

ALTAR FIRES

T.R. HEALY

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ALTAR FIRES

*Fear is where
We hunger.*

Robert Lowell

DEDICATION

For my late mother, Mary

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PROLOGUE

He ran past an enormous gray building whose windows were all empty. He wondered if anyone was inside, wondered if anyone was ever inside the place. He doubted it and began to run faster. Above his footsteps he heard those of another, gradually getting closer, and was tempted to look back but was afraid to and continued to run past other deserted buildings until he was jarred awake by the rumble of a recycling truck outside his window.

At once, he got up and sat on the side of the bed, holding his head in his hands. He often dreamed of being chased and he always awoke covered in sweat because he was so afraid he was going to be caught.

But by whom? he wondered. Who was after him?

T.R.HEALY

PART ONE

Along with the other players, Parsons stood against the rickety wooden wall that enclosed the octagonal sand pit. And like the others, he placed one hand against the wall as he waited for the referee to toss the rubber kick ball into the center of the pit. He was about to play a game he had never played before and just hoped he didn't make a fool of himself. He looked at his friend, Alex Ballard, who appeared just as apprehensive and they exchanged anxious smiles.

Suddenly, the ball was thrown and a few of the experienced players shouted "Ga!" for the first two bounces then "Go!" on the third bounce and the game commenced.

Right away, a player directly across from Parsons swatted the ball toward him with an open hand and he ducked nimbly out of the way because, if the ball struck him below the knee, he was eliminated from the competition. He then charged after the loose ball but was brushed aside just as he was about to reach for it and fell to his knees. Ballard tried to help him up; the ball struck him on the shin, and he was through and groaned in frustration.

Back and forth the ball was batted among the players, each and every throw aiming below the knees, until only Parsons and one of the seminarians remained in the pit. All the others stood on the other side of the wall and cheered on the two competitors.

Parsons just missed striking the back of his opponent's left ankle and angrily slapped his hands together. There was so much spin on the ball it rolled to a corner of the pit; immediately both

players dashed after it. Parsons reached it first and pivoted and swatted it at the seminarian who jumped over it then scrambled and shot it back and hit Parsons squarely in the kneecap. Though disappointed, Parsons congratulated the victorious seminarian who embraced him as if they were close friends even though Parsons didn't even know his name.

"I thought you were going to win," Ballard said as he and Parsons walked back to the residence hall.

"So did I."

"Maybe next time, Cullen."

"If there is a next time," he said, which he thought was highly unlikely.

*

The summer before their senior year in high school, Cullen Parsons and Alex Ballard enrolled in a week-long immersion program offered by the Saint Ignatius Seminary which was located in a wooded area in the southern corner of the state. The program was free of charge because the seminary was interested in encouraging young men to consider pursuing what it called in its brochure "a consecrated life." Ballard, who had an uncle who was a priest, was interested by the idea of also becoming one while Parsons, though baptized a Roman Catholic, wasn't a bit interested in joining any kind of religious order. He only agreed to accompany his friend because Ballard, who was quite shy, asked him to and Parsons was always eager to get away from his foster family if only for a week.

Every morning, at six o'clock, reveille blasted through the speakers in the residence hall where Parsons and Ballard shared a room and, by six-thirty, they and the other students in the summer program attended Mass with the seminarians. After breakfast, they attended classes in theology and, after lunch, other classes in Catholic philosophy. An hour before dinner the students were assigned chores to perform outdoors. Because they were young and in pretty good shape, Parsons and Ballard chopped firewood with

long-handled axes that looked as if they hadn't been sharpened in months.

"I haven't worked this hard in I don't know how long," Ballard grumbled one afternoon as he struggled to split a stubborn chunk of cedar wood.

"I don't think I ever have."

"I feel like my blisters have blisters."

Parsons looked at his torn and bruised hands. "We should have been given gloves."

"We should have, but I think we're supposed to suffer."

"You really think so?"

He nodded, driving the axe back into the chunk of wood.

*

The hardest part of the day for Parsons, however, was the hour they were required to spend in meditation in the chapel. One of the senior seminarians, Benedict, who had long brown hair and a scraggly beard, suggested that something they should seriously consider was "the discernment of God's will." He said this with a flourish as if he alone had come up with the idea.

"Not only what is His will in general," Benedict continued, "but especially what does He expect of you. He has a plan for everyone and through meditation you may well discover what His plan is for you."

Parsons thought that was unlikely because all he could think about in the chapel were his foster parents. He stared intently at the life-sized wooden crucifix hanging on the wall behind the altar, struggling to discern what God's plan was for him, but it seemed as if his foster parents were kneeling on either side of him in the pew. He could almost hear their grating voices and see their dark green eyes. He had been in their custody since he started high school and like the other foster parents he had were only interested in the compensation they received for taking him into their home. They weren't cruel or mean. They never raised a hand against him. They just didn't care about him, seldom showed the least bit of interest in

him, and never offered a word of encouragement. When he turned eighteen and was out of their lives, they would find another child to take his place. And he was sure they would be as indifferent to that child as they were to him.

Each hour he spent meditating became more and more difficult because he just couldn't concentrate enough to discern God's will for him. Perhaps, he thought, because he was so afraid of what lay in store for him after he graduated from high school he didn't really want to know.

*

Thursday, by far, was the strangest day Parsons spent at the seminary. As usual, in the afternoon, he and Ballard performed their daily chore of chopping wood. Nearly the entire week it had been cool but dry except for a light mist in the morning. On Thursday, however, it began to rain pretty steadily. Parsons and Ballard assumed they would be called out of the bad weather but, instead, Benedict came out and gave them slickers and canvas hats and they continued to chop wood in the rain. After about twenty minutes, the rain grew much harder and, soaked to the bone, they put down their axes and took cover under a cypress tree near a side door of the residence hall.

"I can't believe anyone expects us to work in this weather," Ballard said, wiping a bead of rainwater from the tip of his nose.

"Then why hasn't someone told us to come inside?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I, Alex."

A few minutes later, the rain turned to hail and the grounds were quickly covered in ice. Parsons had never seen such huge hailstones; some were nearly the size of ping pong balls.

"You hear that?" Ballard asked anxiously.

"What?"

"Listen."

He cupped a hand behind his left ear and heard a cracking sound. "It sounds like glass breaking."

"It is," Ballard said, pointing a finger at a delivery van parked outside another side door. "Its back window is shattered."

"My God, it is."

"And there are some dings in its roof."

"I see that," Parsons said, clearly baffled by the ferocity of the hailstorm.

Ballard looked at a couple of other vehicles parked near the delivery van and saw that some of their windows also were damaged. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Me, neither."

Seconds later, Roger, one of the younger seminarians, burst through the main door of the residence hall, frantically scissoring his arms above his head. "Forgive us, Lord!" he shouted. "Forgive the wrongs we have committed!"

He whirled around in the small plaza in front of the entrance, his head tilted back to let the hailstones pelt his face. Continuing to whirl around and around, he pulled off his tennis shirt and immediately his back and chest were stung by the stones which left angry red welts all over his skin.

In another minute, two other seminarians rushed out and picked up his shirt and hustled him back into the hall.

"Forgive us, Lord!" he continued to shout.

Ballard, stunned by the outburst, said, "He looks like he belongs in a loony bin."

"Somewhere under wraps."

"That's for sure."

Maybe he has too much faith, Parsons thought to himself, but he didn't dare say that to Ballard who was so serious about his faith.

*

The last night of their stay at the seminary, Parsons and Ballard and the other students in the immersion program were summoned after dinner to gather in the common room in the basement of the residence hall. They found Benedict seated in an

elevated chair near the door and set up in front of him were two rows of green metal folding chairs. A corncob pipe was clamped between his teeth but, as usual, it wasn't lit. On his left sat another seminarian who had what looked like a shawl spread across his lap though it appeared much too long for a shawl.

"Please, gentlemen, take a seat," Benedict said as they entered the room.

Parsons and Ballard sat in the back row along with three other students.

"I've summoned you here this evening because I'd like to say a few words before you leave tomorrow," he began, leaning forward in his chair. "First of all, on behalf of everyone associated with Saint Ignatius, I want to thank you for enrolling in our program because I know how demanding it can be at times."

He paused and set his pipe in an ashtray.

"There are many paths to follow in life but the religious path is certainly one of the most difficult."

Again, he paused, surveying the room.

"Those of us who choose to live a consecrated life must sacrifice a lot. Because we seek to imitate Jesus, we take oaths of poverty and chastity and swear to abide by the rules and regulations of the Church. The primary job of the physician is to oppose death and ours is to oppose evil in all its manifestations. We become, as a result, soldiers of Christ. Such a life is not for everyone, to be sure, but, if you hear God's voice, you'll know it is the one He intends you to pursue."

As he began to describe some of the particular demands of living a consecrated life, the other seminarian removed the small tote bag that hung on the arm of his chair and took out of it two long bamboo needles and a chunky ball of yarn.

Parsons stared at the young man, not quite believing what he thought was about to happen.

The seminarian deftly looped the yarn around his index and middle fingers a couple of times then pulled the first loop over the

second loop. After tightening the knot around the base of the loop, he slipped the loop onto one of the needles and proceeded to make another stitch in the long shawl-looking piece of cloth spread across his lap.

Parsons was stunned because he had never seen a man knit. All of his foster mothers knitted but he couldn't imagine any of his foster fathers stitching a thing.

His first foster mother knitted nearly every evening as she watched one dreary comedy after another on television. He was grateful for that because it kept her occupied. Otherwise she would be reprimanding him for something he did or failed to do. She was a very unpleasant person with a hair-trigger temper. One evening, as he walked past her while she was knitting a sweater, he tripped over her enormous sewing basket and spilled half the contents across the floor. Incensed, she swiped one of her slender rosewood needles across the side of his face which drew a small trickle of blood and left him with a faint but permanent scar. She was the first person he ever really feared, and as he watched the seminarian make one stitch after another he could not help but cringe a little. The incident happened many years ago but it seemed as if were only the other day.

He was fourteen when he was removed from the custody of his mother who had developed a serious drinking problem. Seemingly, without alcohol, she could not cope with the death of his father who was struck by a car while walking home from his late shift at an all-night grocery store. So, he was put in the temporary care of complete strangers, never really understanding why his mother didn't want him back home.

He could vaguely hear Benedict's droning voice but it was difficult to make out what he was saying because Parsons could still hear the angry voice of his first foster mother when she struck him. It was a tone he hoped never to hear again.

Along with the Stolberg cousins, Parsons entered the old fieldhouse of his high school and gasped in amazement. For the past few months it had served as a storage facility for spare furniture and athletic equipment. Tonight it was transformed into an enormous tiki lounge with electric torches set up on either side of the main entrance. Fish netting and glass floats decorated the brick walls along with paper lanterns in the shape of coconuts. A rubber palm tree stood in the center of the basketball court and around it were three long cafeteria tables laden with platters of pineapple slices and slivers of raw tuna and roasted pieces of chicken. And in the middle of each table was a punch bowl filled with mango juice.

"Can you believe this?" Gary Stolberg asked his cousin who seemed just as surprised.

Roy shook his head. "I never thought this musty old building could ever look anything like this."

Parsons agreed. "It makes you feel like you're in paradise."

"I don't know about that," Gary replied, "but it certainly doesn't look like any place you'd find in this dreary town."

They had hardly taken two steps when two freshman girls in grass skirts slipped leis around their necks and shyly bowed their heads.

"Maybe you're right, Cullen," Gary chuckled. "Maybe we

are in paradise."

