ignored Charlie's request and started to move away, but Charlie grabbed his

arm and told Agent Leary that the boy was going to die if he didn't get help. Agent Leary turned to another agent and told him to get an ambulance for the kid. As that Agent picked up the phone, Charlie walked over to the boy who was shaking and seemed oblivious to what was going on. He stared off to nowhere and mumbled nonsense.

The agent hung up the phone and told agent Leary that there was a six alarm fire and all the ambulances were tied up. Agent Leary looked to Charlie and shrugged his shoulders suggesting that he had done all he was going to do.

Another agent appeared and privately assessed the situation in the room, especially the boy and Charlie. He asked Agent Leary if he wanted the boy handcuffed.

Hearing this, Charlie picked the boy up, put him over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

“Where do you think you're going?” Agent Leary yelled at Charlie.

“To the hospital,” Charlie said. “You heard him. No ambulances are available.”

“Go help him out,” Agent Leary told the other agent.

Once outside, Charlie stumbled to his car and threw the boy in the front seat. The DEA agent got into his car and maneuvered his car in front of Charlie's and led the way to the hospital.

Meanwhile, Lynn was driving Senator Polston to the Hospital to show his concern even though it would be a fake sentiment. But, Polston knew he would gain some political advantage in the upcoming VP selection by going to the hospital.

While in the back seat, Polston studied Lynn for a few seconds. He noticed she was agitated. “What's wrong, Lynn?” he asked.

“Nothing”.

Something was surly wrong and he wanted to know what it was.”Nothing?” he asked. “I don't think so. One does not run a red light and not know it unless something is wrong.”

“I gotta get a life, Uncle Ted,” Lynn said. “I haven't had a date in over a year.”

“Oh, so that's it! Okay. I'll get you set up ...”

Lynn slammed her hands on the steering wheel to stop her uncle from continuing.

“We can't have another incident,” her uncle said.

“You're not going to let me forget about that, are you?”

“The White House is so close, Lynn. Nothing can jeopardize that now.”

The hospital was drowning in chaos as Lynn pulled into the emergency entrance. The news media led the way with the cameras, lights and people and microphones that were shoved in everyone's face for comments. The lights from emergency vehicles flashed as bodies were being rushed in from everywhere. Nurses and doctors were running in every direction.

“We'll talk later,” Polston told Lynn.

Lynn inched her way into the chaos as Polston got out of the car. One of the news people spotted Polston and immediately started hurling questions at him from afar. “Senator,” the newsperson yelled out, “how did the fire start?”

“Now, Philip,” Polston said, “let's not disturb these great workers of miracles. I'm just here to see if I can help.”

A critically burned victim was being rolled on a gurney on the grass. It got stuck and Polston helped the attendant free the gurney to move forward. Lynn walked to the emergency entrance and entered the hospital while the Senator lent a helping hand.

Meanwhile, the DEA Agent appeared at the emergency entrance with Charlie close behind. The Agent gave quick spurts of the car's siren to move a slow-moving vehicle ahead of him. Charlie looked at the sleepy boy next to him and wondered if they got there in time.

"Hey," Charlie yelled at the boy. "Stay awake."

Charlie pulled on the boy's arm. The boy opened his eyes.

"Do you know where we are?" Charlie asked, testing the boy's cognitive powers.

The boy shook his head.

Do you know who I am?"

Again, the boy shook his head.

"Well, I'm your guardian angel."

The boy slurred, "Wow! I used to pray to my angel."

"I'm taking you to the hospital," Charlie said.

"Wow! My own angel. Does every one get an angel?" The boy dosed off again as Charlie pulled into the hospital entrance, he replied, "Just the good ones."

Chaos still ruled. Charlie stopped the car then turned to the boy and held his chin. The boy opened his eyes.

"Repeat after me. I NEED HELP."

There was no response, the Charlie added, "Hey. I'm your guardian angel, remember. Say, I NEED HELP. Say it."

"I need help," the boy said.

"Keep on saying that in your mind. If someone asks you a question, and I'm not around, you say I need help."

In the hospital emergency room, Lynn spotted Charlie with the boy over his shoulder.

Curious as to whom Charlie was, she kept her attention on him while he urgently looked for a place to put the boy.

A man with a hand injury lied on a gurney, moaning. Charlie pushed the man's feet off the gurney, grabbed him by the shirt, and propped him into a sitting position. Charlie then put the boy on the gurney next to the man and took the man's good arm and put it around the boy.

“Hold him,” Charlie said, “while I go get help. Don’t let go.”

Charlie then turned to the boy asked him his name.

“I need help,” the boy said.

“Good,” Charlie said as he patted the boy on the head. Charlie turned into the foray and collared a nearby Doctor.

Lynn tried to get closer to Charlie while he was explaining the boy’s condition to the doctor, but Charlie finished talking to the Doctor and pushed his way through a crowd of news people, doctors and attendants. But there was something about him that made Lynn follow Charlie outside.

Charlie spotted a Police Officer ticketing his car because it was parked on the lawn blocking the emergency vehicles from ushering burned victims into the hospital. While Charlie pulled out his wallet, an emergency crew rushed by and knocked the wallet's contents to the ground just as the DEA agent came over and showed his badge to the Police Officer.

“It's alright, Officer,” the Agent said. ”He's with me.”

Charlie got into his car and glanced back at Lynn. Their eyes meet. A connection between them was established. Just what it was, neither one of them knew.

Lynn looked down and saw Charlie's license on the ground. But it was too late. Charlie had vanished into the darkness.

Charlie walked into the FT&T third floor testroom and was greeted by Jimmy who was reading a magazine.

“That was the longest supper break you have ever taken,” Jimmy said.

Charlie explained to Jimmy what had happened and then turned his attention to the noise measurements that Clarence wanted.

CHAPTER TWO

Charlie woke up at his apartment in the late morning the next day. It was a Saturday actually, and he found himself in the bathroom cleaning the toilet bowl. Then he went to kitchen and threw out mold-ridden food from the refrigerator.

He moved to the living room and vacuumed one spot repeatedly as if the memory of the filthy house overpowered his good senses. He moved to the dining room and vacuumed the same spot repeatedly again. He moved to the bedroom polished the furniture and noticed his wedding picture. As he looked at it, tears fill his eyes.

At Mary's home, she made a sandwich for her husband, Frank, while he fed their one-year-old son who was in a high chair. Mary plopped his sandwich down on the table and grabbed her neck as if she was in distress.

"What's the matter," Frank inquired.

"My neck. My shoulders. So, tight!"

Frank stopped feeding the baby and began rubbing her shoulders and neck. He did this as Charlie knocked on the door. Frank looked out the window. "It's Charlie," Frank said, then yelled for him to come in. Charlie walked into the kitchen with a newspaper in hand. He put the paper on the table and sat down while Frank continued to massage Mary's neck and shoulders.

"Oooh, that feels so good," Mary said. "I seem to get this way every time I sleep on my side. What do think the problem is?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "I would have to give you a complete physical." Frank winks at Charlie, then continued, "You should get bras that support you better, Mary. Listen to me. I

know about these things.”

Mary smacks Frank's hand indicating that she's had enough.”You're a real character, you know.” She moaned while she got up. “Want a sandwich, Charlie?”

Charlie nodded while Mary got up and walked to the counter.

Frank noticed a picture in the newspaper. “Holy cow,” he said. “Look at this. The name, Blayer. Hmm. I know that name.”

“That’s my ex-brother-in-law,” Charlie said.

Mary served Charlie a sandwich and sat down and read the article that showed Cordova being killed. “You happy now, Charlie?”

Frank returned to feeding the baby.

“I mean I’m glad Lois is avenged, Charlie. But what now? I can't afford to lose my job. Frank is laid-off . I got a baby to feed.”

“I’m tenth on the list,” Frank said. “And construction is picking up again.”

“It's over, Mary. I have no more need to interfere with the public’s privacy.”

Mary eyed Charlie. He was under suspicion.

“Well, good,” Mary said. “Now all you need to do is corral that corn-fed numbnuts you work with.”

Frank snuck an exaggerated look of fear to Charlie.

Jamie was alone in Poston’s office, when he heard loud, muffled voices approaching. The door flew open to Lynn and Polston arguing about what happened the night before.

“I bumped into him at the hospital,” Lynn said. “So, what's the big deal?”

“Every Tom, Dick and Jane in the media would love to get something on me. Give Jamie

the license. No arguments.” Polston then turns to Jamie. “Have Jack check him out.” He turns back to Lynn. “If he checks him out, and he doesn’t have a hidden agenda, then you can personally return the license to him. Okay. That’s the best I can do.”

Lynn handed Jamie the license and sat at her desk while Polston ripped the news story off the UPI printer and motioned for Jamie to come into the office with him.\

Polston sat at his desk and read from the printout. “The Administration reversed its long-standing U.S. policy by advocating a buildup of the nation's deadly chemical arsenal.”

Jamie nodded as if there was a secret between them. Changing the topic, Polston put the paper away.

“Adler! I need her in my corner. She's got the President's ear.”

“Senator Adler hates your guts,” Jamie said.

“Hell, Jamie, have you ever slept with anyone you didn't like at all.”

“No. Well, I think ... no. Maybe.”

“I need Adler saying nice things about me to the President. Check with our friend at the bureau. See if you can get anything on Adler.”

In Polston’s office, later in the day, while he was in mid-conversation on the telephone, Polston got up and caught Lynn looking at him with a suspicious eye. He turned his back to her. “All I'm asking from you, Adler, is to make sure the President knows that I believe a strong Israel makes for a peaceful Mid-East.”

“But you don't believe that,” Senator Adler said over the phone.

Polston rapped on the glass and saw that Jamie was on the phone. He twirled his finger as a signal to wrap it up.

“Sure I do,” Senator Polston said into the phone. “If you're referring to why I voted 'no' on the last appropriations bill ...”

“Your voting history has nothing to do with it. I'm assuming you're voting your conscience. It's the way you do business. I'd resign if you ever became Vice President.” Her voice sounded angry over the phone.

Lynn watched Jamie as he held a piece of paper up to the glass. It read, "SON IS GAY – DRUGS, MAYBE"

Polston sat down and swiveled his chair around, showing Lynn his back again. She was more than interested.

“Listen, Mel. I didn't want to do it this way but ...”

“Do what?” Senator Adler said loudly enough that Lynn could hear her voice from ten feet away.

“We all have our dirty secrets,” Polston added. “You're son is gay and he's on drugs. The bad news - the bureau knows about it. The good news - I know about it too, and I can keep the bureau quiet if you want.” A long pause followed. Then Melanie Adler, the US Senator from Pennsylvania said, “You are a prick, Polston.”

“Don't take it personally, Mel,” Poston said. “Do as I ask and I'll treat it as a favor. Then I'll owe you. That can be a good thing, Mel. Think it over.”

As Jamie approached, Lynn eyed him with suspicion. He handed her Charlie's license.

“Jack checked him out,” Jamie said. “He's clean. Telephone worker down the street.”

“How do you know Adler's son is gay?” Lynn asked.

“I knew Polston was on the phone with Senator Adler, so I just googled the words “Senator Adler” and this article came up that her son was, or is, gay and on drugs? So, I did what

I did.”

Jamie continued walking into Polston's office. Lynn watched Polston hand Jamie a manila envelope. More secrets. Another shady deal the Senator had Jamie involved in, perhaps.

Polston reached for the newspaper, turned to the drug-bust story and slammed the paper down on the table.

“Saved you from a nasty job,” Jamie said. “What a coincidence.”

“Yeah, what a coincidence?”

“Coincidence is right,” the Senator said, then pointed to the envelope. “The usual drop off. Tomorrow. Noon.”

At the FT&T long distance testroom, Charlie read a newspaper at the desk while Jimmy listened to a conversation from Chicago. The voices came from Jimmy's headset loud enough that Charlie could hear.

“If I told you once, I told you a hundred times, Mom,” David, from Chicago said. “I don't know where I'm going to minister.”

“You preach here in Long Island, son,” the Mother said. “God wants you here.”

As Charlie appeared to be reading the newspaper, he tossed Jimmy a deadpan stare.

At the guard station downstairs, Lynn walked into the building just as Mary walked out of the elevator. They eyed each other briefly then Mary asked if Lynn needed any help.

“I have Mr. Longley's driver's license here.”

“Charlie?” Mary said in a quandary. “Give it to me. I'll see that he gets it. I know him.”

“He dropped it at the hospital during that fire fiasco, and I'd rather give it to him myself.”

Mary walked over to the guard station and called upstairs. Mary told Charlie that a woman was at the guard station with his driver's license. Charlie didn't realize he lost it and told Mary he'd be right down.

After Charlie hung up, she said into the phone as if he were still on the line, "Oh, and Charlie," she said, "Stop by later. I got that special cream you wanted for that ... itch, or whatever you have."

She hung up. As she walked away she winked at Lynn and said, "He'll be right down. Don't shake his hand, though. He's got this nasty rash."

Lynn waited a few beats. The elevator door opened. Charlie walked out and showed surprise.

"I've seen you before, haven't I?"

"At the hospital," Lynn said. "You dropped this." She handed him his license with reservation, as if she was trying to avoid skin contact.

They both stood there for a few beats. Lynn was the first to break the awkward silence. "Well, I guess I'll go now." Lynn turned to leave. Anxiety flushed across Charlie's face, but he spoke up anyway and said, "Wait. How about a cup of coffee? Embassy Diner. Down the road."

"How's your rash doing?" Charlie looked confused. "A woman was here before and said you had a rash and to avoid skin contact."

Charlie looked towards the local switch office and saw Marie peeking out. Lynn shot a look in the same direction and caught a glimpse of Mary just as she ducked out of view.

"That's Mary, the practical joker. I don't have a skin disease."

"Oh. I see." Lynn nods as she realized she had been duped.

"So, what do you say?" Charlie asked. "A cup of coffee at the Embassy Diner? I have a

few minutes I can kill.”

“Why not,” Lynn said. “I’ll meet you there.”

At the diner a little later, Charlie and Lynn sat in a booth, and a casual observer would have thought they had known each other for years the ease of which they were talking.

The waitress came over and served them coffee then left.

“That’s quite a story, Lynn said. “Very sad.”

“Yeah,” Charlie added. And putting a little drama into the story, he continued with, “And Cordova’s head bounced off the sidewalk like a basketball and his blood poured on the ground and was sucked into hell. Sorry for the imagery. I didn’t feel differently, as I thought I would have. I didn’t feel happy or sad that he died. Oddly, I felt compassion.”

“You managed to save a kid’s life. He called you his guardian angel. Some positive things were going on there.”