The officers of the senior class organized the event as a farewell party because in another week the class would graduate from Milburn High School. Everyone was invited and only a few failed to attend. Parsons didn't really plan on going, either, but the Stolbergs showed up at his house after dinner and insisted he come with them so he agreed reluctantly.

"Let's get something to drink," Roy suggested as he made his way to one of the punch bowls.

His cousin agreed. "Sounds like a good idea to me."

Another freshman girl handed Roy a paper cup and he took a small sip of the beverage and grimaced.

"What is it?" Gary asked.

"I don't really know," he said, handing a cup to his cousin then one to Parsons, "but it definitely needs to be perked up a bit."

Gary nodded. "You can say that again."

"Let's go behind the bleachers," he said, patting the small flask of rum in his back pocket, "and I can give this punch some kick."

Parsons, never having had rum before, drank slowly while the cousins knocked back the spiked punch in a couple of hefty swallows. They then went back to the punch bowl to re-fill their cups but Parsons, still nursing his drink, headed over to the north side of the fieldhouse where a quartet of classmates played a ragged set of vintage Van Morrison songs.

Soon after they started to play *Moondance*, Rosalynn Mayo picked up a hula hoop lying across a chair, stepped inside it and gave it a push, and immediately it began to spin around her waist. One of the prettiest girls in their class, with shimmering blond hair that fell below her shoulders, she rotated her waist in small circles but otherwise didn't budge from where she stood. The yellow hoop whirled around her so quickly it seemed to blend into her bright tropical dress as if it were just another accessory.

She was sheer perfection, he thought as he watched in

admiration, sure she could keep the hoop spinning all night long if she wished.

He didn't really know Rosalynn, they had only been in one class together back when they were sophomores, but he thought she had smiled at him a few times when they passed one another in the hallways between classes. But then she smiled at everyone because she always seemed to be in such a good mood. She was someone who was used to getting what she wanted, he suspected, which was just the opposite of him.

As he watched the hoop spin around and around Rosalynn's waist, he was all but certain she knew what she was going to do after she graduated. No doubt, like so many of his classmates, she would be attending college, maybe even some exclusive one in the east. And he knew Ballard would be entering the seminary and the Stolbergs would continue to work in the car repair shop owned by their fathers. As for himself, all he knew for certain was that on August 18th, when he turned eighteen, he would be out of the custody of his foster parents and would have to find somewhere else to reside. Perhaps he could go to college but he knew he couldn't afford the tuition, perhaps he could work at the Stolberg's garage but that was unlikely, perhaps the part-time job he had on weekends as a grocery clerk could become full-time.

Perhaps, perhaps, he thought, becoming more and more agitated.

"Come on, Cullen," Gary said as he stepped alongside of him. "Let's get out of here."

"What?" he mumbled, still watching Rosalynn spin the hula hoop.

"Let's go, pal."

"Already?"

"We just want to have a smoke," Roy explained. "We sure as hell can't smoke inside the fieldhouse or the teachers here will have a conniption."

"Yeah, right."

"Come on then."

He trailed after them as they headed toward the door, still wondering about what lay ahead of him after he graduated. He had no idea, but all his classmates did, he was sure.

"Well, well, look what we have here," Gary observed as he paused in front of a fire alarm box to light a cigarette.

"Do we dare?" Roy wondered with a mischievous grin.

Gary shrugged, exhaling a plume of smoke in the direction of the alarm box.

Then, surprising himself, Parsons opened the box and set off the alarm and the three boys took off running while their classmates poured out of the fieldhouse. Parsons didn't know why he did it but, strangely, he was glad he did.

*

That summer, as a prank, Parsons and the Stolbergs set off a few more false fire alarms in their neighborhood. They knew it was wrong---Roy understood the fine was a considerable amount of money---but still they took the risk because they felt such a rush of excitement. It was certainly better than sitting at home and watching some mundane production on television. Usually they ran away after they set off an alarm but one night, out of curiosity, they stayed around to watch the fire trucks roar down the street to put out the invisible fire at an abandoned Catholic church just a few blocks from Milburn High School. They crouched under a billboard across the street from the church and laughed heartedly as the fire fighters, with axes in hand, searched the building for any sign of a fire.

Roy was tempted to cross the street and ask them where the fire was but his cousin didn't think that was a good idea and suggested they leave.

"If we act like we don't know what's going on," Roy argued, "they'll never think we're the ones who set off the alarm."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No, but it seems likely enough."

"Come on, Roy," Gary insisted, "let's go."

"All right, all right."

They scurried out from under the billboard then, with Gary in the lead, broke out into a run that was scarcely more than a jog. They didn't want to run all-out and draw attention to themselves but they also wanted to get out of the sight of the fire fighters. They were within a couple blocks of the high school when they heard the *ee-oo-ee-oo* sound of a patrol car behind them. Trying to ignore it, they continued to run until the patrol car pulled up alongside of them and the officer behind the steering wheel leaned out of his window and motioned for them to stop.

"What are you guys running from?" he asked gruffly.

"We're just running," Gary answered, "to see who can get to our house first."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

The officer, whose bald head shone like a silver buckle under the street light above the patrol car, did not say a word for a good two minutes but just glared at them.

"You the guys who set off the false fire alarm a few minutes ago?"

"No, sir," Roy answered, his voice quavering.

"I think you are and that's why you're running."

Parsons wanted to deny the accusation but he was too frightened to say anything and let the cousins talk.

"No, sir," Roy said again. "It wasn't us."

"I think it was, son, but I don't have any proof," he admitted. "But what I do have is an instinct for what is and what isn't and I am all but certain you guys set off the alarm."

"No, sir, you're mistaken," Gary contended.

The officer leaned back from the window. "I know some folks think setting off a false fire alarm is a harmless prank but, in fact, it is a crime and can be punished up to five years in the slammer."

The three boys, trying to remain calm, listened as the officer

described the various charges that were likely to be involved in such a so-called prank.

"So are you guys still in high school?" he asked after he finished listing all the charges.

"We just graduated from Milburn," Roy answered without making eye contact with the officer.

"So what are your plans now?"

"I am going to work at my father's car repair shop."

He looked at Gary. "And you, son?"

"I am going to work there, too."

"And what about you?" he asked Parsons.

"I don't really know."

"You don't?"

"No, sir."

"You better find out right quick."

He nodded.

"When I got out of high school, I didn't have any idea what I was going to do, either," he admitted. "Eventually I enlisted in the Army and that turned out to be one of the smartest decisions I ever made. It put a lot of things in perspective ... put me on the right path so to speak. You might consider joining one of the service branches, son. It sure as hell can't do you any harm."

Parsons nodded again, not really having any interest in becoming a soldier.

Parsons was late for the morning roll call.

As he rushed out of the barracks with the rest of his platoon, he tripped on a footlocker and twisted his left ankle. He was only a minute or so late when he stepped into the formation but he was late and knew there would be repercussions. And he was right because after dinner that evening he was ordered by his drill sergeant to report behind the barracks at 1800 hours. He arrived a couple of minutes early and found the sergeant standing beside a stack of empty sandbags.

"Are you a cretin, Parsons?" the drill sergeant snarled.

"I don't know what that is, drill sergeant."

"I believe you are."

Parsons, standing at attention, did not contest the claim.

"A good soldier is a dependable soldier. He's not a cretin. He can't be late, not for anything, not for any reason, because if he is he might be killed and those who rely on him might be killed as well."

The drill sergeant, a short, muscular man in his early twenties with a faint blond mustache, paused to look over his shoulder at the small duck pond behind the barracks.

"Is that understood, recruit?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"It better be," he hissed, "or you'll wash out of here so fast you won't know what happened until you're standing outside the gate waiting to take a bus home."

Parsons, still at attention, did not say a word.

"I want to make sure you understand you can never be late again as long as you are a member of the United States Army."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"So, to get this into your thick skull, I want you to wade into the pond up to your neck."

"Now?"

"You're damn right now."

Immediately he started to unbutton his fatigue shirt.

"Did I tell you to take off your shirt?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

"That's right," he snapped, toying with the brass whistle in his left hand. "I want you to wade into the pond, boots and all."

"Yes, drill sergeant."

"Now get to it!"

He plunged into the frigid water and slogged through the muddy bottom until the water reached his chin. Then he waited for the next command which didn't come until his shoulders started to tremble.

"Get out, recruit!"

As fast as he could, he slogged back to shore and stood at attention before the drill sergeant who glared at him with contempt.

"Give me twenty push-ups."

Parsons dropped to the ground, the pond water still streaming out of shirt sleeves, and pounded out the push-ups.

"Now roll around once in the sand."

He did.

"Roll around some more and make sure your face is covered in sand."

He closed his eyes and pressed his face into the sand.

"On your feet!"

At once, he stood back at attention.

"There are twenty bags in this stack and I want you to fill every one of them then report back to me. Is that understood, recruit?"

"Yes, drill sergeant."

"Then get going!"

What the hell am I doing here? Parsons wondered as he began to fill one of the bags. This can't really be happening. It must be some awful dream I am having.

*

Parsons sat in a window seat in the back of the municipal bus next to a tattooed man reading a pocked-sized edition of the King James Bible. He scarcely noticed the man when he sat down because, as usual, he was looking out the window. It was not unlike watching television because there was so much to see if he looked hard enough.

Prior to graduating from high school, he seldom ever rode the bus, maybe two or three times a year when he had to go downtown for some reason. But now he was a frequent passenger, sometimes riding more than once a day. Now that he was out of school, he didn't know what to do with himself except on the weekends when he walked to a nearby park and watched half a dozen retired firefighters pitch horseshoes at a metal stake. They were very skilled, tossing the two-pound shoes with such precision that they often completely surrounded the stake which they referred to as a "ringer." Sometimes they invited him to play but he was pretty clumsy and was sure he would never throw a ringer. To his amazement, though, he did throw one and one of the players hoisted him on his shoulders and paraded him around the pitching box. It was one of the best experiences of his life.

He knew he couldn't stay at home all day listening to his foster parents pester him about his intentions after he turned eighteen. He didn't have any idea what he was going to do so, day after day, he rode the bus because he had to get out of the house. It

was simply something to do to occupy his time. Also, aboard a bus, he didn't have to contemplate his future but, instead, could sit back and look at what was going on outside his window. He boarded one bus after another without any regard to its destination. He just needed to get out of the house and be on the move somewhere.

"Say, partner, do you happen to know how much farther it is to Wiltshire Park?" the tattooed man asked Parsons after setting aside his Bible.

"Sorry, I don't."

"I figured you might be a regular passenger on this bus route."

He shook his head. "This is my first time on this bus."

"You new to town?"

He smiled. "I've been here most of my life."

"Oh," the passenger replied, and as he raised his left hand to scratch his chin, Parsons noticed that each knuckle was tattooed with a small cross. "I just got here a couple of days ago."

"You settling down here?"

"Nah. I'm on my way to Salt Lake City to visit my sister but I thought I'd spend a couple of days here and see what it's like."

"So do you like what you see?"

The passenger thought for a moment as he stared out the window at a shop selling oils and vinegars. "Not particularly."

"Why's that?"

"There are just so many people without anywhere to go wandering the streets, many more than I'm used to seeing."

"I wouldn't know because this is the only place I've ever lived."

"I've lived in half a dozen places and I've never seen so many people out on the street as I've seen here," he said, his voice rising. "And I know what I'm talking about because there was a point in my life when I was out on the street." He paused. "That's not a place you want to be, partner. No, sir. Somehow you have to find somewhere where you belong." He paused again, noticing

something out the window. "Or you can end up like that poor soul."

Parsons also looked out the window and saw a man whirling around in front of a locksmith shop with nothing on but a blanket. And, suddenly, he imagined himself on the street in nothing but a blanket and looked away and slumped down in his seat. The tattooed man continued to talk but Parsons couldn't hear a word he said because his heart was pounding so loudly in his ears.

*

Parsons got off the southbound bus, which he had been on for the past three days, and transferred to a northbound bus which wound through a section of town which was still known as "Little Italy," even though now it was mainly populated by families from Latin America. He sat behind a guy with an enormous halo of coal black hair that made it difficult to make out anyone in front of him. He didn't mind, though, because he was just interested in looking out the window as the wheezing bus chugged down one street after another.

It was Saturday so a lot of people were outdoors. He saw a bearded man carrying a child on his shoulders. He saw a boy throwing a baseball against a stone wall. He saw a mime practicing gestures with his gloved hands before a plate-glass window. He saw three girls prancing around in a fountain with their sandals in their hands. And on a corner, he spotted three other girls in white dresses walking up the steps of a rustic Catholic church.

The bus made a right turn, and as it rumbled past the church, Parsons urgently pulled the cord above his head to get off at the stop in the middle of the next block. Recalling the evenings he was required to meditate at the seminary last summer, he thought maybe he should ask the Lord for some guidance as to what he should do with himself after he turned eighteen. He hadn't received any answers then but, perhaps today, it would be different, he hoped, as he hurried up the stone steps of the church. It seemed unlikely but he was desperate for some kind of direction.

"Good day," an older woman also in a white dress greeted

him as soon as he stepped inside the church.

"Hello."

"Are you here for the baptism?"

He looked across all the empty pews and saw a small throng of adults and children gathered near the altar. "No, I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No, ma'am," he said anxiously. "I just came in to say a few prayers."

"Of course," she said, seeming a little flustered by his response. "Don't let me detain you, young man."

Quickly he stepped past the woman and slid into one of the back pews and knelt down and bowed his head. He had not said a prayer since that week he spent at the seminary and struggled to say an *Our Father*. He had forgotten some of the words, quite a few in fact, but he managed to get through it then got to why he was there and asked for some kind of assistance. He didn't plead, didn't make any sort of demand, just asked for some guidance. Not sure what more to do than that, he started to say another *Our Father* when all of a sudden he heard a scream and looked up and saw a corner of the linen cloth on the altar in flames.

A few people attending the baptism rushed over to put out the fire, including a man in uniform. The soldier was the first one to reach the altar and quickly smothered the flames with his dress blue jacket. The others were full of gratitude, including the priest conducting the baptism who warmly embraced the young soldier.

Parsons almost wanted to embrace him, too, he was so impressed with his swift and selfless response. Maybe he should take that police officer's advice, he thought as he slid out of the pew, and enlist in some branch of the service. Maybe he, too, could become as respected as that soldier someday.

Still a little sleepy, Parsons crept through the pews in a daze as he set out the hymn books for Sunday Mass. Then he made sure the collection baskets were out and that there was enough holy water in the font just outside the vestibule. These were among the rudimentary tasks he was required to perform as a chaplain's assistant before every service at the post chapel at Fort Reliance.

After nine weeks of basic combat training, he completed nine weeks of clerk typist advanced training. Then he was encouraged by the company commander to volunteer for the Chaplain Corps. The idea took him by surprise at first until he remembered while filling out some personnel form at the reception center, he listed in the education bracket the summer immersion program he had attended at Saint Ignatius Seminary. He only did so because he was embarrassed he had nothing more to write down than that he had a high school diploma. More than a few in his unit had gone to college, a couple even had graduated.

"I'm not ordering you to become a chaplain's assistant," the commander told him. "That's entirely your decision. But I understand you've spent some time at a seminary so it's something to consider."

Not having any idea what an assistant did, he visited the Office of the Chaplain the next day and asked one of the assistants

what all was involved in his job.

"Practically speaking, we're his Man Friday," the assistant, who reminded him of the seminarian Benedict, informed him. "We do whatever it takes to facilitate the ministry of the chaplains on post. We manage the office. We conduct interviews. We answer letters and send out letters. We sign for all equipment, including the use of vehicles. We schedule meetings."

"You must be pretty busy."

The assistant nodded. "You name it, we do it."

"So I see."

"Oh, one other thing we're responsible for."

"What's that?"

"As you know, chaplains of all faiths are non-combatants and don't carry weapons. But we are combatants so one of our most important duties is to protect chaplains from getting injured in combat situations."

"That makes sense."

"It's more than that, soldier. It's our obligation."

He nodded.

"So are you interested in being reassigned to the program?"

"I am," he answered, not really sure if he was or not but he didn't want to disappoint the enthusiastic assistant.

"It's a job that always keeps you busy, but the spiritual rewards it offers makes all the hard work worthwhile."

*

A week later, Parsons requested to be reassigned as a chaplain assistant because he figured the work had to be more interesting than typing out forms in an office all day. The assistant who interviewed him was a non-commissioned officer who had been in the service almost eleven years. Right away, he asked him about his experience at the seminary and to the best of his recollection Parsons described some of the activities he was required to perform at the seminary.

"Were you thinking about entering the priesthood?"

"I was," he lied, figuring that might facilitate his acceptance into the Chaplain Corps.

"So why didn't you return to the seminary?"

He hesitated, not sure what he should say. "I felt I needed to experience more of life before I made such a commitment."

"But you made a commitment to serve in the Army."

"I did, yes, but that is for two years. The seminary is forever and I don't believe I am ready to make such a long commitment."

The assistant sat back in his chair and stared at Parsons for a moment. "Much of the work we perform as chaplain assistants is clerical, which I know after the past nine weeks you are capable of doing. But it is the spiritual component of our work that sets us apart from a clerk. At times, you will be required to step in the shoes of the chaplain you serve so there are two additional attributes you have to possess in order to perform your duty."

Parsons edged forward in his chair.

"You must have compassion. I don't mean just to feel sorry for someone, but you must want to help others even if you happen to disagree with them for whatever reason, " he said, stroking a finger across his root beer brown mustache. "And your faith in God must be strong. Do you believe you possess these particular qualities?"

"I do," he declared, not sure if he really did but he knew that was what the assistant expected to hear.

"Then I think you will be a welcome addition to our ranks."

*

The chaplain Parsons was assigned to serve was Father Creighton Cahill, a forty-three-year-old Roman Catholic priest stationed at Fort Reliance. A short, stocky man, with hands the size of fly swatters, he reminded Parsons of his first foster father who also was diminutive with very small hands. And, like his foster father, he would do whatever he possibly could to resolve any problem presented to him. He was a gruff man with a tender heart.

At first, Parsons was quite intimidated by him, much more so than he was by any of the drill sergeants he encountered in basic training. Father Cahill was very demanding, a command sergeant with a Roman collar instead of stripes. He expected Parsons not only to do what he ordered but, if the situation merited it, to show some initiative and do what he thought was best. Every day was a challenge, with Father Cahill issuing one demand after another, and as Parsons struggled to carry each one out, he just hoped he didn't disappoint the chaplain as he had all his foster parents.

Father Cahill was dedicated to his ministry, seldom ever leaving his office before it got dark. "The more there is to do the better" was a frequent comment he made to Parsons. The only time he seemed to relax were the three afternoons a week he spent playing handball with an X-ray technician in the Medical Corps. Parsons was not at all close to the austere priest and only rarely saw him outside the office and the chapel so he was surprised one afternoon when he invited him to play handball.

"I've never played the game, Father."

"It's not hard to learn, Cullen," he assured him. "I'll teach you all you need to know about it."

"I won't be much competition."

He shrugged. "I play for the exercise, not to see if I win or not."

Parsons assumed they would play on one of the squash courts at the post fieldhouse which was just down the street from the chapel but, instead of going inside the facility, Father Cahill led him around to the back of the building where a sixteen-foot-high granite wall loomed a few feet from a fire exit door. Two crude lines were drawn on the blacktopped ground in faded white paint.

"This is my practice court when I can't find anyone to play with," he informed him, standing behind the farthest line from the blank wall. "And this is the serving line. I figured this might be the best place to show you how the game is played."

Parsons looked at the line as he slipped on an old pair of

leather field gloves the priest had suggested he wear when he played.

"Shall we get started?"

"We might as well."

Father Cahill took a hard rubber ball out of his back pocket, bounced it once on the ground, then smashed it with his bare right hand against the wall.

"Now it's up to you to return the ball," he explained, after retrieving the ball. "Then I hit it and you hit it and so forth until one of us fails to hit the wall."

"So that's how you score a point?"

"It depends," he said, after retrieving the ball. "If you're not the server, you only win the serve not a point."

"I see."

He handed Parsons the ball.

"How many points do you have to get to win a game?"

"Twenty-one."

"That's a lot."

Father Cahill smiled. "We're not going to play a game today. We'll just practice, if that's all right with you, Cullen?"

He nodded. "I'm sure I'm going to need a lot of practice, Father."

They played for almost twenty minutes, taking turns striking the ball against the wall. Parsons played exclusively with his right hand, and after only a couple of minutes, the palm of his hand began to sting, while Father Cahill, who was ambidextrous, didn't seem to be in any discomfort even though he played without gloves. Parsons was nearly twenty-five years younger than the priest, but he felt slow and awkward on the makeshift court. He was able to reach only a few returns but, in spite of his small hands, Father Cahill managed to make contact with the ball on every exchange.

*

Three days later, the chaplain invited his assistant to play inside the fieldhouse on one of the polished wood squash courts, and Parsons was delighted because he wanted to get better acquainted

with Father Cahill who seemed, at times, as remote as any of his foster parents. He seldom greeted him in the morning and when he did he avoided eye contact as if embarrassed about something. What it could be, Parsons had no idea, so he figured the chaplain was a shy person who was uncomfortable around others he didn't know really well. Soon they were playing together once a week. Parsons wasn't really much competition for the nimble priest and only won a point when Father Cahill let him score. He didn't care, though, because he was just glad to strengthen his relationship with the priest and gradually that happened and he became more relaxed in his presence. He was someone who would listen to him and even offer a word of encouragement if it was warranted.

One afternoon, after a game, Parsons noticed a faint scar across the priest's left shoulder when he took off his sweat-soaked tennis shirt to put on a clean shirt. He wondered if it would be inappropriate to ask him how he acquired the scar but he felt enough at ease with him that he did ask.

"Oh, that's my version of a tattoo."

Parsons wrinkled his forehead. "It doesn't look like a tattoo."

"It isn't," he admitted, after taking a swig from his water bottle. "Many people who get tattoos get them because they represent something significant that happened in their life. So, in that sense, I think of this scar as kind of a tattoo."

Parsons, also drinking some water, waited for him to disclose the particular significance of the scar.

"Truth be told, it's on account of this scar that I became a priest, Cullen."

Again, he wrinkled his forehead. "I don't understand."

"It happened many years ago," he said as he led Parsons out of the squash court. "I was a senior in high school and was driving home from a basketball game in my father's Pontiac when I hit an oil slick on the road and lost control and the car plunged into this lake not more than a few blocks from the school. I can't tell you how scared I was because I was sure I was going to drown."

"I can imagine."

"No, you can't, Cullen. Not unless you've been in a similar life or death situation. I'd been scared before, but nothing like this and I never prayed as hard as I did that night as I struggled to push open the door but it wouldn't budge."

Parsons could tell from the tightness of his jaw that the priest was recalling the accident as if it occurred just the other day.

"Please, let me get out, I implored our Lord and Savior, and if that happened, I swore to dedicate myself to serve Him for the rest of my life."

He paused, but Parsons didn't dare interrupt him and waited for him to continue.