They both remained silent for a beat. Then Lynn smiled and said, as if she had nothing else to say on the matter, “So, you work on telephones?”

“Not really. I work for the long distance side of the house. I make sure the quality of the connection is good when you make a long distant call. Enough about me. Who’s Lynn Ragona? What’s she about.”

“Oh, nothing much,” she said. “I work for a Senator from Pennsylvania. Polston keeps me busy.”

Jack, who worked mostly as a body guard for Senator Polston, took pictures of Charlie and Lynn through the diner window from his car while they were conversing at the window of

the diner.

“Harvard!” Charlie said. “And a degree in sociology! I’m impressed.”

“I didn’t have good enough grades to get into Harvard,” Lynn confessed, “But my uncle certainly had enough influence to get me in there.”

“Is your uncle someone important?”

“Important? I’d prefer to think of him as someone with influence. He’s a senator from Pennsylvania. Anyway, I’ve always wanted to be a social worker. But I don’t want to talk about me. Your brother-in-law. You said he was a reporter?”

“For Newsday. That’s a pretty big paper, you know?”

“I’d say so. It has a circulation of over a million. Has had 19 Pulitzer Prizes to date. Sorry. I’m a google nut. What’s he like? Your brother-in-law.”

“He’s an anal-retentive with a magnifying glass.”

“I thought you said he’s a cool guy.”

“He is. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s always on the job.”

“Please say he’s a sports writer,” Lynn pleaded.

“He was. Covers politics now. Why?”

“No reason, except my Uncle ... he...he thinks that news media is after him.”

She was hoping Charlie was totally unattached to politics. Now she had a reason to probe.

“My brother thought Cordova and Senator Polston were linked somehow. Drug money used to buy guns for El Salvador rebels, some crap like that.”

Lynn was visibly disturbed now. This was not going to work out, she figured.

“Really,” she said as she prepared to leave. “What do you think?”

“Once politicians are elected, the power is too much for them to handle, I think. They become pocket-lining jerks who can't resist the low road.”

Lynn searched for something to say, but didn't have anything witty to say. She got up to leave. “I gotta catch some shut eye,” she said. “I gotta go.”

“I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

“No. No. I just gotta go, Charlie.”

She left without saying goodbye. Charlie was upset with himself for saying what he said and as she left he smacked himself in the head and said to himself, “You opinionated idiot.”

In an afternoon game at Shea Stadium, the Mets were hosting a game against the St. Louis Cardinals. Charlie flaunted his press pass as he eased his way into the Press Room. Al spotted Charlie and waved him over. Charlie sat next to Al who he handed him a pair of binoculars as soon as Charlie sat down.

“Good article,” Charlie said. “Nice scoop.”

“It's a Pulitzer. I can taste it. That was quite a stunt you pulled with the boy. Quite the heroics, Charlie.”

“All's well that ends well, I guess.

Al looked through a pair of binoculars and saw Lynn, Polston and Jamie walking down to their seats along the first base line.

“My son's Bar Mitzvah is Saturday.”

“I know,” Charlie said. “I'm coming.”

“That's good. Hey, check Polston out. First base line. That's his niece with him. Lynn Ragona. A real looker, huh?”

Charlie scanned the first baseline with his binoculars and spotted Lynn.

As he looked at Lynn through the binoculars he asked Al what he knew about Polston besides the fact that he's a crook.

“I know at seventeen his father died. The insurance money put him through Harvard Law School. He didn't have a pot to piss in when he graduated. From then on he earned money the old fashion way. He stole it. And then he became Senator and work with some real unsavory characters. Overseas and homegrown. Then he became senator.”

“And his niece?”

“Lynn was fifteen years old when she started doing drugs. It was just for a spell. She went to rehab and Polston looked after her after that. She's been clean ever since.”

Al changed the subject and told Charlie that there was someone he'd like him to meet on Saturday.

Irritated somewhat, Charlie told Al that he was a putz for trying to set him up with a blind date at his son's Bar Mitzvah. “Have you no shame?” Charlie said.

“She's a foxy lady,” Al said.

“So! Good looks can screw you up. I'm looking for a good woman who doesn't take herself too seriously,” Charlie told Al.

“You know,” Al said. “You're like a ship upon a vast ocean without a chart or compass.” You're driven by every wind and wrecked upon the shores of some unknown, barren island, or something like that.”

“Wordsworth?” Charlie guessed, but Al forgot where he read that. “Stop setting me up is all I'm saying. I'm going to tell Cynthia what you're doing. Your wife will stop you.”

“No she won't. It was her idea to ...” Al didn't finish the sentence, because he didn't

want to involve his wife She might get angry at him thinking he didn't quote her accurately. But it was her idea, nevertheless and she might not have said the words, but it as her idea to 'set Charlie up'.

"It was her idea to do what?" Charlie wanted to know.

"You have a lot of woman in your life, do you?"

"No!" Charlie retorted quickly. "And I'm not looking, either. It's only been a year since ... Just cool your jets."

"Yeah, yeah," Al said with condescension. "My sister was one in a million. I get that a lot."

Charlie scoops up the binoculars again.

"I met Polston's niece yesterday."

"Really, now," Al said. "When were you planning on telling me that? Where did this happen, and why?"

"I lost my license at the hospital. She found it and brought it back to me. We had coffee together after that. I didn't know she was Polston's niece until ... then." Al took out a pad to take notes. Charlie got up and said he had to go to work.

"The hell you do," Al said. "Get back here. Tell me. What did she say?"

As Charlie left, Al yelled to Charlie that they would talk at the Bar Mitzvah.

CHAPTER THREE

At a tavern close to where Jamie lived, he sipped on a beer while watching a Gulf War news brief on the TV above the bar. As the news switched to a story on the Vice President's cancer, Jamie removed the envelope marked 'ZIPPER' from his attaché case. He then got up and on his way out he deposited the envelope in a garbage can near the door. Seconds later a hand reached into the trashcan and retrieved the Manila envelope. It was not Jamie's hand.

At the Newsday office, a mailroom worker dropped a legal-size envelop on Al's desk. Al casually picked it up and opened it. He pulled out a picture of the 1948 Harvard graduating class with circles drawn around Senator Polston and two other men by the names of Clayton, and Hensen. One was a senator, but who was Hensen, he wondered.

“Who the hell is sending these things to me?” Al said to himself. Confused about who Hensen was, Al got up and approached the Information Specialist's office, Steve Crawford. Al entered and found Steve typing at a terminal.

“Albert,” Steve said. “What can I do for you?”

Al tossed the photo on Steve's desk and told Steve that he needed some information. Al said that he knew who two of the three people were. He knew who Senator Polston was, and he knew who Senator Clayton was. “But who is this third guy? I'm hoping you can find out who he is,” Al said.

“His name is Frederick Hensen according to the names listed underneath,” Al said.

Steve types FREDERICK HENSEN at the computer terminal and waits for a response. The cursor blinked for a beat or two, then the screen filled with information.

“It seems Frederick Hensen is the CEO of Chem Corp,” Steven said.

“Can you find out anything on Chem Corp?” Al asked. “Government contracts maybe?”

“We just have articles in this data base,” Steve said. “Let's see what we got.”

Steve hit some keys and they waited until information poured on the screen.

“It says Chem Corp made record profits this quarter.” Steven pages down on the screen then stops. “Oh. Here's something. It received a seventy million dollar contract from the Clayton defense sub-committee. Hmm. Is that the same Clayton who's in the photo.?”

“I guess it is,” Al said. “That's it. That's the connection. Print it out, would you?”

While they wait for the printer to spit out the article, Al asked Steven if he could find who the shareholders were and how many shares they owned. Steve thought it over for a second and then shook his head. “We don't have that kind of info,” Steve said. “We only have public information. That's considered private. The S.E.C. can give us that information, though, but you need to fill out Form Ten, I think. Or maybe it's Form Three.”

Al pondered the situation for a second, then gave Steve the thumbs up sign. “Let's go get it, then,”

“I have to either go down to Washington, in which case you need to talk to my boss, or I can make a formal request and fax over the form, but they'll mail it. But that'll take weeks.”

“That's too long,” Al said, “and I don't want to raise a flag on this just yet. I don't know whose eyes are on it.”

“Let me see what I can do,” Steve said. “I got a friend at the commission. Maybe he can get us the info on the sly, but it wouldn't be official. You got that, right?”

“That's okay. I just need the info so I can take the next step.” Al smiled, then kissed Steve on the head.

Charlie was washing dishes at his apartment when the phone rang. He picked it up. It was his brother-in-law and he needed help

“Lynn is a major stock holder in a company who received a seventy million dollar government contract,” Al said.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “So?”

“The Senator's niece is a share holder. Probably a dummy holder for Senator Polston. Conflict of interest ... get the picture?”

“I don't think so,” Charlie said. “Her uncle is probably using her. She has a degree from Hartford in Sociology, you know ...”

“Oh. That's right. You know her. Been her buddy for years. I forgot.”

“Don't be a smart ass. I don't think she would knowingly do anything illegal, is all I'm saying.”

“Okay. Then help me prove it.”

“How?”

“You have the IRS computer circuits going through your office, right?”

“Oh, no,” Charlie said, knowing full well what Al was going to ask. “There's no way, Al. I'd get thrown in jail for thirty years!”

“Of course. What am I thinking?”

Al, you're not squeezing anything from me. I had a friendly, PRIVATE talk with her. And that's that. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Sure,” Al said. “Don't forget the Bar Mitzvah on Saturday.”

At the diner, Lynn, Jamie, and Polston were sitting in a booth already engaged in a conversation when Polston warned Lynn and Jamie to watch out for reporters. “Now, more than any other time,” he warned, “you must be careful what you say to the press. Both of you.”

“I understand,” Jamie said. “To change the topic. We have a cocktail party on Saturday.”

“That’s right,” Lynn said. “Do I have to go?”

“Yes.” Jamie intervened. “We have to show solidarity, right, Mr. Polston?”

“Yes, indeed,” Mr. Polston said. “And I want you to meet someone, Lynn.”

Lynn groaned and stared out the window, like a sloth ready to sleep. When she spotted Charlie pulling into the parking lot, she perked up.

“Ted,” Jamie said to Mr. Polston, “you need to review your speech for this afternoon.”

Polston dismisses Jamie with a hand wave.

“Senator, you have to be more non-committal on the abortion issue. You need to express both ideologies; else you’ll splinter your vote. You don’t want to do that.”

“So, you want me to sacrifice my principles to gain votes.”

“Yes.”

“I like the way you think, Jamie.”

Charlie entered the restaurant and went right over to the counter, and waited. He spotted Lynn and smiled at her. Lynn waves him over.

“Oh, boy,” Charlie whispered to himself. “I’m going to die.”

“Coffee regular,” Charlie said as he slapped down two dollars. “Keep the change. I’ll take it to go over there. How do I look?”

“You look marvelous, Charlie,” the waitress said.

Charlie walked over to the booth and stood in front of the table. Lynn introduced Charlie

to Jamie and his uncle then said, “He saved that boy the other day at the hospital.”

“Agh, yes,” Jamie said, “The man who lost his license.”

“Well, Mr. Longley, I want you to know, I had you checked out. You work for the telephone company down the road, yes?”

“Yes. I’ve been there for a few years.”

“Well, maybe you can shed some light. We were just discussing the virtues of politics and we all came to the conclusion that there wasn't any. What do you think?”

Polston looked to Charlie for a response. Lynn sat back, annoyed with Polston for being so cagey.

The waitress came over with Charlie's coffee and left.

“I'm afraid I don't know, Mr. Polston,” Charlie said.

“You don't have an opinion, or you're ignorant ... on the matter?”

“Uncle Ted!!!!” Lynn looked to Jamie for help, but Jamie just shrugged his shoulders. Charlie started to leave, but then quickly returned.

“Good to see you again, Lynn,” Charlie said, then turned to Senator Polston. “Senator, maybe the question you should ask is whether politicians have virtue. I think high position and great wealth can create a sense of honor and virtue if the power doesn't destroy them.” Charlie then left, and after a beat, Lynn got up to follow him. Polston grabbed Lynn wrist tightly.

“SIT DOWN!” the Senator commanded.

From Charlie’s point of view looking into the diner from the outside window, it looked as if Senator Polston was accosting Lynn. Charlie a made a motion to return, but Lynn signaled him to go. She sat down but the Senator refused to release her. She yanked her arm away and rubbed her wrist.

“You were hurting me, Uncle Ted.”

“This is not a game, Lynn,” Polston said. “You don't think I know that his brother-in-law is a Newsday reporter.”

Lynn saw Charlie get into his car. Both of them kept their gaze on each other. He waved and she tried to smile, but couldn't.

“You forget the POST reporter? He screws me in the paper while he's poking my niece. Not good.”

“How many times do I have to apologize for that?” Lynn looked out the window and watched Charlie drive away in a nostalgic way, as if she would never see him again.

Charlie was at the third floor Private Line Testboard with Jimmy. Cords were strung from the IRS circuit to a PC. Jimmy and Charlie watched weird characters scroll on the monitor.

“You know, we can get in real trouble for this,” Charlie warned. “It's the IRS for crying out loud.”

“It doesn't matter,” Jimmy said. “I can't crack this. The IRS alternates between a dozen cryptic methods, and I just can't figure it out.”

Charlie pulled the cords from the circuit and the computer, and put them on the hook by the boards.

“I know,” Jimmy said. “I'll call my buddy from San Fran when work is slow for him. He might have some suggestions.”

Later that evening, at the Message Testboard, Charlie finished taking noise readings in Clarence's noise book and tossed it on the desk. “I'm going downstairs to see how Mary is

doing,” Charlie said.

“Ask her how ‘her machine’ is doing while you’re down there.”

Charlie left and when Jimmy heard the sound of the exit door closing, he quickly hooked two conversations (circuits) together. He could hear from his headset the confusion of the two parties he hooked together. “Shouldn’t be calling on a night when the moon was full,” he whispered to no one in particular.

“Wilma and Sally from Baton Rouge and Long Island,” he said to himself, “meet Frank and Hank from St. Louis and Long Island.”

“Who the hell are you?” Sally from Long Island said.

“Get off the line, you retard,” Frank said from St. Louis.

“You get off the line. Sally. You still there?”

Jimmy laughed as they all began to yell at each other. “This is our line. You get the hell off. Sally...Sally, can you hear me?”

Sally finally answered giggling. “Yes, Wilma. I’m still here.”

Jimmy chuckled as he listened to a third conversation and plugged it into the first two conversations further complicating the situation.