"I didn't have my seat belt on and leaned back from the window and kicked and kicked and kicked until it broke, and as I squirmed out, I scraped my shoulder on some glass. I wasn't aware of it at the time because I was in such a hurry to get out of the water but, after I did, I saw blood on my jacket. It hurt, to be sure, but I was so relieved to escape from the car I barely felt it."

"You're very fortunate, Father, that's all you suffered."

"Blessed, I'd say."

"Of course."

"And that night, because my prayers were answered, I decided to enter the priesthood. It's a decision I've never regretted, Cullen, not once in all these years."

Parsons stared at the cement wall for a moment before he bounced the ball then smacked it with his dominant hand. It struck the left side of the wall and bounced to his right so he had to run a few steps to catch up to it but he did and smacked it again. It also struck the left side but this time it bounced directly back to him. He tried to swat it with his left hand but barely made contact and the ball dribbled feebly across the blacktop.

"Damn it," he groaned as he picked up the ball and stepped behind the serving line.

The past three Saturdays he got up early to practice hitting a ball against the wall behind the fieldhouse because he was determined to improve as a player. He knew he could never defeat Father Cahill, who could hit a ball as well with his left hand as he could with his right, but he hoped to put up a better effort against him the next time the priest invited him to play.

For close to half an hour, running back and forth and from side to side, he smacked the ball against the wall with mainly his dominant hand. A few times, he even pretended he was playing against the nimble priest and making him work almost as hard as he did but knew that was unlikely ever to happen.

After practice, he was so thirsty he headed over to the Post Exchange to buy something cold to drink. Often, when he was at

the PX, he found himself looking at all the men's watches in the display case near the front entrance of the enormous store. There was one in particular he looked at, a Bulova vintage field watch. It looked like something a commanding officer would wear, not a chaplain's assistant. It cost a staggering \$340. He had never owned anything comparable to that watch. He was sure what few possessions he had were not items anyone else would want.

"Hello," the cashier behind the display case greeted him. "How may I help you today?"

He was so focused on the watch he wasn't even aware she was there so her greeting took him by surprise. "Oh, I'm just looking, ma'am."

"I see you're looking at that Bulova."

He smiled shyly, noticing the tag on her blouse said her name was Greer.

"Would you like me to take it out so you can try it on?"

"No. It's not something I can afford."

"We have an installment plan if you're interested."

Though tempted, he shook his head. "I really can't."

"I've seen you in here before looking at that watch I believe."

"You have?" he replied, again surprised.

"I keep waiting for you to ask me to take it out of the case."

"I don't know why I keep looking at it because I know I can't afford it. I guess I just want to see if it's still there."

"One of these days it won't be."

"Probably not," he said, stepping back from the counter.

"But I hope that won't be for a while yet."

*

One afternoon, toward the end of the week, Father Cahill was scheduled to preside at a baptism at the post chapel. It was the fourth one Parsons had participated in as a chaplain's assistant, but what was different about this one was that the person being baptized was not a squalling infant but a man close to the age of Father Cahill. Daniel Sukowa was a retired warrant officer who, seven months

earlier, lost his wife, a cradle Catholic, in a boating accident. For years, he told Father Cahill, his wife had tried to persuade him to join the Church and for years he said he would but never got around to it so, now, he felt obliged to do what she requested.

"It's very commendable that you are doing this for your late wife," Father Cahill told him, "but you should want to be baptized because you believe in the teachings of the Church."

"I understand, Father."

"It is the sacrament that liberates you from original sin and must be entered into for yourself not for anyone else."

"Of course, Father."

Sukowa, who wore a starched white dress shirt for the occasion, was accompanied by several relatives and friends. Among them, Parsons noticed, was Greer, the cashier from the PX who worked at the jewelry counter. Once everyone gathered around the baptismal font in a corner of the plain wooden church, Father Cahill began the ceremony by tracing the sign of the cross on Sukowa's forehead then read some appropriate passages from the New Testament. Parsons, mindful of the fire that occurred at the baptism he observed just before he enlisted in the Army, stood between the tray of votive candles and the altar in order to protect Father Cahill from injury should a blaze break out this afternoon.

Half listening to the readings, Parsons looked at Greer out of the corner of his eye. She was a little older than he thought, probably in her early twenties, but very attractive with long sand-colored hair that gleamed in the reflection of the votive candles. He looked to see if she wore a wedding ring, but she wasn't and he smiled to himself.

After the readings, Father Cahill handed the Bible to Parsons then picked up a small silver cup from the table next to the font and rubbed a pinch of blessed olive oil on Sukowa's neck. At once, Parsons handed him a towel to dry his hands.

"Now, sir," Father Cahill said, staring intently at Sukowa, "do you renounce Satan? And all his works? And all his empty

promises?"

"I do, Father."

"Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"

"I do, Father."

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

"I do, Father."

"Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?"

"I do, Father."

Father Cahill motioned for Sukowa to incline his head over the font and picked up another silver cup and poured water over his head, saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Parsons handed the retired warrant officer a towel while his friends and family congratulated him on becoming a member of the Church. Then, as he started to gather up the silver cups, Greer approached him with an icicle-bright smile.

"Say, I didn't know you were a priest."

"I'm not," he replied shyly. "I'm a chaplain's assistant."

"Well, that's close enough I suppose."

Not really, he thought, but he didn't correct her. "So, is that Bulova watch still for sale?"

"It is."

He smiled. "I'll probably come by sometime this week to have another look at it."

"Are you sure you don't want me to put it in layaway for you?"

He looked at the cups in his hands; well aware he really couldn't afford to purchase such an expensive item. "No, not now, but maybe later."

"Of course, Father," she said, teasing him. "You just let me know when and I'll make sure it's in safekeeping."

"Thanks."

To his surprise, she pressed a finger on the left sleeve of his

surplice then turned away to join Sukowa and the others as they left the church.

*

A soldier was allowed to see a chaplain whenever he wished and was not required to give a reason for his request to his superiors. As a result, Parsons conducted quite a few preliminary interviews every week with disgruntled soldiers who asked to speak with Father Cahill. He served as something of a gatekeeper, determining if the soldiers had a legitimate reason for wanting to meet with the priest. Many of the soldiers he interviewed were simply homesick, especially those who had recently enlisted in the Army, and for the most part he was able to comfort them without having to involve Father Cahill. Occasionally, though, someone he spoke with clearly needed to meet with the chaplain.

One soldier, in particular, seemed adamant about getting out of the service. His name was Ethan Jacks. A gangly guy with blacktop black hair, he was a couple of years older than Parsons but only recently had completed basic training.

"I don't belong here," Jacks insisted as soon as he sat down in front of Parsons. "I've tried to fit in, but I know I don't belong in the Army."

"And why's that?" Parsons asked, seated behind a small metal desk just outside the chaplain's office.

"I'm just not cut out to be a soldier."

"Then why did you enlist?"

He shrugged. "My father was a career soldier, and he expected me to join up and I didn't want to let him down."

"Did he know you had reservations about becoming a soldier?"

"No, not really. It's not something I ever talked about. As I said, I didn't want to disappoint him because the service meant everything to him."

"You should have said something, Private."

"I know. It was a mistake on my part."

"You'd only be compounding your mistake if you just left now on your own accord. You'd be considered a deserter."

Jacks picked up a paper clip lying on a corner of the desk and twisted it back and forth as he considered what else he needed to say to the chaplain's assistant.

"I know for a fact I could never shoot anyone even if my life depended on it. It's just not something I could ever do." He paused, twisting the paper clip in half. "I'd be a liability on a battlefield, not only to myself but to those around me. So, I think it's best that I leave before I find myself in a situation where I'm expected to fire a weapon at another person."

As he listened, Parsons realized what Jacks said was a conviction he not only understood but also shared to some extent. His second foster father, Karl Federman, was someone he absolutely loathed. A long-haul truck driver, he was on the road two or three weeks every month and all was calm in the house then, but when he returned the place became a very frightening place. He drank heavily when he wasn't working and he and his wife argued all the time and often exchanged blows. Parsons was terrified of the man. Federman never struck him, but he threatened to many times and hollered at him as vehemently as he hollered at his wife, so Parsons always looked forward to when he was gone on one of his cross-country hauls. Somehow, he wished he would never return and, though he hated to admit it, even prayed he would get in a fatal accident and be out of his life for good. Federman kept two hunting rifles in the attic, and though there were occasions when Parsons was tempted to get one of them and shoot his foster father, he knew he could never do such a thing however much the terrible man deserved it.

He was not so different than Jacks, he thought, as he directed him into Father Cahill's office to discuss applying for conscientious objector status. Not at all.

Parsons warily approached the jewelry case at the PX. Always when he went there, he was afraid the Bulova watch would be gone but there it was, tucked inside a snug little blue box. This particular model was part of the Hack Collection which was inspired by earlier Bulova military watches. The stainless-steel case had an ivory dial and luminescent hands and an inner 24-hour track. Its leather strap was coal black and appeared as if it would last for many years.

"Well, hello there," Greer said, stepping behind the counter.

"Hello."

"Still looking, are you?"

He nodded. "But today I'm looking to buy the Bulova watch."

"Seriously?"

Again he nodded. "It'll have to be on the layaway plan, though."

"No problem, Cullen." Promptly, then, she took a key out of her pocket and unlocked the glass case. "Would you like to try it on before I put it away?"

He hesitated.

"Come on," she urged him. "It's practically your watch now."

"I don't know if I should."

"Don't be scared," she chuckled as she took the watch out of its box and handed it to him.

Tentatively he strapped it on his left wrist and held it above the counter.

"You look like someone important," she remarked with a thin smile, "someone to be reckoned with on the parade ground."

"I don't know about that."

"You should celebrate," she told him. "Do something special."

"Like what?"

She shrugged. "You tell me."

He thought for a moment, his eyes riveted on the vintage watch. "I know what."

"What's that?"

"Meet me for a drink at the Firebase after you get off work."

She smiled again. "Sure, I'd like to, Cullen."

"All right," he said as he removed the watch from his wrist and returned it to her.

*

The Firebase Bar and Grill was just a few blocks beyond the north gate and was popular with enlisted men because the beer on draft was a little less expensive than it was at the other watering holes that enveloped the fort. Also, its jukebox played only country-western music which appealed to many soldiers who weren't fond of the mixed selections played at other taverns.

Parsons had only been at the establishment a couple of moments before Greer walked in with a flower fastened around her right wrist.

"What's that for?" he asked about the flower.

"A little girl outside my apartment was selling these bracelets she made and, being a good sport, I bought one," she explained, sticking out her arm. "What do you think of it?"

He looked at the crude bracelet. "The color of the flower

nearly matches the blue in your eyes."

"It does, doesn't it?"

In another minute, a barmaid came over and Greer ordered a glass of Chablis.

"So, tell me, what made you decide to get the watch after all this time?"

"Well, as I told you, I can't really afford to dole out \$340 in one lump sum but, over time, I can manage to make the payments."

"You deserve it, Cullen."

"Do I?"

"I mean, as a conscientious objector, you probably take a lot of grief so you should have something that makes you feel good."

"I'm not a conscientious objector."

"You're not?"

"No."

"I just assumed all chaplain assistants were."

He shook his head. "To the contrary, it's my responsibility to protect the chaplain I'm assigned to if we're ever in a combat area."

"I guess you learn something new every day."

Parsons started to ask her about her connection to the retired warrant officer who was baptized last week when a scuffle broke out between two guys seated at the bar. Right away, though, another guy intervened and was able to calm them down without even raising his voice.

"I don't know if I could've done that," she remarked, after taking a sip of wine.

"Done what?"