Chaos ensued. While everyone screamed over each other, Jimmy flipped the switch to the talk position and burped loudly. “That was disgusting,” said Gloria of the conversation he just hooked in. “Revolted, you pig. Who did that?”

“It was a guy,” Sally said. “I could tell. Frank, he did it? Where are you from, Frank?”

Jimmy flipped the monitor switch to talk and said, “You’re right, Sally. I did it.” And then Jimmy burped again, this time much louder and longer than before.

In the Long Distance Switch Room, Charlie and Mary were sitting at a desk.

“I've been your friend for a long time,” Mary said. “And we loved Lois dearly. But I gotta tell you, Charlie. You are borderline certifiable.”

“Mary. Something's terribly wrong here.”

“I don't give a crap, Charlie. You don't have the right to play God and try and save the world every time you have an epiphany.”

Clarence entered with their paychecks. He threw two checks on the table.

“Good,” Charlie said. “I was about to go in to see if you had them. I'll take Jimmy's if you go it.”

“That's okay, Charlie,” Clarence said. “I'll poke my head upstairs and say hi.”

Charlie and Mary look at each other, then to Clarence.

“I'll go with you,” Charlie said. “I have to get back up there anyway.” With Clarence's back turned, Charlie motioned to Mary to call up to Jimmy to warn him.

Jimmy had five conversations hooked into each other at the testboard on the third floor. One could hear from his headset burping sounds, and yelling. It was so loud that Jimmy couldn't hear the buzz from the intercom from Mary. He didn't hear the door open from down the hall either.

Charlie and Clarence walked into Jimmy's view and Clarence surveyed the multitude of cords crossing each other.

“What the hell is this?” Clarence asked with a scolding tone. “What are you doing?”

Jimmy pulled his headset out of the talk/monitor jack so the yelling and burping sounds wouldn't cause alarm.

Charlie asked Jimmy if he had found the spurious tone yet. Charlie then told Clarence that they had been getting complaints of a spurious tone from the Long Island office at the distant end, like Chicago and St. Louis, and that was why there were so many cords up on the board. "It's here, then it's there. We can't seem to nail it down. It's driving us nuts trying to find it. As you can see." Charlie pointed to the chords that Jimmy has criss-crossing all over the place.

"Dump the cords," Clarence said. "That's no way to troubleshoot a carrier problem." Jimmy took down the cords. Clarence handed Jimmy his check.

"Follow me. We'll track it at the carrier. I saw you had St. Louis hooked up. Let's go there first."

Obediently, Jimmy and Charlie followed Clarence from behind. Charlie raised his hand to smack Jimmy in the head.

The next day at the Newsday complex, Al doodled a noose around Polston's neck on a newspaper picture of him. Phil, Al's editor of the news section of Newsday, entered and sat at Al's desk, "Aren't you going to the mall?" Phil asked.

"Yes. I'm wondering what to ask Polston without sounding like a jerk." Al noticed an envelope on his desk that had not been opened yet. He opened it and found a New Jersey local newspaper article. The headline read, "BOY DIES - CAUSE UNKNOWN". Al looked around for its sender, but he saw no one.

AL "Who the hell is sending these things?" he asked his boss rhetorically. Phil got up and said, "Come on. Get a move on. It's almost four o'clock."

At the shopping mall, Al took a position with the other fifty people, mostly reporters, who came to hear Polston talk. Charlie was there with Frank and Mary and they walked past several people who were putting the finishing touches to a makeshift stage. Mary was pushing her son in a stroller.

Jamie and Lynn walked in the main entrance with two bodyguards close behind. They strolled towards the makeshift stage. Polston marched onto the stage as if he owned it. "Ok, let's have some fun today," he said into the microphone. Jamie jumped onto the stage and adjusted the microphone for Polston. Polston leaned in and asked, "Who belongs to us?"

"Francine, the one with the red hat, and Ted, the man with the green jacket," Jamie said.

Lynn stood on a box and scouted the area. She spotted Charlie and her face beamed, but quickly soured when she saw Mary sneak up from behind, putting her arm around him.

She then spotted Frank behind them pushing the stroller. Mary turned her attention to Frank and hugged and kissed him. Lynn sighed in relief.

Charlie spotted Al, and they nodded to each other. Charlie then spotted Lynn, and she looked at him and they smiled at each other. Lynn jumped down from the wooden box. It was obvious she was desirable to men, as they watched her swagger towards Charlie.

"Okay, I'm here today to answer some questions," Poston's voice beamed through the speaker set located on either side of the room. "But let's talk about the protocols first. If I call upon you, just state your first name and the news media you're from. So, my name is Ted and I represent all media. And here's the first question: Are there any question, today?"

Of course, Polston gets bombarded with questions. The Senator called on the man with the green jacket who said, "My name is Ted as well, and I work for The Tribune. Senator, my sources tell me that the boy at Mercy Hospital in New Jersey died from an unidentified virus that

he got in a foreign country. Do we know anything more?"

"No," the Senator said. "I don't know anything more..."

A little later at the Mall, Lynn appeared in front of Mary. Frank and Charlie were some distance away from the podium where other reporters gathered.

Charlie smiled cordially at Lynn, "Hi, Lynn," he said. Then he introduced Mary and Frank to her. Frank pointed to the stroller and said, "This little scoundrel is my son."

"Oh, what a handsome child," Lynn said.

Mary raised her eyebrow to Charlie, giving her approval.

Al maneuvered closer to the stage and raised his hand. He was called upon and he said, "Albert from Newsday. Senator, can you tell us anything more about the death of the Werner boy from New Jersey? His father works at Chem Corp and he was stricken with the same..."

While Al was speaking, Jamie tugged at Polston's sleeve and the Senator excused himself and turned from the microphone to what Jamie had to say.

He then turned back to the microphone and said, "He died of unrelated causes. It was a blood clot that travelled to the brain. It's been in all papers."

Al forced a laugh then waited for a calmer moment and said, "Yes, I know, Senator, but the boy's father was just hospitalized with the same ..."

"Like I said, it was in all the papers. He died from a blood clot. He had a-fib and the clot travelled to his brain. End of story. I suggest you talk to the doctor in charge, because that's all the information I have on the matter."

Another reporter jumped in with,

"Mike from the Post. You've been quoted in today's NEWS as saying a strong Israel is an

obstacle to peace. Any comments about that?"

As Polston responded to that question, Lynn pointed and asked, "Who is that reporter over there?"

"Oh, that's Al Blayer," Charlie said.

"The brother-in-law?"

"Guilty as charged!"

"It figures," she said to herself, then asked a little louder, "He's not too friendly to my uncle."

"He's not very friendly to anyone," Charlie said.

It was obvious to Mary and Frank that Charlie was smitten by Lynn, but they didn't know how Lynn felt about Charlie.

"I want to apologize for my behavior at the diner..."

"It wasn't you," Charlie said. "Your Uncle was ...:"

"No. Not that time, Charlie. When we were at the diner alone and I left abruptly. That was rude of me."

"You were angry. If I knew your uncle was Senator Polston, I might've of used different words."

"You were just being honest. A rare quality these days. No offense, but I gotta go." And with that Lynn said good-bye to everyone and left.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the Blayer Bar Mitzvah, Charlie entered the Temple and marveled over the number of people who showed up. He adhered to the sign of silence while Al recited something from the holy Torah. Al recited the passage in Hebrew at the podium. But he stopped as soon as he spotted Charlie, and he yelled for him to come up in front row of the congregation. "I have to talk to you later," he said quietly. Then Al continued reciting the Torah in Hebrew.

Charlie spotted Cynthia, and Silvia Blayer, Al's mother, who was sitting next to Cynthia. Cynthia waved Charlie over and moved over a bit to allow for room for him. As he sat, he acknowledged Cynthia, and leaned over to say 'hello' to Silva, but she looked straight ahead, a snub, perhaps. She was a little angry, for what, Charlie wasn't sure.

"Cynthia, mother of Joseph Blayer, please come forward," Al said in Hebrew. Cynthia got up and walked to the podium. Charlie snuck a peak at Silvia who looked straight ahead avoiding eye contact with Charlie. "You skuch," she eventually said. "It takes my grandson's Bar Mitzvah for you to see me?"

"Hi, Silvia," Charlie said while patting her hand.

"Shut up. I'm angry with you."

"I can tell," was all Charlie said.

After giving her soliloquy at the podium, Cynthia walked back to her seat.

"Silvia Blayer, daughter of Jessup Stein," Al said in Hebrew. "Please come forward."

"What a putz!" Silvia said. "I told that little shit I'm too old for this up-and-down crap."

Silvia got up. Charlie stands, steps into the aisle, and let Silvia get out while Cynthia approached and got back in.

Later that afternoon, Lynn stepped out of the shower in her bathroom and put her robe on. She talked to herself in the mirror while putting on mascara. A red blouse was neatly folded on her bed. She felt sort of giddy, so she started singing ‘Don’t Worry, Be Happy’. She got dressed then looked at herself the full mirror she had on her bedroom door.

She said in the mirror in a dignified way, practicing the introductions she anticipated for that evening, “Senator Sweeney. I’m Lynn Ragona.” Then she switched to a southern belle and said, “Hi there, Congressman, I’m Lynn Ragona.” Then she tried her sexy introduction and added, “I’m hot and don’t you forget it.”

She finally let her true feelings come out and said to herself, “I hate these get-togethers. Yuk!”

Lynn dropped the towel and exposed her shapely body. Since nobody was there, she decided to walk around naked, which made her feel sexy. She took the blouse that was lying on the bed and put it on. Briefly, she stopped and looked at the mess in her bedroom. “I’ve gotta get a maid,” she said to herself. In a frivolous way, she added, “Or maybe a good-looking butler.”

In a more serious tone, she said, “Or a husband.”

A little later, in one of the side rooms in the temple, dozens of people sat at tables eating. The room was lined with tables of food. A server put the finishing touches to Charlie’s dish. While eating, he saw a man sitting alone, so he got up with his plate in hand, and took a seat next to an old man who was sitting alone.

“ Hello, my name is Charlie.”

“Ridiculous,” the old man said. “Charlene lives in Mexico.”

He was going to ask who Charlene was, but the man looked like he might've been disturbed in some way, so he decided against it. Instead, he picked at his food.

“You don't even look like Charlene,” he said to Charlie.

“Is that the one with big boobs,” Charlie said. But just then Cynthia appeared and told Charlie that they had saved a spot for him at her table. “You're sitting with us, Charlie,” she said.

He gave his apologies to the old man, but he wasn't paying attention, so Charlie just got up and walked with Cynthia.

“What's going on with Al, Charlie?” she asked. “The past couple of weeks ...” but she didn't finish the sentence because Al came over and pulled on Charlie's arm and said to Cynthia “Sorry, Hun. I gotta talk to Charlie.” And he pulled him away.

Once they were out of hearing range from anyone else, he told Charlie, “A kid dies. Two days later the father checks in the hospital with the same disease. And guess where he works? Chem Corp. You know, the company that Lynn is heavily invested in.”

Charlie didn't like where the conversation was headed, so he simply said, “So.”

“So the doctors aren't talking... Never mind. We'll talk later. Just be available tomorrow. We're going to Mercy hospital. New Jersey.”

Lynn casually walked through a cocktail party at a Congressman's house observing the knick-knacks on the mantle in the living room. Fashionably-dressed people gathered in groups evenly spaced in this elegant room. Polston and Jamie were in a separate group with John Sweeney, an older congressman.

“We'll pass the Authorization Bill,” the Older Congressman said. “Why? Because Russia is producing deadly chemicals. No garment can protect against it. ‘Yellow rain’, they call it.”

“I read somewhere that stuff is killing pigs in Laos,” John Sweeney said.

While Polston put his two cents into the conversation, Lynn casually walked through the room with most eyes staring at her.

“Politics,” Polston said. “Listen, the Defense Bill comes up soon so opponents quote some Yale-nobody bio-chemist who says Yellow Rain is caused by bee shit and not to worry. It’s a normal diversionary tactic, right?”

“I think you hit the nail on the head, Polston,” the older Congressman said. “Good olé American Politics. I’m sorry guys, I must end this conversation. I see my constituent waving me to come over. I must go to him.” Polston said his goodbyes to the older congressman just as Lynn came towards them.

“Before you go, I want you to meet my niece,” Senator Polston said to Senator Sweeney.

“Hello, Uncle Ted,” she said, then turned and faced John Sweeney. “And who do we have here?”

“John, meet my niece. Ms. Ragona. Lynn, this is Congressman John Sweeney from New York City, Seventh District.” After the introduction, the Congressman didn’t want to leave.

Charlie and Al were talking in front of the speakers. They had to yell if they wanted to be heard above the background music.

“So, a kid dies and the father is having a hard time breathing,” Charlie said. “Big deal. What’s the angle?”

“I don’t know yet. But get this. My boss got a call from the Polston’s camp complaining that I was taking pot-shots at him at the mall. Can you beat that?”

“Well, maybe you were, Al.”

“I don’t expect you to really understand this, but it's a politician's job to answer tough questions. Anyway this mystery person is giving me clues. Pictures. Don't you see. I'm on to something very big here, Charlie.”

“You watch too many movies.”

“Someone is trying to tell me that something is rotten in Denmark. Well, in New Jersey, actually.”

“It’s been done before. Go see ‘All the Presidents Men’.”

Al spots Rebecca, a young, sexy lady who maneuvers her body provocatively. She saunters over to them. “Rebecca!” Al said. “Who invited you?”

“You did, you schmuck.”

“My darling cousin. Rebecca, meet Charlie, my brother-in-law. Well, my ex-brother-in-law, actually,. I bet you two have a lot in common. Gotta mingle.” But before leaving, he added, “Tomorrow, Charlie. We go to New Jersey tomorrow.” Al winked at Charlie and left.

After a brief second of awkward silence, Rebecca said, “He's such a kidder, isn't he?”

“Yes. He is.” After another awkward pause, Charlie asked Rebecca if she wanted a drink.

Meanwhile, at the congressman’s house, Polston left John Sweeny and Lynn alone in favor of another conversation, somewhere in the room. Lynn listened politely to the congressman’s soliloquy. She looked bored and was looking for a bailout.

”... And then after a year in the law firm, I decided to run for Congress.” John finished talking which left an opening for Lynn to say, “This year was a very big year me too, let me tell you. My uncle ... Wow! He's helped me a lot as well.”

While she talked her eyes met Jamie's and her expression was a subtle, pleading look to be saved. He understood what she wanted so he gave his excuses and left.

“Yes, my uncle has been very helpful. He's taken me under his wing, so to speak.”

Just then Jamie appeared and grabbed Lynn's hand. “John, you wouldn't mind, would you?” Jamie asked. “I need to talk to Lynn.” Of course, he didn't mind and gave permission for Lynn and Jamie to leave.

“You're a life saver,” Lynn said once they got out of the Congressman's hearing range. “I don't think I could've lasted much longer.”

“I noticed,” Jamie said. She noticed her uncle with the stranger; someone who was poking her uncle in his chest with his index finger, trying to make a point, she guessed.

“Who is that with Uncle Ted?” she asked Jamie.

“Some financial analyst, I think.”

“Jamie, what's going on? My Uncle has changed. What's happened to him?”

Jamie and Lynn were distracted as Senator Adler approached them. She appeared a little tipsy.

“Greetings, Senator,” Jamie bellowed.

Adler squinted giving the impression she didn't now who she was speaking to.

“We're with Senator Polston.”

“I know that,” Senator Adler said. “You know, I haven't talked to my son in ages. You know why?”

“No, Senator,” Jamie said. “Why?”

“Because he's a fag,” Adler said in no uncertain terms. “MY SON IS A FAG,” Senator Adler yelled out so everyone could hear. No one took notice.

“But you two know that already, don't you?” Senator Adler asked. “Shame on you. Shame on you both.”

Adler walked and Jamie looked across the room and noticed Senator Polston wanted to be saved.

“I see your uncle has that 'come hither' look. I gotta go, but first ... Listen! Your uncle would kill me if he heard what I'm about to say. Quit. Go out with that telephone guy. Get a life.”

And with that, Jamie left, and Lynn took a panoramic view of the room. People networking. Mouths jabbering. She put her drink down and walked to the exit door. She had enough.

Back at the Bar Mitzvah, Charlie and Rebecca were at the bar and they both had drinks sitting in front of them, and they both stare out into the dance floor. Finally, Rebecca said, “So, you're a private investigator?”

“Is that what Al told you?”

“He said you were investigating important people for him.”

Charlie nodded his head several times. Silvia appeared and while pulling him away, she said to Rebecca, “I need to talk to Charlie.” And then she pulled him over to an empty table. She pinched his cheek and said, “You skuch. How's your love life?”

“Nothing much to report there, Mom. Although Rebecca seemed pretty hot. You know, the one you just dragged me away from. The one Al was trying to hook me up with.”

“Oh, don't make me puke. She's too young for you. Still, it's been an acceptable time, Charles. You can go and meet other women now, you know. There's no one, besides whosy

whatsy over there?"

"There is one woman. But she's out of my league."

"You listen to me, Charlie Longley. Any woman would be lucky to get you. So go out with her. You'd make an old lady very happy."

CHAPTER FIVE

Later that night, while Charlie was sitting on his apartment bed with the phone book opened, he picked up his cell phone beside him and while dialing he practiced, “Hello, this is Charlie.” He hung up before the connection was made. “It’s been too long,” he whispered to himself. “I don’t know how to do this. Just do it. Don’t think about it. Just do it.”

Charlie dialed again waited anxiously for Lynn to answer.

“Hi,” he said, then stalled. “I just got back from the Bar Mitzvah,” he said.

“How was it?” Lynn asked.

At first Charlie said it was ‘good’, but eventually he told the truth and said it was boring as hell.

“How are you?” he asked again.

“I’m fine, Charlie. And how are you?” she said mockingly

“Good. I mean well. ‘WELL’ is the right word. I think.”

There was an awkward pause, and then Lynn finally asked why Charlie called.

“I called?” Charlie said trying to get over his nerves. “Agh, yes. I did, didn’t I? Now I suppose I have to tell you why I called. Hmm. Listen, Lynn, I haven’t done this in a long time, and I guess what I’m trying to say is, I would you like to go out with you on a date.”

“Sure,” Lynn said. “Why not? I haven’t been on a date in a long time either.”

“Good. How about dinner? Tomorrow?”

“Sure. That sounds nice, Charlie. I live at the HILLS, apartment twelve J.

“Okay. I’ll pick you up. How about six?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at six.”

That was a cue for Charlie to hang up, so he said his goodbyes and hung up. He threw himself on the the bed – exhausted.

At the Mercy Hospital Intensive care floor, the the elevator door swung open. Al and Charlie came out and walked toward the patient’s rooms. “I’m told he's not contagious any longer,” Al said to Charlie as they walked to the reception desk. “It’s like Chicken Pox, I guess,” he added, Al walked up to the receptionist and asked for Paul Werner’s room.

“Are you family?” the receptionist asked.

“No,” Al said, “but we work with him.”

That was good enough for the receptionist so she told Al 308 was the room number. Al and Charlie followed the signs until they reached room 308. Paul was asleep while breathing through an oxygen mask. Wires invaded his body, measuring his vital signs. Mrs. Werner was in there as well, sitting in a chair reading a book. Al and Charlie entered and gave their greetings, and then Mrs. Werner sobbed. Al wanted to console her but she said, “Don’t come near me. I may be contaminated.”

Charlie approached Paul's bed which alarmed Mrs. Werner. “Get away from him, too,” she said.

“They wouldn’t have allowed us to come in here if you or he was contagious,” Al said.

“Good point,” Mrs. Werner said as Paul awakened. He motioned for Charlie to come to him. Charlie moved closer, and Paul grabbed Charlie’s wrist tightly.

“Must stop them,” Paul whispered to Charlie so no one else could hear. Just then a nurse rushed into the room. “Is everything okay in here,” she said.

Paul pulled his mask off. He tried to speak, but his breathing was laborious and he couldn't. He pulled Charlie closer and said again, "Must stop them."

Paul choked on his own saliva until he fell silent and released his grip on Charlie's collar. Paul's spent body triggered the vital-sign alert alarms on the machine. "I need help in here," the nurse yelled,

Mrs. Werner collapsed into her chair, exhausted. Al grabbed Charlie and they snuck away.

Moments later, Al peeled out of the hospital parking lot. Charlie breathed in and out, in short spurts, as if he was having an anxiety attack.

"What did he tell you?" Al asked.

Charlie poked his head out the window and took deep breaths.

"Snap out of it," Al said.

"He said we must stop them, Charlie said, "And then mumbled something about no antidote."

Al hit the steering wheel. Charlie pulled his head back in.

"Hell, man. I knew it."

"What?" Charlie asked. "What do you know?"

"I don't know, exactly," Al said. "But whatever it is, Polston's behind it."

"Behind what? What?"

"I don't know, I just said. But I'm going to find out."

"Just make damn sure you do it without involving Lynn. Okay? This adventure of yours is getting out of hand."

At the Private Line Testroom, later that night, Jimmy had cords connecting the PC to the Testboard. He picked up the telephone and dialed. It rang and, finally, Charlie's voice came booming through the speaker.

"I've scrolled through some VISA outputs, and I don't think Polston has a VISA card."

"Maybe it's another data base," Charlie said.

"I don't think so because I've found Lynn's VISA on file."

Jimmy scanned the monitor which had some of Lynn's charges. "Your girl likes Godiva Chocolates. Macy's ... a couple of gas stations ... That's about it."

"Good," Charlie said as if Jimmy found gold. "Anything more on the IRS?"

"My buddy sent me an old encryption device. Maybe we'll get lucky and I'll find more."

"Okay. See ya tomorrow."

"Have a nice night off."

Charlie walked up to Lynn's apartment door the next day with a wrapped gift in hand. He knocked and she answered rather quickly as if she knew he was there.

"I thought you might like this instead of flowers," Charlie said, then handed her the gift. She opened it while Charlie scanned her apartment which was smartly decorated, he thought.

"Oh, I don't believe it."

"You like chocolates?"

"I do," Lynn bellowed, "but I'm allergic to them. I buy these for my sister all the time. She loves Godiva.

"Okay. Well. Give it to her then."

"I will. Thank you, very much."

Lynn put the chocolates on top of the refrigerator. "I'm ready."

Charlie gazed at the orange glow on the horizon and shared this good feeling with Lynn as he drove to the diner. "A beautiful night," Charlie observed.

"Charlie. I need to say something. I don't want you to get offended."

"Shoot," Charlie said.

"My uncle's behavior the other day was awful. I offer no excuses for him, except to say he worked hard to get where he is. A Vice Presidential candidate, that's pretty big bananas. The news media is unfair to him at times. What I mean to say is I know your brother-in-law is a reporter and if you have any thoughts of using me to get to my Uncle, then be a decent man and tell me now."

Charlie pulled to the side of the road, turned off the engine and looked at Lynn squarely. "I wouldn't. Never! I'd rather die."

Lynn felt Charlie's sincerity. She waited a few seconds then nodded, accepting his answer.

Moments later, as Charlie was driving, Lynn said

"My dad had money problems after Mom died. Uncle Ted jumped in and helped out. I guess that makes me obligated."

"What about your dreams of becoming a social worker?"

"When the time is right?" Lynn said. "Not now. My uncle needs me." Lynn noticed an auction sign. "Oh, an auction. I love auctions."

Moments later, Charlie and Lynn walked through the back entrance of the auction house.

Patrons sat in chairs that were neatly spaced in the center of a rather large room where auction items decorated the perimeter of the room ready to be auctioned off sometime that evening. Some patrons stood along the perimeter looking at the merchandise ready to be auctioned off, or they were intently listening to the auctioneer who was at the podium while an assistant stepped forward with an old doll.

“A dollar, a dollar fifty, two, two fifty, three ... three ...three ... sold to number six for two fifty.”

The auctioneer was quick which he had to be if he wanted all the patrons to stay by the time he got to the last table of goodies.

Charlie and Lynn inspected the perimeter passing by tools, baseball cards, a washing machine, and old clothes. She inspected an exotic hat and put it on her head, sporting it for Charlie.

“I like it,” Charlie said out loud, “but I’m not sure it’s a hat and that you should put it on your head.” They both laugh.

“You’re right. It might have lice.”

Some time later, Lynn and Charlie came through the door of the auction house laughing from the belly. Charlie had a Sherlock Holmes hat on and twirled a walking cane like Bat Masterson. Lynn had a mink stole wrapped around her and sauntered along as if she was a 1920’s movie star. “I’m ready for my next close-up,” she said.

“Not bad for five bucks.”

“You look marvelous. Mr. Masterson, I presume. Or is it Sherlock? Can’t tell with the hat and the stick.”

And with a very poor WC Fields accent, “You don't look bad yourself, Lady.” Then Charlie dons a Jimmy Stewart accent. “I really don't do ... do impressions all that well, you see. I'm more of a ...a home body.”

Lynn appeared charmed by this new side of Charlie. “Let's not go to any fancy place,” she said. “How about Johnny's Hot Dog Stand.”

Later, at Johnny’s Hot Dog Stand, Charlie and Lynn quietly enjoy eating the hot dogs.

“The only part of my job I really like is when people write for help. I get a chance to do some good then.”

“If I may be so bold, your Uncle does seem to have an attitude.”

“He's probably more paranoid than anything,” Lynn said. “He got burnt by a reporter who posed as a teacher. He became my boyfriend for a couple of months, and some very private information found its way into the papers. My uncle is still rankled over that.”

A person by the name of Jack Nicols, not far away, snapped a picture of Charlie and Lynn. Oblivious to the intrusion of their privacy, Lynn said, “Let's just say that I'm trying to seek balance right now.”

Charlie donned a weak smile. They continued eating.

Later, upon leaving, Lynn heard music.

Charlie grabbed Lynn's hand and they followed the music.

Meanwhile, Jack pulled out a mustache and a black beret hat from a bag that was on the front seat of his car. He put them on and followed Charlie and Lynn.

Moments later, at the bar next door to Johnny’s Hot Dog Stand, Charlie and Lynn sat at a table. A waitress took their order and left. A slow romantic song began playing.

“Dance?” Charlie asked Lynn.

Lynn got up and they fall into an embrace. They fit perfect together. Lynn buried her head in Charlie's neck and it was all over for her.

Meanwhile, Jack sat at a table and sipped on a drink and watched. Forever watching.

Jimmy hovered over a decoder box at a long distance testboard while Charlie read the VISA outputs.

“So, did ya have sex?” Jimmy asked while he began soldering two male jacks to the decoder box.

“That’s none of your business,” Charlie said as he was reading a report. “We had a nice time. That's all.”

“Gonna see her again?”

“I might. Probably. Yes. I feel like I'm spying on her,” Charlie said. “These reports don’t tell me anything.”

“Hold these wires.” Jimmy handed Charlie two wires while Jimmy continued to solder one end of the wires on the decoder.

“Where did your friend get this?” Charlie asked

A puff of smoke goes up. “He worked for the IRS for a year. Found an old encryption schematic and built this thing. Became his master degree project, actually.”

“This is a Federal crime, you know.”

Jimmy finished soldering the cord. He picked up the box. “Please. Stop. Everything we’ve been doing for the past few years is illegal. You want to stop? Just say the word.”

“No,” Charlie said sheepishly.

Jimmy plugged one end of the cord into the PC, then plugged the other end into the

decoder. Another cord dangles from it. "Go ahead," Jimmy said. "Plug the loose end into the IRS circuit."

A sound indicated the exit door is opening down the hall. Charlie looked. "It's just Mary," Charlie said.

"Hey schmuckos," Mary said upon arriving. "You got a carrier failure. I'm getting stuck senders again."

"I'm not doing this with her here," Jimmy said.

"I'll take care of it," Charlie said. "You stay focused."

And with that, Charlie plugged the cable into the IRS circuit then bolted. Jimmy hit the return key a couple of times and waited. All of a sudden information poured onto the screen.

In Jimmy's mind, he visualized the wires of the IRS circuit and up rack and met hundreds of other wires, then down to the frame, to an underground cable, a tandem office, another cable, a local switcher, another underground cable, to the Holtsville IRS building and, finally, to the IRS computer three hundred miles away.

The computer hummed and gurgled as if it were human.

Jimmy hit the F1 key and the PC screen showed a series of options. Number "5" was "QUERY". Jimmy quietly celebrated his success and hit the "5" key. The screen picked up a form requesting "last name, address, etc". He began typing.

Meanwhile, back at the Message Testboard, Charlie 'locked out' and plugged the circuits that were involved in the carrier failure that produced the stuck senders down at 'Mary's' long distant switching machine.

"Your cheeks look awful rosy," Marie said while she looked on.

Charlie threw her a deadpan look. "Yeah. So. What are you trying to say?"

“She seems very nice, is all,” she said.

After Charlie finished at the Testboard, he sat at the desk and looked for the register sheet for the noise tests he was about to do..

“She is very nice,” Charlie said, “but we didn’t have sex, if that’s what you’re saying.”