"Get involved in a situation where two people look as if they're about to square off. I suppose I should, but I don't know if I would."

"You never know for certain how you're going to react in a situation until you're actually in it. You might think you do but you really don't."

"Back in high school I knew this quiet girl who got between two friends of hers who were arguing and, before she knew it, they turned on her and never spoke to her again."

"If she hadn't got involved, they'd still be friends with her."

"Probably so."

"People are strange."

*

Parsons was bent over his desk, going over the chaplain's schedule for the remainder of the week, when Father Cahill stepped out of his office. He appeared a little short of breath as if he had just run down a sharply angled ball in the handball court.

"Are you busy?"

"No, Father, just looking at your schedule for the next few days."

"Come into my office," he said, stepping back from the door. "I have something I want to tell you."

"Sure thing."

The priest stepped back into his office and Parsons followed right behind him.

"Please, take a seat, Cullen."

He sat down at once, wondering what was so urgent that Father Cahill was compelled to invite him into his office.

"I just received some very disturbing news," he began, sinking down in his leather desk chair.

"What's that, Father?"

"A couple of weeks ago, a soldier came in here who was adamant he had suddenly become a conscientious objector."

Parsons nodded. "Jacks."

"That's the one. Private Ethan Jacks. Well, I was just informed he's been reported AWOL."

"I can't say I'm surprised."

"I sure as hell can," he sighed. "I've had a couple of long conversations with the young man, and I was under the impression he had agreed to enter the medical training program at Fort Sam

Houston and then serve out the rest of his hitch as a non-combatant medic."

"He just wanted out I believe."

"Apparently so."

"I don't think there was anything you could have said that would've changed his mind."

Father Cahill leaned back in his chair and stared at a tangled cobweb in a corner of the ceiling. "As you may or may not know, there are two types of conscientious objectors in the Army. One is someone who is opposed to participating in any armed conflict and seeks to be released from service altogether. The other is someone who is willing to serve but only in a non-combatant capacity." He paused, still staring at the cobweb. "Jacks, as an Army brat, knew what he was getting into when he enlisted so it was very unlikely, he would be released from duty. But he could have become a medic and completed his service honorably. I just don't understand why he up and left but you can't really know what's in another person's heart I guess."

"Do you think he'll be caught?"

The priest shrugged. "I suspect, if he stays around these parts, he probably will be sooner or later. But if he goes somewhere else, well, that's another matter. Then, wherever he is, he'll be in a constant state of fear, forever looking over his shoulder to see if someone is coming after him. That's a hell of a way to live your life."

Parsons nodded in agreement.

"A hell of a way, son."

*

A few days after Parsons and Greer met for a drink at the Firebase, they met there again at his suggestion. Though he barely knew her, he enjoyed her company because, unlike him, she was so carefree and spontaneous, willing to do things on the spur of the moment. Moreover, she wasn't someone who pestered him with a lot of questions which he appreciated because he wasn't one who

was eager to share his thoughts and feelings with others. As long as he could remember, he kept pretty much to himself, worried if he said the wrong thing he would suffer the consequences and be sent on to another pair of foster parents. Silence was his protection, his invisible shield.

"What shall we drink to?" Greer asked, raising her wine glass.

"You tell me."

"To us then," she said, smiling. "That we are who we think we are."

He didn't know if that was something he wanted to drink a toast to but, as usual, he kept his opinion to himself and took a sip of his beer.

Shortly one of the barmaids approached their table but, instead of asking if they wanted another round of drinks, she asked if they would like to purchase a lapel flag pin to benefit a charity house for homeless veterans. Parsons bought two pins and gave one to Greer who pinned it above the pocket of her blouse.

"This makes me think of my Aunt Reba," she said, circling a fingernail around the pin. "She often invited homeless people to spend the night in a spare bedroom in her basement."

"That was generous of her but wasn't it a little risky? I mean, she didn't know these people from Adam."

"Her sisters told her time and again not to let strangers stay overnight in her house, but she wouldn't listen. I guess she believed her good intentions protected her from anything bad happening to her."

"Was she right?"

"So far, but I still don't think it's a very good practice and I suspect one day she'll realize it. I just hope she doesn't get hurt as a result of her generosity."

"Some people do."

"Don't I know it."

In another minute, a gritty guy with a carton of beer cans

pressed against his chest paused in front of their table. "You folks hunters?" he asked in a slurred voice.

Parsons look at Greer who shook her head. "We're not."

"Oh, I bet you are."

"Sorry, friend."

"You're drinking a beer, aren't you, fella?"

"So?"

"I'm talking about beer hunting."

"What in the world is that?" Greer asked, tilting back in her creaking wooden chair.

He grinned. "You've never heard of it?"

"Nope."

"Let me enlighten you then," he chuckled, setting the carton on their table.

"Please do."

"Just moments ago, I shook up one of these cans so whoever opens it will get beer sprayed all over his or her face. So the trick is to avoid picking that can."

"I see."

"Now make a selection."

She did and the can she selected opened without a hint of spray.

"Now your turn, fella."

Parsons popped open a can near the spot Greer picked and immediately his face and neck were soaked in beer.

Greer burst out laughing and handed him a napkin to wipe away the suds.

"See, fella, I figured you were a hunter," the guy said then, looking at Greer, added, "and I do believe the hunter deserves a kiss for his achievement."

Greer, still chuckling, took his face in her hands and licked the beer from his lips then kissed him on the mouth as others around them applauded and cheered.

"I've never kissed a holy man," she whispered in his ear then

kissed him again to even more applause.

Hunched over on the hard wooden bench in the locker room, Parsons massaged his sore right hand. He was exhausted, barely able to keep his eyes open. Sweat dribbled down his chin onto his bare knees. He had played two long games of handball with Father Cahill, and though he lost each one, they were surprisingly close.

"I can't believe how much you've improved, Cullen," the chaplain said before they left the court to shower and get dressed.

"I've been practicing."

"It shows."

Parsons smiled.

"You keep practicing, son, and one of these days you're going to get the best of me."

"Oh, I doubt that, Father."

After they dressed, Father Cahill offered to buy Parsons a juice at a stand around the corner from the fieldhouse. It was crowded, as usual, so they had to wait a few minutes before they could place their order.

"I've something I've been meaning to tell you, Cullen," he said, after the cashier took their order.

"What's that, Father?"

"It's not official, mind you, but there is a very good chance we might be deployed overseas in the not-too-distant future."

"Really?"

"Afraid so."

"You know where?"

"Not for sure but, more than likely, to Icris."

"Where in the world is that" he asked, after taking a sip of mango juice. "I've never heard of it."

"It's on the east coast of Africa."

"Africa! Why would we be going there of all places?"

"Ours is not to reason why," he muttered grimly. "All I know is that we have a fairly significant contingent of troops stationed there."

"I didn't know that."

"I doubt if many Americans do, either."

"So, you think being deployed there is a real possibility?"

"I do, son, and I suspect it'll be sooner than later."

*

One afternoon, later than week, Father Cahill invited Parsons into his office and introduced him to staff sergeant Luke Worden whose starched fatigues appeared every bit as stiff as his lantern jaw.

"The sergeant here was stationed in Icris about six months," Father Cahill said, leaning back in his desk chair, "so I figured he could give us a heads-up on what to expect if we're deployed there."

Parsons nodded. "That'd be helpful."

"The floor is yours, sergeant."

He hesitated. "I don't rightly know where to start."

"Anywhere you like, sergeant. Neither of us know anything about the country."

"Well, sir, I don't know if you've ever been to an amusement park."

"I have many times but that was quite a while ago."

The sergeant gritted his teeth, mulling what he was about to say. "I suppose this sounds a little strange, but it was like visiting a haunted house at some amusement park. You never know what's going to pop out at you next. You might be coming out of a coffee

house and in broad daylight someone in a car starts shooting in your direction. You could be crossing a street and all of a sudden, a bomb explodes a block away. You just never know what's going to happen, but you know something will. That's for damn sure."

"It sounds like the wild west," Father Cahill remarked with obvious concern.

"It's wild, all right, Father. I can tell you I hope I never have to go back there because I've never been so scared in my life as I was in Icris."

"So I can imagine."

"You can't really, Father, not until you're actually there. It's a nightmare come to life. I don't know any other way how to describe what it's like being over there."

*

After work that day, almost in a daze, Parsons stepped into the chapel which at that hour was completely empty. It was the first time he had been there when he wasn't helping Father Cahill perform Mass or some other celebration. As he knelt down on one of the hard wood kneelers, it felt a little strange to be there all alone so he could not help but hope that Father Cahill would join him any moment. But he knew that wasn't likely because the priest was invited to dine at the home of the post commander tonight.

Awkwardly he signed himself with the cross and closed his eyes. He seldom ever prayed, never thought it accomplished anything, but now he found himself asking the Lord and Savior to spare him from going to some place he had never heard of like Icris. Really, he didn't want to go anywhere overseas, but especially to a place that Sergeant Worden described as "a nightmare come to life." He was afraid if he was posted there something awful might well happen, to him or to Father Cahill, something they might not be able to overcome however hard they tried.

"So, please Lord," he whispered, "let me remain at Fort Reliance. It's where I belong, I believe, where I can be most helpful, not somewhere thousands and thousands of miles away from here."

Not having anything more to say, he got up from the kneeler but, instead of leaving the church, he sat down in the pew. If he did receive orders to report to Icris, he thought how easy it would be to ignore them and take off as Private Jacks did. All he had to do was get out of his uniform and take a bus to the train station and buy a ticket. He didn't know if he had the nerve to do what Jacks did but he knew he would certainly be tempted to follow his example.

*

Two and a half weeks later, Parsons and Father Cahill were informed they would be deployed to Icris at the end of the month. Parsons was stunned, even though Father Cahill had warned him that it was very likely they would be posted there. Again, he thought of Private Jacks; again, he was tempted to board a train and be done with the Army.

That evening he met Greer again at the Firebase, and as soon as they sat down at a table told her of his upcoming deployment to Icris.

"I've never heard of the place."

"Neither had I."

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere in Africa."

"Africa!"

"Yep."

"Why are you being sent there?"

He shrugged. "I reckon the American soldiers over there need a chaplain and a chaplain's assistant as much as the soldiers stationed here."

"As I said, I've never heard of the country. Is it dangerous over there?"

"I imagine it's dangerous everywhere in Africa," he replied, after taking a long swallow of beer. "What doesn't shoot you, eats you."

"Oh, Cullen, don't say such things."

"It's the God's truth I'm afraid."

Her eyes crinkled in apprehension as she took a small sip of wine.

"I've been thinking of not going."

"What?"

He nodded.

"You can't do that, Cullen."

"Why can't I?"

"You'd be a deserter. You'd never be able to relax for a moment because you'd always be afraid of being caught."

He didn't say anything, just looked around at some of the other patrons in the bar who he suspected also had never heard of Icris and never would have any reason to go there.

"I don't want you to go," she said, stroking a finger across his wrist. "But I don't want you to get in trouble, either."

"I know."

"Come on," she said, after another minute passed. "Let's get out of here."

Even though some wine was still left in her glass, she got up and pulled him away from the table and, holding his wrist, led him out the main door. Not saying a word to one another, they headed toward the small, wooded area behind the bar then, after only a few steps, she paused and pressed him against one of the bare spruce trees.

"You know I want only the best for you, Cullen."

He nodded in silence.

Promptly she knelt down and pulled down the zipper of his jeans and took out his member and pressed it against her left cheek.

"You know that?"

"I do," he answered, still not sure what really was best for him.

ALTAR FIRES

PART TWO

With an unlit cigarette drooping across his lower lip, Parsons leaned over the balcony of his room and looked down at the empty swimming pool on the west side of the hotel. It was filled with leaves and candy wrappers, and cigarette ends and crumpled sheets of paper. He wondered how long it had been since it was filled with water. Months, no doubt, maybe even years. Briefly he closed his eyes and imagined women in scant swimsuits lying in colorful lounge chairs set up around the pool. Their skin would be glistening with perspiration because it was every bit as hot here, in Merope, the capital of Icris, as it was in Arizona.

The country, according to Father Cahill, had endured a bitter civil war between two rival tribes, the Uurkus and the Hagarrs, and was finally resolved almost two years ago with the Uurkus in control of the capital. But it appeared to Parsons as if the conflict had been settled more recently than that because from his balcony, he could see several demolished buildings and many of the streets downtown were littered with huge chunks of rubble. There were numerous people walking around, some with baskets balanced on their heads, but not that many cars for a capital city. And the few he saw this morning were several years old with white smoke spewing out of

their rusted exhaust pipes.

He lit his cigarette, waved out the match, and watched it fall into the pool.

To his surprise, he and Father Cahill were not quartered in the American compound stationed near the airport. Instead, along with several officers, were assigned to stay at the Rustica Hotel in the heart of the financial district. It was quite small, compared to some of the other hotels in Merope, with only thirty rooms, ten on each floor. Some of its exterior walls were pockmarked with bullet rounds from all the fighting that had raged in the city. A huge limestone sign that identified the place lay on the ground covered by weeds. The hotel closed down during much of the war and had not been occupied until the American military requisitioned it almost sixteen months ago.

What in the world am I doing here? Parsons wondered, after inhaling another swallow of smoke. Here in a place, I'd never heard of until a couple of months ago? Here where I doubted if I was even wanted?

*

Parsons and Father Cahill arrived in the country late at night but even so they were scheduled to report to the commanding officer of the American expeditionary contingent at half past ten the next morning. They were informed a driver would pick them up at ten o'clock sharp so they waited outside the main entrance of the hotel to be taken to the compound. Their fatigues, after only a couple of minutes, were already sticking to their skin it was so hot outside.

About a quarter to ten, a Jeep pulled up in front of them, and the freckle-faced driver leaned over the steering wheel and asked, "You folks waiting to go out to the base of operations?"

Father Cahill nodded. "We are."

"Come aboard."

Father Cahill sat in the passenger seat and Parsons sat in the back with his kneecaps practically pressed against his chin.

"So how do you like Icris?" the driver asked as he roared

away from the hotel.

"We just got in last night," Father Cahill said, "so it's a little early to have an opinion about the country."

The driver snickered. "It doesn't take long to realize what a hole this place is, sir. Not long at all."

"Is that so?"

"That's not just my opinion. That's what just about everyone sent over here thinks."

The chaplain looked back at Parsons who appeared as if he agreed with the driver.

"Truth be told, the people here don't want us here anymore than we want to be here."

"You're a soldier?" Father Cahill asked, surprised, because instead of fatigues the driver had on a bright floral shirt and wrinkled khaki shorts.

"Yes, sir," he said, glancing over at the priest. "Corporal Niall Ferguson, at your service."

"How come you're not in uniform, corporal?"

He grinned. "I am, sir."

"Sorry?"

"It's recommended, well, it's more like an unwritten rule that if you go into town for whatever reason you shouldn't be in uniform."

"Why's that?"

"You stand out more than ever and become an easy target," he answered. "There are a lot of angry people here who'd like nothing better to do than ruin the day of an American soldier."

Out of the corner of his eye the chaplain noticed a tall man in a doorway glaring at them as they drove past him and wondered if he might be someone who wanted to ruin their day.

"Not more than a week ago," Ferguson continued, "I spotted this technical coming up fast on me."

"What's a technical?"

"It's an open-backed pickup truck usually mounted with

some kind of machine gun," he explained. "Anyway, before I knew it, it was right alongside of me, and I looked over and the driver just smiled at me then swerved in front of me and drove me off the road."

"Were you injured?"

"Nah. Just banged my head against the steering wheel is all."

"That's good."

"Believe me, stuff like that happens all the time here so you always have to be on your guard when you're away from the compound." Again, he looked over at the chaplain. "You blink you bleed."

*

"Please, have a seat, gentlemen," Colonel Walker Hunnicutt said after they exchanged salutes in his office which didn't appear to have anything out of place. "I suspect everyone stationed here can use some spiritual guidance on occasion so you should be pretty busy during your tour here."

Father Cahill nodded. "Yes, sir."

The colonel had close-cropped graying brown hair that made him seem a little older than he was and a pinched mouth that didn't appear as if he smiled much.

"The purpose of our mission in Icris is, first of all, to protect any and all-American citizens who are here in one capacity or another," he informed them as if reciting something from memory. "And, just as important, we are here to root out terrorist cells that pose a clear danger to us here and back home in the States."

Father Cahill and Parsons listened closely as the colonel discussed some of the methods employed to contend with potential terrorists. In particular, he told them about the small outposts set up in different areas of the country that he considered the first line of defense against hostile forces.

"Part of your work here, gentlemen, will require you to pay periodic visits to these outposts of freedom because the troops stationed there will surely welcome your guidance and support because of the enormous stress they are under out there all alone.

You should receive a schedule of your visits to these outposts by the end of the week."

"We look forward to getting it, sir."

"One other matter," the colonel said, sliding back from his metal desk. "There are many factions in this country, besides the Uurkus and the Hagarrs, and it is not our intention to side with one group or another. We endeavor to be impartial with regard to their disputes unless they should directly affect our security. But some factions don't see it that way and question our claim of neutrality and that's when trouble can break out in the country. So, sad to say, you really can't trust any of the people here, including those who work for us, and you're better off if you regard all of them as hostiles."

Father Cahill remained silent, not sharing the colonel's blanket indictment of everyone who lived in Icris even though he had just arrived in the country.

The colonel rose out of his chair. "Now, do you have any questions, gentlemen?"

Father Cahill looked at Parsons who shook his head. "No, sir."

"Well, I'm sure you will once you get situated," he predicted. "Oh, I almost forgot, Father."

"Yes?"

"As you no doubt are aware, this is a predominantly Muslim country, so I don't think it's a good idea to wear your collar when you're off the base. It makes you an easy target for some fanatic with a gun. I'm not saying you can't. Not at all. That's your business. I'm just offering you some advice for your own safety."

"I appreciate it, sir."

The colonel nodded then returned their salutes and sat back in his chair and stared out the lone window at a scavenger bird circling above the mess hall.

As usual, Parsons sat in the back of the wheezing bus while Father Cahill sat in the front with the officers. He didn't mind, though, because he preferred to sit alone and look out the window and see what was going on in the city.

Every morning the forest green bus, known by some as the "Tortoise," arrived at the hotel at half past seven to drive the soldiers stationed there out to the compound. Because everyone was in uniform it was considered safer to ride together on the bus. The vehicle was a relic, close to thirty years old. It sputtered and rattled and just crept along and, except for the armed sentry who sat behind the driver, it appeared much like any other municipal bus on the street.

Though the civil war had ended almost two years ago, it appeared as if it were only a matter of weeks as the bus chugged past one burnt-out building after another on its usual route. Parsons leaned forward in his seat, looking for the children he often watched playing hide-and-seek in the ravaged buildings, but he didn't see any this morning. He was surprised until he noticed two men huddled in a doorway smoking cigarettes. They wore sarongs and ragged tank tops, and each had a bullwhip slung over his shoulder. He assumed they were members of the so-called *morality cadre* delegated by the current government to make sure the residents of

the capital complied with its strict interpretation of Islamic law. No children were around today, he figured, because they didn't want to risk being whipped. The cadre weren't hesitant about using their whips even if no obvious infraction of Sharia law had occurred because they wanted others to be wary of them at all times.

Fear was always a strong motivator, as Parsons well knew, and slowly he leaned back from the window because he didn't want to make eye contact with the men with whips. He didn't have to worry, though, as they seemed oblivious of the bus, of anything really, as they cracked their whips at a towering pile of rubble.

"Always keep your distance whenever you see a cracker," Ferguson cautioned him and Father Cahill the morning he drove them to the compound.

Father Cahill, puzzled, looked over at the corporal. "Say again?"

"That's what we call the guys with the whips. They're the real militants in this government."

"I see."

"Once I saw them whip a young girl caught wearing a pair of socks. They spot anything they don't approve of they start cracking their whips so you don't want to be anywhere near them if you can help it."

"Have you ever been whipped?" Parsons asked.

He shook his head. "But I've been threatened a couple of times just for looking a tick too long at them. They're nothing but thugs pretending to be carrying out some divine plan."

Not quite three blocks from the compound, as the bus turned onto a narrow street framed by gutted-out row houses, the driver warned everyone to make sure their windows were shut. The houses, which were barely intact, were covered in dirt as thick as paste. Often children playing in the skeletal remains of the houses threw dirt clods at the bus and other vehicles that drove down the street that some passengers referred to as "Bang-Bang Alley."

"I don't see any of those little pests today," a soldier behind

Parsons said to no one in particular.

"Oh, they're here, all right," another soldier declared. "They're just waiting for the right moment to pop out and start their attack."

"I don't think so. I don't think they're here today for whatever reason."

"They were here yesterday."

"But not the day before so maybe they're taking every other day off."

"I don't know."

"Neither do I but we'll find out soon enough," he said as the bus crept down the deserted street.

Parsons stared out his window, straining to see if any children were around.

"There they are!" a soldier shouted just seconds later as close to a dozen children emerged from the dilapidated houses.

And, at once, the barrage began, with clods the size of golf balls banging against the bus. The driver speeded up and the kids, throwing whatever they could pick up, pursued the bus to the end of the street.

"There seemed more of them today than usual," the soldier behind Parsons remarked.

The other soldier disagreed. "It seemed about the same number to me."

Parsons also believed it was the usual number of kids and wondered if they would ever get tired of pelting the bus and other passing vehicles. It depended, he supposed, if they did it out of anger or boredom.

*

Father Cahill didn't celebrate Mass every morning as he did at Fort Reliance, only on Sunday in a Quonset hut situated at the north end of the compound beside a motley row of storage lockers. The steel hut was not more than a third of the size of the chapel at Fort Reliance which was more than sufficient to accommodate the

small congregation that attended the service. There was seldom more than a couple dozen soldiers in attendance, and only a few of them came on a regular basis.

Sundays were slow, even slower than they were at Fort Reliance.

Soon after he settled in at the compound, Father Cahill noticed a large limestone wall half a block from the Quonset hut and a couple of afternoons after Mass he and Parsons played some games of handball there. It was difficult, though, because the wall wasn't very smooth and the ball bounced off it erratically and sometimes not at all. There were dead spots almost everywhere.

"I really don't think it's worth playing here anymore, Cullen," Father Cahill said after another ball he hit dropped straight down in front of the wall.

Parsons agreed. "You just never know where the ball's going to go."

"I guess we'll have to find another wall somewhere."

Parsons hadn't seen any wall any better than this one in the compound so he doubted if they would be playing anymore handball as long as they were stationed here.

*

Usually on Sunday, after Mass, Parsons hitched a ride back to the hotel where he went straight to his room and slept for a couple of hours despite the oppressive heat. Then he went downstairs to the bar, ordered a beer, and half watched some tape-delayed soccer game shown on the small television suspended from the ceiling. He never quite understood the strategy of the game but wasn't interested in it enough to take the time to find out why players made the moves they did.