At the Private Line Testboard, Jimmy couldn’t contain his excitement as the PC screen filled with data. The printer printed out a hard copy. Jimmy held his head contemplating the power he had breaking into the IRS circuit with impunity. “Wow,” was all he said.

Charlie sprawled Polston's and Lynn's IRS returns on the coffee table in his living room. There was a knock on the door. Since it was unlocked, the door flung open and Al ran in excitedly exclaimed, “Let's see. Let's see.” He sat down on the coach and began reading Lynn’s IRS returns.

“My god! She made a half-million on dividends from Chem Corp. See. I told you, damn it. I told you.”

Charlie turned away, somber, as if he did something wrong. He felt like he was snooping. He had to keep this from Lynn, but he didn’t know what to do. He felt conflicted.

“Look at the deduction to this charity,” Al said. “World Strategies. Did you ever hear of them?”

“No,” Charlie said. “It's obvious she's being used.”

Al immediately focused his attention on Polston's return. He took his time, but finally Al looked perplexed and admitted that Polston's return looked like a jigsaw puzzle. “How the hell do you read it?” Al said. “Still, this is a gold mine, Charlie.”

“Just don’t tell anyone where you got it from,” Charlie pleaded.

Charlie reached for the returns. Al grabbed them.

“I think I made a mistake, Al. Let’s have them.”

“Not on your life,” Al said.

“I should’ve never called you. Give me the forms. You can’t use them, anyway. They’re illegal.”

“It’s corroborated evidence. Anyway, don’t get so high and mighty with me now, Charlie. If Lynn is guilty, well ... I’m sorry. Shit happens.” Al headed for the door with the forms in his hands.

“You’ll ruin her and Polston will get off Scott-free. Please ... wait.”

Al was almost out the door what Charlie yelled, “I got a plan.”

Al turned and faced Charlie. “What kind of plan?” Al asked.

At the first floor Long Distance Switching Room, while Mary was on a ladder hovering over the switching counters, and logging the numbers into a book, Charlie bolted through the door carrying in a reel of frame wire with him.

Charlie raised one panel of the raised floor and saw cables running through to the NY Tel office next door.

Mary threw the book down and it hit Charlie in the shoulder. “What the hell...”

“I’ll recite and you write. Page seven. Okay. Ready?”

Charlie took the book and went to page seven. He gave the go ahead and, as she recited the numbers, he wrote them in the appropriate box. “I’m done,” Mary said and started to come down the ladder.

“When does Connie go to break?” Charlie asked

“Six,” Mary said. “What are you doing with the floor?”

He bent down and raised another tile. The area under the floor was clear. The clock on the wall read 5:58.

“I’ll crawl through here,” Charlie grabbed Mary’s tool pouch from the desk which had frame wire-wrappers, wire-cutters, etc. Mary jumped off the ladder and briskly walked to Charlie and grabbed at the tool pouch. Charlie refused to let go.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m crawling to New York Tel next door to tap Polston’s phone line.”

“You can’t do that,” Mary said. “That’s illegal without the proper warrants. I’m assuming you don’t have the proper paperwork.”

Charlie shook his head.

“I didn’t think so.”

“You don’t know how to do that, anyway. Do you?”

“I can wing it,” Charlie said.

“Wing it! You know how to use the console, get onto the computer? You know how to do that, mister big shot?”

“No. Not if you put it that way. Besides, that’s not the only way. They got a frame card bin. I’ll cross-reference the frame number to the phone number, and then find Polston’s lugs and solder these wires here to them and run the wires back here and, presto, I’m done. Don’t worry. Connie showed me how to do it a long time ago.”

Charlie a set of wire strippers and a wire plugs to wrap the wires around the lugs at the appropriate time. He positioned the reel of wire so he could pull the wires while he crawled under the floor. He inspected the patch trunk bay that went up to the third floor – that’s where he

would attached the other end of the wires once he established the tap on the local telephone frame.

He took the reel of wire and placed it to the raised floor. Charlie was ready. The clock on the wall read six.

“Watch for Connie. Please!” Charlie said. “and watch the reel in case I hit a snag.”

Mary headed for the door and opened it a crack, enough so she see the guard and the elevator. Just as she did that, Connie, the NY Telephone Switchman, opened his door and disappeared into the hallway and down the stairs to the cafeteria where the vending machines were.

“He left,” Mary said. Charlie ducked under the floor leaving the reel of wire in the Long Distance Switching office above the tile. He pulled and started dragging a set of wires as he crawled marine style under the floor causing the reel of wire to turn as he went. He disappeared from Mary’s view while the wheel turned. “I hope this chick is worth it,” she said.

“It's for the interest of justice,” Charlie echoed as he wiggled his body next door dragging a pair of wires with him as he went.

Next door, a floor tile eased up and Charlie’s head peaked out. He missed his mark, so he ducked down again and continued to crawl through the ground space. He raised the floor board again. This time he was right by the frame, so he climbed out next to the frame bays, then wrapped the wire on a onto the frame leg and ran around the corner to the card bin. One area of the bin reads, "SORTED BY FRAME NUMBER", and another side that reads, "SORTED BY TELEPHONE NUMBER". He thumbs through the "SORTED BY TELEPHONE NUMBER" bin and found Polston’s lug location card.

Meanwhile, at the Long Distance Switch room, Mary saw the spinning wire wheel stop

indicating that Charlie found where the frame was . She then rushed to the door and looked for Connie to come back from the downstairs cafeteria.

“Justice, my ass,” Mary whispered to herself. “He just wants to get his whistle wet.”

At the local switching office, Charlie finds the card, writes down the frame numbers onto a piece of paper and put the card back into the bin. Charlie then ran to the frames and alternately looked at the paper and the bay numbers. He continued to do this until he found the right term block bay. Once he did that, he scanned the block for the right pair. He found it, which was the pair that had a red tag on it, indicating that this is an important circuit.

Charlie took the wire pair that he tied to the frame leg and brought it to the term block where he quickly tied it to the posts and clipped it on tightly.

Back at the Long Distance Switchroom, Mary opened the door a crack and looked for Connie. He was still down at the building’s cafeteria. With a sandwich from the machine in one hand, Connie deposited coins in the soda machine with the other. The soda drops. He retrieved it and headed back to the office.

Back at the Local Switching Frame, Charlie removed the red tags, stripped the wires he wheeled in, and put one wire into the gun. He wired it to the one lug, and did the same for the second lug. He put the red tags back on, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Two more to go,” Charlie whispered to himself.

Meanwhile, Mary saw Connie coming back from the Cafeteria. She opens the door and said, “Hey, Connie. How ya doing, bud?”

Connie stopped and Mary waved him over.

While she was distracting Connie, Charlie put the last wire on and tucked the new wires into the cable and out of sight.

Meanwhile, in the hallway by the Long Distance Switchroom Entrance, Connie took a bite of his sandwich and mumbled, "What do you want, Mary?"

"What time do you have?"

Connie looked at the watch on Mary's wrist.

"Mine is busted," she said.

"It's six-ten."

Connie sauntered back to his door and punched the numbers in the security lock. He looked back at Mary and mumbled, "Get a new watch."

In the local switching office, and having finished tucking the wires into the cable, Charlie heard the door open, so he moved faster.

As Connie walked through the door, he heard a noise behind him, so he turned around and walked to the aisle where Charlie was. As Connie approached, the floor tile was seated into place, indicating that Charlie was on his way back to the Long Distance Switching Office. While he crawled back marine style, he crawled over the wires he just dragged in.

Charlie's head appears above floor, and Mary curses, slaps his face, then helps him up and out. She slaps him again.

"That hurts," Charlie said. "Stop it. I'll take it down in a couple of days, alright?"

Charlie then takes the reel to the patch trunks marked "Third Floor Testboards". He cut the dangling wires off and began to connect the tap wires to upstairs.

A little later, at the Long Distance Telephone testroom, Charlie hooked a set of wires from the patch bay to a vacant jack at the testboard. He hooked in a speaker and Jimmy stood on the testboard desk running wire up to the cable rack. Jimmy hooked the other end of the wire to the tape recorder.

“Ok,” Jimmy yelled out. “The recorder is in place.”

Charlie reached for the phone and dials. Multi-frequency tones emanate from the speaker which indicated that Charlie's call was coming in on Polston's line. Charlie hung up.

A little later, in the middle of taking register readings multi-frequency tones emanated from the speaker again, and Charlie flipped the recorder on from underneath the bay. Polston answered. It was a short conversation with a telemarketer. Charlie turned the machine off.

According to the wall clock, it was 8:30. Charlie and Jimmy were reading at the desk when Charlie heard multi-frequency tones again. Charlie bolted to the recorder and turned it on. Charlie listened intently.

“Hello, Polston here.”

“It's confirmed. The boy got infected from the father. And the father got it from the project.”

“What about the doctor?” Polston asked.

“The boy's doctor signed the death certificate ... complications from the flu. But the doctor who treated the father is not co-operating. Says he wants to do an autopsy.”

“Ok. I've called off the project. Too much at risk without a fix. Dump the chemicals, shred the evidence.”

“Ok, Senator.”

Charlie and Jimmy look at each with their jaws wide open.

Charlie knocked on the door of Al's house and waited. He knocked harder. The lights go on and AL answered the door in his bathrobe.

“I got it. I got it,” Charlie said excitedly.

Al’s wife, Cynthia, yelled from the upstairs bedroom who was it at this ungodly hour, in a shrilling voice that cut to the bone.

”It's just Charlie,” Al said in a comeback voice.

“Al!” Charlie said with a tone of urgency. “I got Polston on tape busting this case wide open.”

Charlie waved the tape in his hand as they walked into the den. Al pulled out a tape recorder from the desk. It already had an ear piece plugged in. As the tape played, Al's smile grew. After a few seconds of listening, Al slammed his hand on the desk, stood up and reached for Charlie's hand. They shook..

“I believe you've done it, Holmes,” Al said.

Cynthia yelled from upstairs, “Is everything alright, Charlie?”

“Yes ... Yes. Charlie's fine. He's finally got a girlfriend and he can't sleep is all.”

“Geez, Al,” Cynthia exclaimed from far away, “When was the last time you were that restless over me?”

“I'm very secure in our love, my dear,” Al yelled. “Go back to bed.”

Then Al whispered so his wife couldn’t hear, “Listen, pal. I'm sorry about before. I know you care for this chick.”

“She's not a chick,” Charlie explained, “Lynn is someone I care for. Leave her be. It’s bad enough you’re going after her uncle.”

“Okay. I will leave her alone. She’s henceforward off limits. But her uncle is fair game.”

“Do what you must, but leave her alone.”

Polston sat alone in his office reading a note that told him the project was terminated, but if he continued to use mycotoxins, as suggested, they would continue to sympathize. Polson put the papers in an envelope marked, ZIPPER, and tossed it on his desk just as the phone rang. “I know you canceled the project,” Polston said. “Yes, Yes. The evidence is being shredded as we speak.”

CHAPTER SIX

In Charlie's kitchen, later that day, Al sipped the cup of coffee in front of him while he was talking to Charlie about the phone call to Polston. "There was silence," Al said. "He wanted to curse at me, I could feel it. But he doesn't. He just says, 'That's interesting. Too bad I don't know what you're talking about'. Then he hung up, and ten minutes later, I get a call from his aide. He wants to meet me at nine tonight at Cherrywood Lounge."

"This is getting very complicated, isn't it?"

"No, it's not, actually. I feel that the story is coming to a close. Besides, this is the way things happen in the world of ... espionage."

At Senator Polston's office, Jamie and Polston sat at opposite ends of the desk. Lynn walked in and sat down at her desk.

"He's just poking around," Jamie said.

"Maybe. I'm sending Jack anyway. I want this idiot to play out his hand. Change of topic. One last drop-off." He slid the envelope marked 'Zipper' to him.

Lynn saw Polston give Jamie a manila envelope and Jamie and Lynn's eyes met. Jamie shook his head. as if to say this envelope is nothing to be concerned over.

At the diner, Charlie and Lynn sit in a booth drinking coffee and talking.

"You know how I feel about the subject," Charlie said. "If you are that unhappy, then leave."

“You don't understand. I just can't right now. When the elections are over in November, then I'll go.”

Charlie nodded, made a feeble attempt at smiling, then said, “How about a real dinner this weekend?”

Lynn nodded and. smiled back.

In a dark alley behind the Cherrywood Lounge at night, Al pulled into the alley, stopped and got out of the car. An attaché case was locked xx to his wrist with a set of hand cuffs. He walked slowly until he heard a voice whisper, “Over here”. Al moved towards the sound.

“That's close enough,” the voice said.

Al opened his case, fumbled for the recorder and turned it on. “Okay. Start talking.”

“The boy's doctor signed the death certificate”, the voice said. “Complications from the flu. But the doctor who treated the father is not co-operating.”

“Ok. I'll deal with that. Senator Polston said he's calling off the project. Too much at risk without a fix. Dump the chemicals he said; shred the evidence.”

Al shut the recorder off, and then the man stepped into the light holding his wallet and flashed a PI card. “I'm Jack Nicols,” he said. “Private Eye. Oooh, I love saying that.” He snapped his fingers and said, “Let's have the tape.” Refusing, Al threw the recorder in his case and locked it. Jack eyed the handcuffs while lighting up a cigar. Jack sucked in a couple of puffs and finally said, “Well, well. Aren't we the cowboy?” Jack then motioned Al to follow him to his car. As they walked, Al said “I thought the Senator was going to send his aide.”

“I am his aide.” They stop at Jack's car. Jack held out his cigar. “Here hold this, will ya?”

As Al took the cigar, Jack whipped out another set of cuffs from his pocket and within a

blink of an eye he had Al's other wrist handcuffed to a fence post by the car.

“Hey. Uncuff me,” Al insisted.

Jack opened his trunk of his car and exposed a lot of tools – a couple of hack saws, hammers, etc. He pulled out an industrial cable cutter. Al shut up as Jack wheeled it like a Ninja. He could find no words of defiance that would suffice for the occasion.

“Goddamn rookies! Give me your pinky.” A look of horror crossed Al’s face. “Just kidding,” Jack said. “I’m not totally inhuman.”

With one quick motion, Jack cut the handcuffs off the attaché case and took possession of it without a struggle. “We can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way. What's the combination to this?” Al is silent. Jack reaches into the trunk for the crowbar.

“Alright, alright,” Al succumbed and gave him the combination, and Jack opened the case without a struggle. He took the tape out of the camera and put it in his pocket.

Jack inspected what else was in the case. “You thought this little charade of attaching the case to your wrist would do the trick, huh?” case,

He laughed. “You were a sportswriter awhile back? I remember the article you wrote about Mohammed Ali. Very Good. Hmm. Well, well. What do we have here?” Jack pulls out the tax returns from the case.

“I made copies of those,” Al said.

“I bet you did.” He started to read the returns. “This is pretty interesting stuff.” Jack threw the returns in the back in the case, took a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the handcuffs from the fence post.

“Let's cut the crap,” Jack said. “You're a fair reporter, but you're an amateur at this cloak and dagger stuff. Haven't you received enough clues the past couple of weeks?”

“So, you’re the one. Why?”

“You can't use this stuff. Inadmissible. And you could be thrown in jail if they found out how you got it. Bye the way, where did you get it, anyway?”

Al didn't want to incriminate Charlie, so he kept silent.

“Hey, I know what your brother-in-law does. Be rest assured, it's illegal.” Jack was met with more silence. “All right. Have it your way.” Jack said. He tossed the case in the car and jumped in. “You had the scoop,” Jack said. “Where did Werner and his son lead you?”

Al went to say something but stopped and just shook his head.

“Well, it may be too late anyway,” Jack said. “The cover up has already started. It's like a virus. Do yourself a favor. From here on, stay out of my way.”

At. Senator Polston's office that night, Polston and Jack sat at opposite ends of the desk. Polston shut the recorder off after listening to the whole conversation that Jack had with Al earlier in the day. He then thumbed through the tax returns. “Check for bugs in this office first,” Polston said. “Then check the central office for taps. Check out that telephone idiot who's hungry for my niece while you're at it.”

Jack nodded and pointed to the tax returns. “I wouldn't call him an idiot,” he said. “My guess, he's the one who got those through the IRS circuit that runs through the telephone central office.”

“Now, how could he do that? The IRS has encryption protocols.”

“I don't know. All I know is the Holtsville IRS is linked to a national network of IRS computers. The communication hub is in his office. How else could Al get it?”

Polston thinks long and hard. “I'll take care of him myself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That’s none of your concern. You just go find the phone tap.”

Polston flicks his hand to dismiss Jack, but Jack sits back, defiant. Polston queries him with a raised brow.

“I don't want to do this anymore, Ted. I want you to release me.”

“Aren't we forgetting something?”

“I've paid you back tenfold.”

“I can't release you just yet, Jack. You know too many things, and you're the only one who can get information for me. Maybe after this is all over.”

They stared at each other for a couple of seconds, then Jack sighed deeply and left.

Early morning the next day, at Senator Polston's office, Jack sat alone checking Lynn's desk for a tap. Nothing. He went into Polston's room, checked around the desk, opened one of the drawers with a key and saw a gun. He picked it up, checked the barrel, put it back, and continued checking.

He closed all the drawers, locked the desk back up and went into Jamie's room. He ducked under the desk to check the Telco wires. He heard someone at the front door and he ducked under the desk to hide.

Lynn fiddled with the lock a bit, then opened the door to a seemingly vacant office.

Lynn walked right over to Polston's desk, took a key from her pocket, and opened Polston's desk with ease that might suggest she had done this before. In one drawer she noticed the gun. She inspected it and put it back. Lynn continued checking and noticed a folder marked, "CORDOVA". She read it, let out with a gruff sigh, and put the folder back. Lynn pulled out a

folder marked, "ZIPPER" and read its contents for a few beats. She put it back and pulled out a folder marked, "WORLD STRATEGIES". She opened it, then read the papers in it.

Jack got up from the floor in the next room purposely making noise.

In a panic, she put the folder back, closed the drawer, then looked through the glass window adjoining Jamie's room and saw Jack. They both walked into the reception area and appeared suspicious of each other.

"Eating worms for breakfast, are we?" Jack said.

They both look at the clock together.

"It's 6 AM," Lynn said. "What are you doing here so early?"

"Just following your Uncle's orders."

"Yeah? And what kind of dirty work might that be?"

"Phone taps, actually."

"You're tapping our phones?"

"Hardly. Checking for bugs. For a change someone has the upper hand on your uncle it seems."

"Who?" Lynn wanted to know.

"Your friend at the telephone office, Charlie Longley, is my best guess."

Although she was still suspicious of Jack, she relaxed some. "My uncle told me last night what you found. I didn't believe him. That's why I'm here early. I mean, I just can't believe Charlie would do this to me. What does he have to gain from my tax returns?"

"Hate to say it, for your sake, but maybe he's helping his brother-in-law. A Pulitzer can be a very powerful incentive."

Lynn sighs deeply and they both go into her office. She slumps down at her desk. "I

thought Charlie was different.”

“Aagh. Maybe he’s not involved. When I find out what's going on, I'll let you know.”

“Why do you do this for him, Jack? What does my uncle have on you?”

“I thought you knew. Ted's never told you?”

“Tell me what?”

Jack pulled up a chair to Lynn. “My relationship with my uncle isn't what it used to be, Jack. He's changed. He doesn't trust me anymore, and I don't trust him. So, tell me what’s going on.”

Jack groaned but remained silent weighing whether he should tell her. “All right,” he said after some deliberation. “I got nothing to lose.” He took a moment, then finally told her that he was on a stake-out in an interstate drug traffic case. There was a suitcase of money. Two hundred thousand. Jack’s son was at Children’s Hospital with a brain tumor. The Doctor said Jack’s insurance wasn't enough. Another agent was shot that day, Jack remembered.

“He saw me take the money,” Jack said. “He signed a deposition against me and two days later he was shot. I didn’t know what was going on, so I confessed,” Jack said. “I figured stealing money was a lesser offense than killing someone. And the funny part is, the money didn't even help. My son died anyway. My career, my pension, my son...” Jack snapped his fingers and said, “Just like that – it was all gone.”

“But you're retired from the FBI, I thought.”

“Well, there's the rub, Lynn. Your Uncle stole the signed testimony and my signed confession. Dead men don't talk, and I wasn't about to confess twice. So they dropped the charges. And I am forever showing my gratitude so the missing information will never return to the Bureau. They can still take my pension away if it ever does.”

“Hell, Jack. How long has he had you under his thumb?”

“Five years, but who's counting?”

Lynn appeared touched.

“I’ve been tailing Charlie and you for the last few weeks, you know?”

Lynn slammed her hand down on the desk and said, “Jesus, Jack. You, my uncle, Charlie, I am so upset with all of you.” They both remained silent for a couple of beats, then finally Lynn spoke up. “I just saw the Cordova file. Did you know that Cordova killed Charlie's wife and Ted helped Cordova get off?”

Jack nodded and said, “I know everything.”

“I am so confused. I feel so trapped and used by all of you.”

“ Well, Toots, I gotta tell ya. I think your friend there is in deep trouble. I don't know how Charlie's involved, but that doesn't matter right now. Your uncle sees him as a threat, and I think Charlie is in danger.”

“Of what?”

“ Your uncle is capable of anything, Lynn. I don't know everything, but your Uncle is involved with some heavy hitters overseas. They wanted Cordova dead. And your uncle was about to kill him, but Charlie’s brother got him first. That’s why he suspects ... Charlie of doing ... who knows what. It gets very convoluted, actually.”

Lynn folded her arms on the desk and buried her head. “This is not happening.”

Jack let Lynn brood a little, the finally piped in, “If you want to help Charlie, I have a plan.”

Charlie was at the long distance testboard with cords in one of the circuit jacks. He

pressed a number of keys, then he pressed a button. The overhead meter lights up, and a noise measurement appeared. He wrote the result in the measurement book.

Just then the phone rang. Charlie answered it. "Sure," he said into the phone. "I can be over there in ten minutes. Okay. Bye."

Jimmy walked around the bays as Charlie hung up.

"It was Lynn. She doesn't sound right. I'll be right back."

At Senator Polston's office, moments later, Jack had his feet up on Jamie's desk reading a paper. Polston sat at his desk in his room. A woman stood in front of Lynn's desk waiting for a response from Lynn just as Charlie walked in, Lynn said to the lady, "Just fill out this form and mail in your contribution. And thanks for your support."

The woman signed a report and left. Charlie stepped forward and she pulled out her tax returns from a pile of papers on her desk.

Jack banged on Polston's window and head nods to Lynn. Polston was on the phone, but once he saw Charlie, he said a few words into the phone then hung up.

Charlie tried to speak but nothing came out of his mouth. Finally, he found his voice. "It's not what you think, Lynn."

Lynn gets up and faces Charlie squarely. "I'm not one of those high-haired, low class, tight-ass, New York bimbos who deserves this, Charlie."

Charlie looked towards Polston, and saw that he was staring at him. He then turned his attention back to Lynn. "It's not what you think," was all he could say.

Lynn reached over and slammed her clenched fist into Charlie's stomach. Charlie doubled over in pain. It was his firm opinion that he didn't want to tangle with her. Not this way.

Lynn appeared contrite for what she had just done, but Jack entered, which gave her the courage to stay the course.

“I trusted you,” Lynn said to Charlie.

Charlie straightened up and gulped the air. Finally, just as Jack stood next to him, he breathed normally.

“I think you better leave,” Lynn said.

“Then why did you call and told me to come over? Just to sock me one?”

Jack had his back to Polston but gave Lynn a critical look as if to say she needed some back-up help.

“Leave Charlie,” Lynn said. “And don't ever come back into my life.”

With that said, Charlie left, moaning.

In the Newsday Editor's office the next day, Tim Gantry, Al's boss, peered through the glass window while talking on the phone. He saw the room was busy with reporters typing at their terminals. “Yes, of course, it was wrong of him. But Polston's not squeaky clean here either. Yes, I know it was illegal. Yes, I'll make sure he understands.” Tim hung up and poked his head out of his door and yelled, “Blayer! Front and center.”

Al got up from his desk and walked past a few curious reporters. He entered the editor's room and closed the door behind him.

“I was just talking to Morgenstern.”

“Our publisher? Why were you talking with her?”

“Sit down.”

Al sat, expecting the ax to fall. Tim never called anyone to his office and told them to sit

down unless he had bad news. Still, Al followed his boss's instructions and sat down.

Al wandered around thinking what and how to say what was on his mind.

"You want to tell me how you got Polston's tax returns?" he finally asked.

"From a source. They're public."

"If you got them from a legitimate source I wouldn't be asking. So, don't go there. His niece's returns are not public."

"Why not, a senator's tax returns are public."

"Says who?"

"Wikipedia."

"Oh, my god. What is this world coming to? Please don't tell anyone that. Besides, Lynn Ragona is his niece – not an aide, and she's considered a private citizen."

Tim took a deep breath which was almost a sigh. He was trying to stay calm. "Don't you have anything legal? What about the chemical company?"

"Nothing panned out," Al said. "Nobody's talking. Polston's done a great job of closing the lid. Again!"

"Where did you learn your ethics?"

"Hofstra."

"It was a rhetorical question, Al." Tim reached into his desk and pulled out a cigar. He went to the outside window and opened it. He lit the cigar up and blew the smoke out the window. He looked at the cigar as if he hated it. "You're making it extremely difficult for me to quit smoking."

Al offered his condolences and Tim immediately told him to shut up. "Now listen to me Al," Tim said. "You've lost your objectivity. Al. Polston is what he is, and always been a step

ahead of us. But that doesn't excuse you soliciting illegal information. We're after the news, not people. I have a mind to discipline you. Officially, you're on the transit strike with Roger. Unofficially, get the hell out of here and go get something legitimate on Polston.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

At the long distance telephone testroom later that evening Charlie sat at his desk, picked up his phone and dialed. An answering machine message came on, then a beep sound. "Lynn. I'm so sorry," Charlie said. If you're there, pick up. Otherwise, we'll talk later?. Call me." And then Charlie hung up.

Jimmy took a noise measurement from the overhead meter. He scribbled something down in a book and moved to the next circuit. A conversation was on it. He listened briefly, looked around, then flipped the TALK key and whispered into his headset, "because I don't love you anymore."

Jimmy flipped the 'talk' key back to the monitor position and listened. A painful expression crossed his face as if someone in the conversation was yelling obscenities. "Oh. I never heard a woman talk like that before," Jim said.

Charlie sat listless, not moving. Not caring.

"Who's minding the store downstairs?" Jim asked.

"Connie is at the local helm and Mary is working at switcher."

Meanwhile, at the Telephone building parking lot, Jack stepped out of his parked car and looked around. He approached the entrance and peeked in the door and saw the guard who was dozing off. He snuck in with ease.

While Jack quietly headed for exit sign to climb the stairs to the third floor where Charlie worked, the guard slept soundly. As Jack quietly stepped past the guard, he peeked into the glass door to the local switch room and saw Mary. He spotted a sign on another door that read 'New York Telephone Switch'. That door was locked.

He peered back in the NY Tel door and saw Connie this time. Connie moved away from view and Jack pulled out a very thin strip of metal from his jacket and ran it between the door and the jam. He wiggled it a few times until he heard a click sound and went in.

Jack maneuvered around the local switching room, avoiding Connie, and found the card bins. He thumbed through the cards in the bin that read, "SORTED BY TELEPHONE NUMBER" until he came upon Polston's office number. He wrote down the frame number and put the card back.

He heard Connie coming back, so he ducked around the bay. The sound of the door opening and closing told him Connie had left his post, so Jack hunted for the right frame. He found it and searched for the right pad and lugs. He fiddled with the lugs and cable and spotted the tap. He looked at the bay number and the number of the lug. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. He turned to a wall-phone and dialed. After a ring, he whispered, "I found the tap. What do you want me to do now?"

"Good," Polston said. "Find out who has the tap if you can," The door opened and footsteps indicated that Connie was back.

"Ok. I gotta go."

Jack hung up. He looked at the lugs, then followed the wires to the floor board. He picked up a tile and saw that the wires travelled next door to the FT&T switching office where Mary worked. Jack headed for the exit door and left, undetected.

Jack entered the FT&T switch room while Mary climbed a ladder and started writing down her register findings in a book. Close-by, Jack inspected the floor boards for wiring coming in from the local switching room. While Mary was on the ladder, Jack felt safe from being discovered. He spotted the wire, traced it to a bay, and followed it until he saw the the sign

overhead that said 'FLOOR PATCH TRUNK'.

Mary stepped down from the ladder, tossed the book on the desk, and walked away from the console area.

Up at the third floor long distance testroom, a little later, Jimmy was doing tone level measurements. Charlie sat at the desk in a trance, staring off into space when Jack snuck behind one of the bays.

Charlie noticed the speaker was off. He got up and turned the speaker on. When he sat back down, he sighed and said, "I think I'm in love with her, Jim."