Sometimes he didn't return to his hotel room right away but, instead, walked over to the Day Room which was a couple of blocks east of the Quonset hut. There was a television there, too, which also played old soccer games and a jukebox and a ping pong table. There was also plenty of magazines scattered throughout the room

which Parsons pretended to look at while he listened to others talk about their experiences in Icris. He hoped what they had to say would help him understand what was in store for him in the coming months. And, so it did, but not in a pleasant way. For the most part, the soldiers complained about the tedium of serving here as well as the obvious hostility of the people outside the compound.

"You know what I think about more than anything since being stationed here?" Ferguson asked him one afternoon in the Day Room.

"What's that, Niall?"

"How to overcome the boredom of being here," he answered. "And believe me, padre, I'm not the only one either."

"I guess that's why the Day Room is always so crowded on weekends."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess, but you can only watch so much soccer. You have to find something else to get through the tedium."

Parsons watched then as Ferguson reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small canvas pouch.

"So I started chewing this stuff."

"What is it?"

"It's called khat," he said. "It's a plant that's pretty common around this part of Africa and I'm told for years and years people have chewed it to give themselves something of a boost to get through the day."

"Is it like weed?"

He shook his head. "It's more of a stimulant, something that makes you more alert, more energetic if you will."

He took a small pinch of the reddish-brown leaves and placed it in a corner of his mouth.

"Here, have some, padre," he said, offering the pouch to Parsons.

"No thanks."

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"Trust me, padre, you'll be chewing this stuff before too long. You just about have to if you don't want to die of boredom."

Parsons wasn't so sure. He had smoked marijuana a few times but never got the pleasure from it that others did so he doubted if he would be chewing a handful of leaves anytime soon if ever.

Parsons braced himself in his seat as the bus approached "Bang-Bang Alley." As usual, he didn't see any kids right away, but he was sure they were around and they were because the bus barely turned on the street when the dirt clods and rocks began to bang against its sides and windows.

"You'd think these kids would get bored throwing crap at us every damn day," someone behind him grouched in frustration.

"Hell," another soldier blurted, "this is what they do to relieve their boredom. If I were them, I'd probably be doing the same thing."

"Not me."

"Maybe not you, chum, but I believe a lot of us would."

Parsons smiled in agreement. He had little doubt at all he would be throwing whatever he could find at the lumbering bus. It was stupid and destructive, without question, but the bus was such an attractive target it was hard to resist going after it if you had nothing else to do.

"Thwack!"

Parsons reeled back in his seat, startled by the loud sound, which he was sure was not made by a dirt clod but by a rock or a chunk of rubble. He was surprised whatever it was didn't crack the window.

"Something ought to be done about these damn kids!" someone insisted. "They ought to be taught a lesson they won't soon forget."

Gaga!

The peculiar word suddenly popped into his head and Parsons smiled some more as he recalled the raucous lawn game he played the week he spent at Saint Ignatias Seminary. That could be something the kids could be playing instead of throwing dirt clods and rocks at every vehicle they saw. He was confident the kids would find it just as exciting. Now, somehow, he had to construct a gaga ball pit for them, but he had no idea who to get in touch with to undertake the project. He suspected Father Cahill might know, though, so he knew he needed to confer with him about his idea.

*

Later that morning, over coffee in the mess hall, he mentioned his idea to the chaplain who admitted he had never heard of gaga ball. Quickly he explained how the game was played, emphasizing how much action was involved by all the participants, which Father Cahill agreed might well be exciting enough to offer an alternative to pelting the bus with dirt clods. He was pretty confident Colonel Hunnicutt would support the construction of a gaga ball pit, especially since all that was required was piecing together a few sheets of plywood.

"You really think so?"

"I do, Cullen."

"It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours if that long."

"We can't say anything to the colonel about this just yet, though."

"Why's that?"

"I've been told it's very likely the day after tomorrow we will be heading up country to one of the observation posts."

"For how long, do you figure?"

He shrugged. "Four or five days, I'd guess, not any longer."

"You're pretty sure about this?"

"I am," he answered, after taking another sip of the bitter black coffee. "But as soon as we get back, we'll take your idea to the colonel."

Nodding, he crossed his fingers under the table, hoping Father Cahill didn't forget to speak with the colonel after they returned to the compound.

*

Not sure why but Parsons wasn't looking forward to spending any time at some distant observation post. He supposed he had become so accustomed to daily life at the compound he wasn't ready for any changes. He really didn't know how much different it would be staying at the outpost so the next time he saw Ferguson in the Day Room he asked him what things would be like at such an installation.

"Well, first off, you won't technically be going to an observation post. That's just a temporary post with usually no more than two or three troopers."

"Father Cahill said we'd be going to an observation post."

He smiled. "The chaplain is mistaken, Cullen. Where you're off to is what is known as a COP or combat outpost."

His eyes cringed at the mention of the word "combat."

"I was stationed at one for a few weeks. It's really just a miniature version of this base without any of the amenities."

"So, is there fighting there?"

"Not that I've heard of recently. There might be some harassing activity conducted by the hostiles in the area but nothing really significant."

"So, what's the purpose of these outposts then?"

"Well, they do serve as something of an observation post, enabling us to keep an eye on any troublemakers on the scene, and should trouble break out the soldiers there have the capacity to get it under control right quick."

"Oh."

"How long will you be there?"

"A week, I believe."

"Don't sweat it, Cullen. You'll be bored as hell but other than that you shouldn't have anything to worry about."

*

Maybe the corporal was right, maybe he shouldn't worry about going to the combat outpost, but that was easier said than done. He knew better than anyone he was someone who was easily frightened by all sorts of things. So, it was hard not to fret about this new assignment.

Trying to keep his mind off it, he wrote a long letter to Greer, assuring her that Icris was not any place she would care to visit. There was scarcely anything to do outside the base, so the days passed slowly. He also said he intended to complete his purchase of the Bulova watch as soon as he returned to Fort Reliance. Then he made plans for the gaga ball pit. According to the information he found on the internet, a pit would require eight sheets of 3/4" plywood and could be assembled with nothing more than a saw and a drill and some sandpaper. It shouldn't be too hard to set up, he believed. The hard part would be persuading kids to play this modified version of dodgeball instead of throwing rocks and dirt clods.

*

"So, why the long face, padre?" Ferguson asked him a couple of days later in the mess hall.

"I didn't know I had one."

"You do, all right. You're not still worried about going up country?"

He didn't answer because he assumed the expression on his face apparently revealed his concern.

"I know something that'll put you in a better frame of mind."

"And what would that be, Niall? Chewing some of those leaves you like to chew?"

"That'll help. No question about it. But I have something else in mind."

"You do, do you?"

He grinned. "I'll pick you up at your hotel around eight o'clock tonight and I'll show you."

"I can't wait," he said sarcastically.

Ferguson and another corporal, Andy McIntire, arrived in a Jeep a few minutes after eight and found Parsons waiting for them on the veranda of the Rustica Hotel. After apologizing for being a little late, Ferguson introduced Parsons to his companion then reminded him to buckle his seat belt.

"You're in for quite a ride tonight, padre."

"Where are we going?"

Ferguson winked at McIntire. "We're going to chase down a fugitive."

"Did someone go AWOL?"

"Nah," he answered, making a turn at the corner of the block. "Are you familiar with the fugitive game?"

"Never heard of it."

"You haven't?"

"Nope."

"I guess they don't play it where you're from."

"I guess not. So, what is it?"

"It's a game of cops and robbers," McIntire replied. "The fugitive races to a designated point while the cop chases him in his car. If he catches up with him, he or someone else in the car gets out and tags him and the fugitive is out of the game."

"So, no one is AWOL?"

McIntire shook his head.

"Then who's the fugitive?"

"That's what we're going to have to find out," Ferguson said. "You see, padre, we've played this game enough times that we can always find someone hanging out at Patriot Circle who'll take up the challenge."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"We offer twenty American dollars to the fugitive who

reaches the point before being tagged."

"That's good money around here."

"You're damn right it is."

Shortly they arrived at Patriot Circle which was just around the corner from the now abandoned presidential palace. It featured a towering bronze replica of a warrior with a spear poised above his right shoulder. Tentatively three young men approached the Jeep with their long arms hanging at their sides.

Ferguson held a twenty dollar bill out the window. "Who thinks he can outrun us to the Ferris wheel?"

The three men raised their hands and, after regarding them for a moment, Ferguson pointed to the youngest one. "You've got a three-minute head start," he declared, slipping the bill into his shirt pocket. "Now get going!"

The guy took off at once, taking strides as long as his arms, and Ferguson watched him sprint down the middle of the street. As soon as he disappeared down an alley, Ferguson released his emergency brake, even though only two minutes had elapsed, and started after him. In seconds, he reached the alley but didn't see any sign of the fugitive.

"Where the hell is he?" McIntire wondered.

"Maybe he's hiding," Parsons speculated.

Without hesitating, Ferguson sped down the alley, and as soon as he got through, he spotted the guy charging down the middle of another street. The Ferris wheel was nearly a mile and a half away and already the fugitive was beginning to tire.

"This is too easy," Ferguson muttered, also slowing down.

Soon he was just a few feet behind the winded fugitive.

"You want me to get out and tag him?" McIntire asked, gripping the door handle.

"Not just yet," Ferguson said, staying right on his heels.

"You're getting awfully close," Parsons cautioned him.

"I'm not going to hit him. I just want to throw a scare into him."

Halfway through the next block, the exhausted fugitive paused and dropped to one knee but only for a second then he began to jog, his arms now hanging limply at his sides.

"He's done for," McIntire remarked.

"So, it appears," Ferguson said, sounding disappointed. "Piss poor. That's what his effort was. Clearly we picked the wrong guy to chase tonight."

McIntire nodded in agreement. "I'll get out and tag him."

"No, let Cullen do it."

"Me?" Parsons said, surprised.

"Yeah, do it, then we can take you back to the hotel."

He hesitated, not really eager to get out of the Jeep but he did and jogged over to the fugitive and tapped him on the shoulder. Instantly the guy turned around and struck him across the face with a closed hand. Parsons spun back, nearly losing his balance, and the guy turned even more and struck him again in the face and Parsons fell to the ground. At once, McIntire leaped out of the Jeep and helped him back on his feet while Ferguson crept ahead and smacked the insolent fugitive with his bumper.

"I ought to run you over, you undesirable maggot!"

With an apparent boost of energy, the fugitive took off running every bit as hard as he did at the start of the chase. Ferguson was tempted to go after him but didn't because he was afraid his temper might get the best of him and he might try to run down the guy.

"We're sent here to help these people and they couldn't care less," he grouched as Parsons staggered back into the Jeep. "You want to see a doctor, padre?"

"I just want to put some ice on my face."

"Yeah, we're on the way to your hotel," he told him. "I'm sorry about what happened."

McIntire looked around at Parsons. "Nothing like this has ever happened before and, I guarantee you, it won't happen the next time we go on a chase."

Parsons was sure there wouldn't be a next time, not for him anyway, and slumped back in his seat, pressing a hand against his face.

The chaplain and his assistant arrived by helicopter at the remote combat outpost early Wednesday morning. They were met at the landing zone by the commander of the outpost, Captain Holt Kehoe, who returned their rather casual salutes with one as crisp as his uniform. A short, compact man in his early thirties, he had a faint mustache and floppy ears that wagged when he turned his head. Brusquely he welcomed them to the base then told the enlisted man standing beside him to show them to their quarters.

"This isn't much," PFC Rick Collier admitted as he led them into a room half the size of the one Parsons stayed in at the hotel. "But it'll have to do because, as you can see, we don't have a lot of space around here."

"It's fine, son," Father Cahill said, setting his overnight bag on the lower bunk bed.