"I thought you said you'd never fall in love again,"

"Yeah, well, I was wrong."

The exit door opened and Mary entered. Jack ducked behind the ladder so Mary couldn't see him.

"No way I can have a relationship with her now," Charlie continued. "I'm out of her league, anyway. What the hell was I thinking?"

Mary appeared. "Everyone is out of your league," she said. "Let's face it. You're a glass-is-half-full misfit."

Multi-frequency tones come from the speaker. Then two rings and the words, "Hello, Polston here."

With a mid-Eastern accent, Charlie listened intently to the words, "Helo, Senet person. Tis da big Zippa heah." As best as Charlie could tell, it was an East Asian accent.

"You idiot. You were told never to call me here."

"Too bad. Dis not a friendly call. Your last message was not received berry good back

home.”

“Sorry about that. That's the way it is.”

“No,” the Zipper said. “Dat's no good answer. We paid ten million dollas.”

“You got a taste of the recipe. That’s what we agree to.”

“We need the spor. We also need more. And we also need antidote.”

Charlie fell over himself trying to get to the tape recorder. He hit the toggle switch just in time to catch the following: “Listen,” Polston said, “tell your people that a terrible mistake was made. We engineered a contagion chemical and we thought we were able to find an antidote. But we can't. Do you understand that? No antidote because we don't have it.”

“Okay. Dats good.”

“No. That’s not good, you little shit. We're not going to give you the power to contaminate the world without being able to stop it in our own country. That would be insane. Besides, it's pretty damn hot right now. Tell your boss to get back to me through the normal channels. This conversation is over.”

When the conversation ended, Charlie stopped the recorder. Just then Jack stepped into view. “Well, well, well,” he said. “What do we have here, little boys and girls?”

“What are you doing here?” Charlie said.

”Who are you?” Jimmy asked.

“My friends call me Jack.”

“How did you get in here?” Charlie asked.

“Oh, dear. What are you doing here?” Mary asked Jack.

Jack looked at the recorder hook-up and, while inspecting it, he said, “I'm a retired FBI agent, actually. Working for Senator Polston right now. I've had better clients, let me tell you.

This is quite a set up. How did you get into the IRS? Where are your private lines?"

"Down the hall," Jimmy said.

"Shut up," Charlie said to Jimmy. "And you," Charlie said as he turned to face Jack. "I'm going to call security."

"Call the police while you're at it. I don't care. What you're doing is illegal. I got connections, so I'll get off. You'll get twenty years."

"Oh, dear," Mary said.

Jack took out a little black book from his pocket and read it.

"Better yet. Call your boss, Clarence, while you're at it." Jack started reading, "Five ... five ... Five..."

"All right, I got your point," Charlie said, stopping Jack from finished the telephone number.

"I don't feel so good," Mary chimed in.

"Relax, both of you. I'm not a cop. But you guys are doing very bad things here." Jack pulled the wires which were hooked to the tape recorder. The recorder tumbled down. He removed the tape from the recorder and stuck it in his shirt pocket.

"I'm pretty impressed, to tell you the truth," Jack continued. "How would you folks like to work for me?"

Jack chuckles, amused with himself. "Just kidding. I don't make enough money. Still, maybe we can do business later."

Charlie held his head as if he has a migraine.

Mary appeared scared out of her wits. In shock, almost.

"When do you guys get off work?" Jack asked.

“Midnight tour comes in two hours.”

“You know the diner down the street?” Jack asked. They all nod. “I’ll meet you there in two hours. We’ll talk and work things out.”

“Talk about what?” Charlie asked.

Jack pulls out the tape from his pocket. “About this. About what you do at the private line testboard over there, and about how you’re going to set things right with Lynn. I’m going now. See you folks later.”

“Why the hell should we trust you?”

“Because you don’t have any other choice in the matter.”

Jack left, and Mary stood by Charlie seething with anger.

“I knew it,” she said. “I might as well kiss my life good-bye.”

Two hours later, at the telephone building parking lot, Charlie, Jimmy and Mary bolt from the building entrance as if they have a mission. As they all walk to their respective cars, Charlie said “What can we lose. Let’s just hear him out.”

“I’m scared,” Mary admitted. “What if he tells the FBI or someone like that?”

“If it’s any consolation, I’m scared too. And he’s not going to tell the FBI. He’s got as much to lose as we do. Maybe more.”

Moments later Charlie stopped at a stop light by the Embassy Diner. Charlie’s car was first, and behind him were Mary, and then Jimmy.

Although the light was green at the intersection for adjacent traffic, a truck was the first to go, but didn’t move. Instead, the driver gunned the engine in idle. The sound was intimidating. Menacing.

Jack waited at a table and had a good view of the intersection through the diner window. He saw Charlie at the light and when it turned green for Charlie to move, the truck driver gunned the accelerator, charging towards the side of Charlie's car. Charlie accelerated hard and out maneuvered the truck. Jimmy saw the danger and turned off the road altogether. The truck driver was gunning for Charlie, but the turn was too sharp and the trailer slid into Mary's car sending her and her car reeling across the street and into a pole.

The truck tipped over on its side and the gas tank ruptured, spilling out gasoline onto the road.

Jack saw the accident and bolted out of the diner to help.

As Charlie pulled off the road, he ran to Mary's car. She was bloodied and pinned in her seat, but she was still alive. Her seat belt was choking her, so Charlie released the belt, thus freeing her.

The truck driver walked slowly towards Mary's car. He pulled a knife from his pocket, and just as he got close to Charlie, Jack bolted onto the scene and pushed the truck driver aside. The driver hid the knife, backed off, and left.

Charlie was oblivious to what was going on except for the need to get Mary out of the car.

"I smell gasoline," Charlie said to Jack. "Help me. She's pinned."

Jimmy burst onto the scene and pitched in. He noticed a stream of gasoline heading towards the car and nudged Charlie. Jack and Charlie looked up and saw the gasoline creeping towards them. They all frantically pulled and tugged on Mary.

The stream gained momentum and all seemed lost but then the liquid got suddenly shifted to the right hitting a pot hole and stalling its progress momentarily. The hole filled and after a

beat or two the stream shifted again and headed towards Mary's car.

Jack saw the stream heading towards them and tried frantically to free Mary, but she was stuck.

The truck driver pulled out a lighter from his pocket, lit it, and threw the lighter into the streaming gasoline. A fire erupted and traveled in two directions: a stream of flames traveled back towards the truck; another towards Mary's car. The truck exploded just as Jack's final tug freed Mary. They ran with her away from the car just as it exploded, sending them flying to the ground, but safely on the grass about thirty yards away.

Jack poked his head up and saw the truck driver get into a passenger car. It spun off into the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mary lied motionless in bed in the hospital the next morning with tubes and wires hooked to monitoring equipment. Frank was by her bedside. Charlie was at the foot of the bed looking haggard.

Charlie walked over to Frank and put his hand on his shoulder. Frank pat Charlie's hand.

Moments later, Charlie and Frank were in the middle of a conversation, and the men do not notice Mary opening her eyes. "He came out of nowhere, Frank," Charlie said, "It looked like he was gunning after me, and got Mary instead."

"Maybe that prick Senator had something to do with it," Frank surmised.

"I should've listened to Mary. I could've had something going with Lynn without trying to be the hero. But it seemed that I've always known Lynn. I can't explain it. Maybe we met in some other time, in another life, where our lives touched closely. I never thought I could fall in love again, but ... I did."

Charlie noticed Mary was trying to say something, but the words come out slurred.

Frank immediately doted on her. She whispered something and Frank leaned in and put his ear towards her lips so he could hear. "Tell Charlie he's full of shit," she whispered. Frank got overwhelmed with joy that Mary was lucid. "Take it easy. Take it easy," was all he said.

"I think Senator Polson did this," Charlie said.

"Then go get that son-of-a-bitch," Mary barely whispered.

Charlie looked to Frank and raised his eyebrows.

"You heard her. Go get him," Frank said.

Just then Jack bolted into the room. He had a vase full of flowers and he set them on the

table.

“Frank, this is Jack Nicols. He helped me get Mary out of the car.”

Frank shakes Jack's hand. Jack takes a flower from the vase and hands it to Mary.

“Will you excuse Charlie and me?” Jack said and then pulled Charlie out of the room.

Jack escorted Charlie to a place where no one could hear. “I don't expect you to trust me,” Jack said, “but I'm going to give you a piece of truth to bite on. We both think Polston is a slime-ball and I have a plan to expose him.”

“Why should I trust you?” Charlie asked.

“Well, you shouldn't, really. But I have two reasons why you should.. First, you're the big loser so far in this drama and you have a prison term to face if things go down hill from here.”

“Is that a threat?” Charlie asked.

“No. It just means you have nothing to lose.”

“And the second reason?”

“It's personal, and you don't get to hear it,” was all Jack said.

Jack took the zipper-tape from his pocket, waves it.

”I copied the tape. You're going to have to sound like the Arab-guy. Practice. Lynn says you can do it.”

At the Long Distance Telephone Testroom, later that day, Clarence was at the desk while Charlie and Jimmy appeared busy at the testboard shooting a trouble.

“Adios, boys,” Clarence said. “Time to go.”

Charlie and Jimmy said their good-byes and Clarence left.

When Charlie heard the exit door close, he took a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Jimmy. “Got to have this done by six, Jimmy. No mess-ups on this one.”

Charlie and Jimmy head for the private line testboard.

At the Private Line Testboard as Jimmy was inputting data, Charlie was putting one end of a cord into the PC. The other end of the cords were dangling at Polston's UPI circuit. Jimmy finished typing. Charlie read the screen at the PC. It read in part: *‘Sources close to the security council say chemical secrets were leaked to Arab rebel forces in the Middle East. The council is close to linking a series of middle men to high ranking officials in a US government plot.’*

The sound of the exit door opening had Charlie removing the cords that were dangling from Polston’s circuit. Jimmy pushed the bay of test equipment to its original position.

“I’ll go and see who just came in. Don’t hit return yet.”

At the Message Testboards Charlie walked up and greeted Clarence.

“Paycheck time,” Clarence said, and then handed Charlie his check. Charlie tried grabbing Jimmy's check, but Clarence pulls it back. “I’ll give it to Jimmy,” Charlie said. “He's working on a Private Line trouble right now, so...”

“That’s alright. I'll take it to him.” Then Clarence headed to the private line area, hesitated and then came back.

“Oh, I forgot. I have to go to parent teachers tonight. I'm late. Here!” Clarence gave Charlie Jimmy's paycheck, and then promptly left.

Meanwhile, at Senator Polston’s office, Polston retrieved his jacket from the coat rack. He checked his pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

Lynn appeared nervous as Polston walked towards her.

“I have papers for you to sign. Bills, primarily.” He locked his desk and urged her to leave with him. Lynn looked at the clock on the wall which read six PM.

“Wow. People are going to say you’re keeping banker’s hours,” Lynn said.

“You should go, too,” the Senator said. “Tomorrow is another day. Whatever you’re doing, do it then.”

“Wait. I’ll just be a minute,” she said. She set herself up with paper in the typewriter, then began typing, then looked at the clock again. Lynn was slow in her movements, as if she was purposely trying to stall.

Meanwhile, back at the Private Line Testboard, Jimmy was punching a few more keys at the terminal.

“Come on. Come on.” Charlie inserted the cords into the Polston’s UPI circuit.

“Done,” Charlie said. “Okay. Do it.”

Jimmy hit the send key on the PC.

At Senator Polston's office, Lynn had her coat on and was ready to leave. Unable to delay any longer, she grabbed her pocketbook and walked with Polston out the door. The UPI printer began tapping away.

“Oh, hell,” Lynn said. “Let me just see what the heck that is. Maybe it’s important.”

She ran over to the printer and read the message. Polston sighed and his demeanor revealed his impatience.

“Interesting,” Lynn said after reading what she pulled off the UPI circuit. She left the office with Polston and closed the door behind her. While walking down the hall, Polston eyed Lynn.

“Well,” Polston said. They approached the street door and after momentary silence Polston finally asked what the UPI printout said.

“Nothing that concerns us. Something about Iraq and germ warfare secrets.” Polston nodded nonchalantly as he opened the outside door of the building. He stepped out into the walkway and then said, “Oh. What's the matter with me. I left my keys in my office. Hey, you go. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Lynn nodded and left.

Back at the Long Distant Telephone Message Testroom, Charlie sat at the testboard staring at Jimmy while he fiddled with the volume control. “It's on. Leave it alone,” Charlie said. They wait a few more beats, then multi-frequency tones emanate from the speaker. Charlie takes a deep breath and said, “It worked. This is it.”

A ring sound vibrates through the speaker. After the second ring Charlie engaged the TALK key, and with a MIDEAST accent, Charlie said, “Hullo.”

“Polston here,” the voice bellowed. “We need to talk.”

“Okee. Tawk.”

“No. Not on the phone. I'll meet you at the drop-off site.”

“No. Dat's no good. We meet in alley. Cherrywud Lunge.”

An abnormally long pause made Charlie wince.

“In a half-hour,” Polston said

Charlie pulled the speaker cord out, and holds his chest.

“Whew. My heart can't take much more of this.”

“That was a pretty shitty interpretation of an Arab,” Jimmy said.

He waited for Charlie to acknowledge that. He got nothing. “How did you know Polston was

going to call 'da Zipper' anyway.”

“We didn’t. We just assumed he would. “

Jimmy turned to the Testboards and searched for calls.

“Don't do that crap, man. Not now. What's the matter with you?”

“Oh, I see. It's okay if we're fighting for truth and justice, but when I want to have fun, it's not allowed. Who are you, God?”

Polston pulled into the parking lot of the Cherrywood Lounge. He got out of his car and ambled into a back alley. A microphone is already hidden in a rafter in the back alley. Close by, a shadow appears of a person who was hiding from view.

Polston walked slowly into the darkness and stopped at the alley entrance. A rustle noise startled him. It was just a cat.

Meanwhile, at the Telephone Long Distance Testroom, Charlie paced the floor. He stopped and said to Jimmy, “I have to see how this turns out. I've got to go.”

“Don't mess it up,” Jimmy said.

“I won’t and leave the public alone,” Charlie said after pointing to the testboards. Charlie left and Jimmy eyed the testboard. He began searching.

At the Cherrywood Lounge alleyway, Polston moved closer to the rafter where the microphone was. A voice in the darkness finally spoke out, “That's close enough” it said.

“Come out where I can see you.”

After a long pause, Jack comes out.

“What the...What are you doing here?” Polston said.

“Just trying to tie things up, Ted.”

“Tie things up?”

“I’m tired of doing your dirty work. So ... Yeah. Tie things up.”

“We already talked about this. You’re on my payroll for as long as I want you or else ... doing what I want you to do or ... do I have to say it.” Jack pulls out some affidavits in an attaché case he was carrying.

“You mean these. My confession.”

“How did you get those? Only Lynn and I had the combination ...” Polston finally realized that Lynn was in on this. “Lynn! I see. What now, Jack?”

“You almost killed that telephone woman, Ted. She’s married. Has a kid, for chrissakes.”

“That was an accident. It was meant for ...”

“I know who it was meant for.”

Polston reached into his pocket, pulled out the knife, and tossed it to Jack who caught it out of a reflex reaction. Then he dropped it. Polston pulled out his gun and a silencer. “Thank you for obliging me with your fingerprints. It just goes to show you, Jack, when you want things done right, you got to do it yourself.” Polston began screwing the silencer on his gun.

“This is too bad, Jack. It didn’t have to end this way.” He finished screwing on the silencer.

“With those papers in your hand, and your fingerprints on the knife, I should be able to wiggle out this quite nicely. There’ll be questions, of course, but I’ve been in tougher situations and go out of them.”

“I put blanks in the gun, Ted.”

“That was you? I couldn’t quite understand why they were in there.” Polston pulled out

the blanks from his pocket. “You mean these?” Polston said and then put them back into his pocket. He aimed the gun at a soda bottle that was close by. He shot and shattered it. The noise of the glass startled Charlie who was in an adjacent alleyway, and he rushed quietly to where Polston and Jack were.

Polston laughed. Jack's demeanor seemed to be submissive. “You should see your face. It’s priceless.” Polston changed his demeanor to a more serious one. “Jack!! What are you trying to pull here? Do you have any idea what's at stake? There are great powers at work here. More than you know.”

“Committee for World Peace?” Jack said. “What kind of title is that? Not very creative.”

“We're trying to befriend the Arabs in the peace meetings in Damascus. Show them that we are sympathetic to their cause.”

“By selling them chemical secrets ... That shows our sympathy?”

“The future is with the Arabs, Jack. The secrecy is so that we don't piss-off Israel.”

“What about the moral issues?”

Charlie finally reaches Polston and Jack. Silently, slowly, Charlie creeps up on Polston from behind. Polston laughs. To Jack and Charlie, the laugh sounded evil, almost.

“Moral issues?” Polston bellowed. “Now what moral issues would that be? No, it was about money. Balance of power – not moral issues.”

Charlie grabbed a two-by-four piece of wood from behind Polston and crept up slowly.

“After the Defense Bill is passed,” Polston said, “We will spend over five billion dollars on our own chemical bombs, antidotes and detectors.”

“And some of that passes to you through Lynn? Or does it go to a Swiss account? I'm confused about that.”

“There's a hundred avenues and most all of it goes to an international group ... Whoops. I shouldn't've said that.” Polston covers his mouth as if he made a mistake. “Oh, Hell! You're going to die anyway, so I think it's okay. You're not worth my breath, so...”

Polston took aim at Jack, but from behind, Charlie made a noise. Polston jerked around and shot at Charlie. Although Charlie got a hit in the arm, he was able to swing the two-by-four, knocking the gun out of Polston's hand. Polston and Jack go for the gun together. Jack's foot reaches the gun first. He kicks it and draws his own gun and holds it on Polston.

Jack took the recorder, which was down by his feet, and turned it off. He yanks the cord to the microphone, and the mic drops from the rafter and into his hand.

“Very damaging, Ted. I don't know how you're going to survive this.”

While keeping his aim, he turned to Charlie who was moaning and bleeding. Jack bent down and inspected the wound. Imitating Humphrey Bogard, Jack said, “Just a flesh wound, kid. You're lucky.”

Jack faced Polston and was practically nose to nose. “You wouldn't believe this guy, Ted, if you saw it yourself. The set up he has at the Central Office? Absolutely amazing!” Jack laughed and then added, “You gotta know the charade is over, Ted.”

“You got nothing on me.”

“We'll see about that. Let's go.”

At the police station, Nick Roselle and Jack were in the side-bar room alone.

“Jack, I'm getting pressure like you wouldn't believe. The mayor has me on notice. My job is on the block. I'm not to charge Polston with anything. Not even a parking ticket, he says.”

“Nick! The mayor is getting pressure from big-wigs in Washington. A world-wide

organization is pulling the strings and it has a lot of power. They control a lot of people. Big-wig types.”

“Come on, Jack. A little far fetched, no? Don't screw around with me.”

“Facts are stranger than fiction sometimes, Nick.”

“I can't press charges, and that's that. You sound out of control, Jack. Maybe you should go see a shrink.”

“All right. Just take my lead, is all I ask. Give me ten minutes. If it doesn't work out, I'll see a shrink.

Later, in Lt. Roselle's office, Polston, his lawyer, and Charlie all sit around Roselle's desk. Charlie's arm is bandaged.

“You talk or press charges on me, you parasite, and your life will not be worth spit, Polston said. His lawyer coughed and shook his head, basically telling Polston to keep his mouth shut.

“Breaking into the IRS circuit, that gets you twenty years I would think. Maybe more. My tit-less niece is in big trouble as well. You say anything, you twerp, and I'll kill her. I will.

“Ted ... shut up, please,” the lawyer said.

“I'll have her killed. You hear?”

Charlie was visibly shaken as Nick and Jack walked in.

“Did you talk to the mayor yet?” Polston said to Nick.

“Yes, I did,” Nick said.

“Good. Can I go, then?”

“Soon. I need to come to closure on a couple of things first. Jack ... do you want to say something?”

“Sure, Nic. It's simple, Ted. We have affidavits linking drug money with arms sales to El Salvador. That was a couple of years ago.”

“Are those affidavits signed?”

“Ted, I'd advise you not to respond.”

Ted holds up his finger, and the lawyer obeys.

“No. Not by you,” Jack said.

“Then they're not affidavits. Just meaningless pieces of paper.”

We'll see what 12 jurors have to say about that,” Jack said. “And then there's Chem Corp. Now, let's see how this works ... they developed chemical compounds, Hensen gives it to you with a promise they will find an antidote. But they can't, and your Arab friends don't like that too much. Then an employee came in contact with the chemicals. You didn't count on that, did you? He contaminates his son and they both die. What was the plan, Ted, to supply rebel Arab forces with a deadly chemical bomb? My God! What would you do if they turned it on us?”

“Oh, dear God!” Nick said.

“Tell me something Ted,” Jack added, “Was it the consortium who decided which countries should be overthrown, and which would stay, unopposed? A secret group of people making millions by starting wars no one can win? And that's all you do for many years is sell arms.”

“Consortium? Please!,” Polston said. “Again, you don't have proof of anything.”

“We have the tapes.”

Polston seems a little more serious. Vulnerable almost. “Attained illegally! Inadmissible!” he said.

“Yeah. We'll see about that. National security had never been at stake when these issues

have come up in the past. We'll see. I saw you shoot Charlie here. Try and explain that away."

"He was going to beat me with a two by four. Self-defense."

"We have enough to stop the President from picking you as his running mate," Jack said. "And the press ... once they get started you won't be able to stop them. They'll start casting light on where the dollars are going."

Beads of sweat appeared on Polston's forehead. He found it hard combating such logic. Polston looks to Charlie and said, "You like my niece, do you? She sells herself to lion-hunters who are related to faggot newspaper reporters. She's a whore. And so are you. And you, Jack! You're the worst whore of all. A crooked agent who preaches. That's like Judas giving a tutorial on friendship."

Charlie, taken back a bit after the Lynn comment, finally summoned the strength and said, "You know, I was keeping silent because I feared what you might do to Lynn. But keeping you in commission is far more dangerous to the world at large. I would be the scum of the earth if I didn't do everything I could to oppose you. I'm willing to pay for my mistakes. But I won't let you destroy Lynn and put millions of people in harm's way."

Charlie turned to Nick. "I'm pressing charges against this prick. He tried to kill me."

Nick sighed and looked to Jack for help.

"Charlie ... you're my boy. And Polston ... what do you say, Nick? Media's going to have a field day on this. You'll be a hero, not a goat ..."

Just as he said this there was a knock on the door. The door opened and Al's head popped through the crack. "I was asked to come here."

Jack got up and walked to the door. "In a couple of minutes," he said to Al and pushed him out the door. Jack then turned to Nick. "Newsday reporter. I told him to come. He is a little

early.”

“Jesus, Jack. Really? A news reporter?”

“I’m gonna offer you a way out, Ted,” Jack said, ignoring Nick’s comment. “You tell the reporter outside you have health problems and you’re taking yourself out of the running for Vice-President. And not only that, you tell him you are resigning your current office as Senator. You do this, and we all go away.”

Polston falls silent. Defeated.

“It’s over Ted. It’s all over,” Jack said providing the finishing touches to a well planned caper.

Moments later Charlie and Jack burst through the doors of the side-bar room at the police station, and headed for the door outside. “Your turn,” Charlie said to Al who was patiently waiting for them to finish in the waiting room.

“It was easy once I saw what was in the ‘zipper’ file,” Jack said as they left the police station “The Arab guy had a low tolerance for pain. Actually, I didn’t even touch him. I took out my cable cutter and told him I was going to start with his pinky. That threat always works. Anyway, he squealed like a pig, and I put two-and-two together and realized the American munitions’ dollars that are flowing into countries who can’t defend themselves but who are willing to fight for our interests ... they were being exploited by Ted and ... others.”

“You mean that world organization group,” Charlie said.

“Yes. They are going to be a little tough to bring down, but this is a good beginning. I have trust in our news media and the First Amendment. We live in a great country.”

Jack looked for his car. He found it then proceeded walking.

“This is all too scary, Jack. But, I don't mind telling you I'm a little upset. Al gets his scoop. Lynn gets to pursue her dreams. You get your freedom. And what do I get?”

They reached Jack's car. He unlocked it and opened the door.”You get a pint of blood and a hearty thank you from a PI who has nowhere to go and nothing to do.”

Jack got into his car and opens the window and said, “I knew Polston was coming after you. I figured if he saw Lynn dump you, so to speak, then he might back off. But it didn't work. He still came after you.”

“Listen, Pal. Let me tell you a secret. The most important part of a woman's body is her heart.”

Jack started the car and added, “That's what you won in all this, my friend. You've won Lynn's heart.”

“Yeah, but I'm afraid I've disrupted her life too much and if I pursue her she'll just tell me to take a hike because she wants to live in peace.”

“Well, that's up to you,” Jack said. He started to go but jammed on the brakes. “Hey. There's still a lot of work to do. We would make a great team. We could find out who's who in that consortium, maybe. You got the access. Banks, UPI, financial institutions.”

“I don't know about that. We'll have to bring in Jimmy, my side kick.”

“We could do a lot of good together. Think about it. I'll stay in touch.” Jack drove off leaving Charlie to his own thoughts.

Charlie was sitting on his couch in his apartment living room watching Polston on TV. A picture of Lois is on the night table, and his arm is bandaged and in a sling.

On the TV, the news channel showed news people trying to corner Senator Polston while

he tried to get into his car. They hurled questions at him. One surfaced above the rest.

“Senator, do you have a comment on today's *NEWSDAY* story? Why have you backed away from the VP offer?”

“No comment,” was the reply.

“Why are you resigning, Senator?”

“For personal reasons.”

Mobbed, Polston struggled to reach his car, but before getting into his car, he turned to the mob and said, “My doctor says I need to slow down. It's my heart. It's time to retire.”

Charlie turned off the TV and sighed. The door bell rang, and he took his time answering it. He opened the door and was taken by surprise at the sight of Lynn. She had flowers.

“My guardian angel told me that you needed some comforting.”

Charlie took the flowers as she walked in.

“Listen, Charlie, I'm trying to work some things out, including my anger towards you for invading my privacy. So, having said that, I'm willing to give us a try. A cautious try, to say the least.”

“Please don't take this the wrong way, Lynn. I'm tired and I'm a nervous wreck, and I'm on pain medication. I just need a little time to think right now.”

“I understand.” Lynn walked back into the hallway and left. Charlie closed the door and returned to the couch and watched the news on the TV.

After a beat, he picked up the picture of Lois and kissed it.

“I have to move on, Sweetheart.”

He took the picture and put it into the top drawer of the cabinet. He shut the TV off, ran to the window, opened it, and saw Lynn walking to her car. She looked up.

“I’m done thinking,” Charlie yelled down to her. “Let’s go for it.”

Moments later, a trail of clothes leading from the living to the hallway told all. A series of sounds, moans, and “ouches” and “oh, my Gods” convey a mixture of feelings.

At the guard station at the Telephone Building, the next day, Charlie walked into the building, showed his badge to the guard, and walked to the elevator just as Connie entered.

“Hey, Connie. How’s the local bizz doing?”

“Fine,” Charlie said, “and how’s the long distance business doing?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

Moments later, at the Long Distance Telephone Testroom, Jimmy was at the testboard listening to a telephone conversation. He heard the exit door open waited a beat. Then Charlie appeared, happily humming a tune. He ambled over to Jimmy and pulled the cords from the testboard.

“No tonight, Jimmy. No. No.”

“I’m going to the private line board to see if there are any troubles to shoot,” Charlie said. Charlie disappeared from view.

Jimmy saw that a Chicago circuit had a call in progress. He plugged his headset in and listened to the conversation

The caller from Chicago was pleading with his mother in Long Island to stop nagging him. But the Mother pleaded with her son to preach in Long Island after he graduated.

“Can you believe it. Two more weeks, and I’m a college graduate,” the man from Chicago said

Having felt he had heard these two before, Jimmy said to no one in particular, “Oh, no.

Not you again. Why don't you just do what your mom wants?"

"Graduation is a big deal, David," the Mom said. "So, have you decided where you're going to preach?"

"Yes. My counselor has set me up with five interviews. All of them are right here in Chicago, Mom."

"Oh, David," the Mom said. "Why don't you be a minister in Long Island? Close to your mother."

"Yeah, why don't you do that David?" Jimmy said, again to no one in particular.

"I've told you before, Mom. I think God wants me to preach out here."

"Now, how do you know that, David?"

"Yeah, David. How do you know that?" Jimmy whispered to himself

"I just know it. He wants me here, Mom."

Jimmy put his headset down on the desk top. He flipped the talk/monitor key to the 'talk' position so only the Chicago end could hear, and spoke through his cupped hands and into the headset in a melodious, god-like voice, "David ... Oh, David. Honor thy Mother."

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Did you hear that, mother?"

A look of great accomplishment crossed Jimmy's face.

THE END