"So how long are you guys going to be here?"

The chaplain looked at his assistant. "Just a few days is all. I think, after Mass on Sunday, we'll be heading back to Merope."

"That's not long at all."

"No, it isn't," Father Cahill agreed. "Say, are you Catholic?"

The soldier shook his head. "Southern Baptist."

"Well, you're more than welcome to attend the service."

"I just might. There's really not much going on here,

especially on Sundays."

Parsons, surprised by his answer, said, "I assumed there's a pretty high threat level out here."

"I've been stationed here almost five months and about all I've heard explode is some firecrackers someone set off one night," Collier replied. "But the looks I've got from some of the folks around here are pretty threatening."

Father Cahill nodded. "We've seen those same looks back in Merope."

"The only serious threat I've actually encountered is boredom. All we really do is busy work which makes for some pretty long days."

"I gather barracks life is the same wherever you are stationed."

"I guess so."

"Oh, before I forget, where can I celebrate Mass on Sunday?"

"Well, as you can imagine, we don't have room for a chapel, but we do have a storage shed that can accommodate a dozen or so people at one time."

"That's all?"

He nodded.

"Can you show it to us?"

"Of course," he said, doing an about face.

They followed him out of their quarters, past the main barracks and past a sagging volleyball net, to a small lopsided building behind the mess hall. The padlock on the door was not fastened so Collier was able to walk right in and promptly switched on the overhead light. Parsons was taken back. The shed, which was not much bigger than their quarters, was crammed with boxes and crates and footlockers and all sorts of equipment and tools.

"I know it's a mess," Collier admitted, "but I assure you everything will get squared away before Sunday."

Father Cahill was skeptical.

Parsons wasn't a bit confident. "Is there something that can serve as an altar?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Father Cahill told him. "We can stack a couple of footlockers on top of one another."

Collier frowned. "I'm sure I can probably scrounge up a table somewhere."

"Don't worry about it, trooper. The lockers will suffice. I've celebrated Mass on everything from sawhorses to extension ladders."

"As you wish, sir."

Collier picked up an empty canteen and set it on one of the footlockers then led the others out the door. They had scarcely got out when a tall man in a lemon-striped undershirt and fatigue pants strode toward them.

"Hello, Yuusuf."

The man paused. "Hello."

"This is our translator," he informed the chaplain and his assistant. "Yuusuf Dajal."

They bowed their heads in greeting, and the translator bowed his head in return.

"Were you looking for something in the shed?"

Collier shook his head. "Father Cahill is a Catholic priest and he's going to need a place to say Mass this Sunday and, according to Captain Kehoe, it'll have to be in the storage shed."

"Mass, you say?"

"Yes."

"But this is a Muslim country."

"It is, of course, but at the moment this outpost is American soil."

DajAal, bowing his head again, stepped past them without saying another word.

"He didn't seem too pleased about a Mass being said here," Father Cahill remarked as he watched the translator head toward the dispensary.

"I suppose he's all right as a translator but he's a pretty sensitive guy about a lot of things," Collier observed. "You always have to watch what you say around him, so you don't hurt his feelings."

Parsons smiled. "Apparently we hurt his feelings."

"Oh, he'll get over it. He always does."

*

The next three days Parsons kept busy serving on work details. He filled sandbags, trimmed trees, cleared brush, swept floors, and one long afternoon painted rocks. He scarcely had a minute of rest but still he was very bored. So, out of boredom, he began to chew khat with Collier and a couple of other soldiers even though he told Ferguson many times he wasn't the least bit interested in the mild stimulant.

The first batch of leaves Collier gave him to chew were sprinkled with water to keep them fresh. In appearance, they reminded him of spinach which he was never fond of but, despite that, he took a bite then another and another. All the time he was careful not to swallow any of the juice and like Collier and the others spit it out into a paper cup. He chewed slowly but all he noticed at first was a slight soreness in his jaw.

"You feeling any kind of spark?" Collier asked after a couple of minutes.

"Not yet."

"You will, Cullen. It takes a while, but you will."

And gradually, after a few more minutes of intense chewing, he began to feel as if he had consumed several cups of strong black coffee. He felt a little jittery, not quite sure he was entirely in control of himself, yet at the same time oddly relaxed. The more he chewed the better he felt. Soon it was difficult to keep still, and he walked around and around, talking about anything he could think of until his throat began to ache.

One evening, while sharing a bundle of khat with Parsons and a couple other soldiers, Collier wondered how perceptive a

person was under the influence of the stimulant. He thought maybe more so but he wasn't sure, so he proposed a test.

"What kind of test?" Parsons asked.

He looked at Ray Gallegos, another PFC, and said, "Ray, you're pretty clever at making shadow puppets with your hands."

"I can make some, but I don't know how good they are."

"Let's see if we can identify some of your puppets."

"All right, if you like, but I'm pretty much a novice at this."

"You're good enough for us, Ray."

Gallegos turned on a desk lamp so only a small circle of light appeared on the north wall of the Day Room. Sighing, he held up both his hands and, almost at once, a shadow appeared on the wall with the hands crossed.

"A coyote," someone guessed.

"Nope."

No one said anything for a couple moments then, grinning, Collier said, "A crab."

"That's right."

More and more shadows appeared on the wall but to Parsons they all looked like fluttering birds so he assumed chewing khat diminished his perceptiveness. He didn't much care, though, as long as it relieved his boredom.

Parsons awoke Sunday morning to the alarm on his Timex wristwatch blaring in his ears and quickly he shut it off before it woke Father Cahill. Usually, on Sundays, he slept in but not this Sunday because he had to get the storage shed ready for the service Father Cahill was scheduled to celebrate later in the morning.

For just a little bit longer, he kept his eyes closed then he opened them and, as usual, the first thing he saw was the dark brown water stain on the ceiling. Before he got out of bed, he stared at it for a minute then smiled. It reminded him of the shadow puppets he watched PFC Gallegos create last night but it took him a couple more minutes before he figured out what it was and then it came to him in a flash---a wolf. That was it, all right, and he was pretty sure Gallegos would agree with him. A dark and fierce wolf with teeth the size of his thumbs.

"You up already, Cullen?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I woke you."

"No problem. I should probably be getting up too."

"You don't have to get up just yet," he told the chaplain.

"I don't?"

"I still have to get the shed organized."

"Maybe I will stay in bed a little longer."

"You might as well."

*

As he walked over to the shed, Parsons felt a little light-headed which he suspected was on account of all the leaves he chewed last night. It was way too much, and he swore to himself he would not chew that many leaves again.

When he turned on the light inside the storage shed, it was so bright he had to close his eyes at once. Again, he suspected the leaves had caused his eyes to be so sensitive. Slowly he opened them, letting them adjust to the light, and had almost forgotten all the clutter that was in the shed. It was a good thing he got up as early as he did because it was likely going to take him a while to get things set up before ten o'clock.

First off, he stacked three empty footlockers on top of one another at the east end of the shed then he unfolded a dozen metal chairs in front of the lockers. He didn't have any idea how many soldiers would be attending the service, but he doubted if it would be more than a dozen after talking with PFC Collier last night. Still, he leaned a few more chairs against a wall just in case they were needed. Then he moved some of the other furniture and lockers to one side of the shed along with some tools and several barrels and cans and ammunition boxes. This didn't make for a lot of space but at least the congregants could walk to the chairs without bumping into anything.

Next, from his backpack, he pulled out the cotton sheet he had removed from his bunk bed before he came to the shed, folded it in half, and draped it over the top of the stacked footlockers. An altar, even a makeshift one, required to be covered with a cloth he believed. Also, he took out of his pack two small votive candles which he set on either end of the altar cloth. Father Cahill told him to bring the candles before they arrived at the combat outpost.

"I probably won't need them but in case the lights go out for whatever reason it's good to have them on hand so I can see what I'm doing."

Near the entrance of the shed he set a small plastic bowl on

top of a locker and filled it with water from his canteen for Father Cahill to bless when he arrived.

Well, that should about do it, he thought as he surveyed the improvised chapel.

Father Cahill had packed a bottle of red table wine and a loaf of bread so he would be bringing these items along with a stick of incense. Satisfied all was in order, Parsons stepped out of the shed and sat down on a stool and lit a cigarette. Overhead a plane flew he could not see but was sure he heard and he thought how eager he was to board one in a few months and return to the States.

"Morning."

He looked up and saw Collier walking toward him with a push broom poised on his right shoulder. He moved briskly, not appearing to show any sign of a hangover.

"Good morning."

"You got the shed ready for the service?"

"Pretty much."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"No. I think everything is set," he said. "Are you going to be able to attend?"

He shrugged. "I hope to but, first, I've been told to clean up the latrine before I do anything else this morning."

"I hope you can make it."

"Say, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What's that, Rick?"

"What exactly is a Mass? We, Baptists, do a lot of singing and praying at our Sunday get-togethers. Do you do the same?"

"There is that, sure, but Mass is primarily about sacrifice."

Collier wrinkled his head in confusion.

"As the Lord offered Himself to his Father on the cross, we continue that sacrifice through the sacrament of the Eucharist. By taking bread and wine at communion, we are once again offering the body and blood of the Lord to the Father."

"This sounds awfully involved for a country boy like me to

wrap my head around."

"You're not alone, Rick, not at all."

*

About a quarter to ten Father Cahill arrived at the shed and carefully surveyed the arrangement of the altar and chairs which Parsons was glad met his approval. From his backpack he took out a bottle of red wine and a loaf of enriched white bread, set them on the altar, then lit the votive candles with his cigarette lighter. In place of a vestment, he wore a starched white dress shirt with his fatigue pants and jump boots.

Always very punctual, Father Cahill was ready to begin the Mass at ten o'clock even though only six soldiers were in the congregation which disappointed both him and his assistant. They had expected at least twice that many to attend the service. Parsons hoped the commander of the outpost might attend but he too was absent.

Father Cahill always said a fast-paced Mass, seldom going past half an hour, and Parsons expected he would be even faster this morning not only because, so few soldiers bothered to show up but because he was just as eager to return to the compound at Merope as Parsons. Promptly he began with making the sign of the cross then recited the Gloria and read a passage from Saint Luke and raced through the litany and Creed. Parsons knew he would be fast but not this fast and figured the Mass would be completed in twenty minutes.

After the Lord's Prayer, Father Cahill removed three slices of bread from the bulky package and began to break them into mouth-sized wafers. He was about to start breaking the third slice when the door of the shed suddenly sprang open and the translator, DajAal, entered with an automatic rifle cradled in his arms. Parsons, who sat directly behind the altar, could not make out who it was at first, he was so startled by the interruption.

The translator just stood there, looking all around the temporary chapel, then he raised his rifle, shouted "Allahu Akbar!,"

and started firing at random. Almost in an arc, he shot round after round at the terrified worshippers. Screams filled the shed, screams every bit as fierce as the gunfire. Father Cahill was struck almost immediately, and as he fell back he knocked over the votive candles and the altar cloth burst into flames. He also knocked Parsons out of his chair and, frantically, his assistant crouched behind the stack of footlockers as the translator continued his attack. It seemed to last several minutes but it was only a matter of seconds before the shooting stopped.

At once, Parsons swept his hands all over his body to see if he was shot. He wasn't. Then he knelt over the chaplain, whose eyes were as blank as the buttons on his dress shirt, and held him in his arms as if to protect him even though it was too late.

PART THREE

Not sure where to go, Parsons waited by the bus stop until he saw a hunched over man in a raincoat approach the Greek Orthodox church and, on an impulse, followed him around to the north side of the building. The man paused before a thick wooden door, stamped out his cigarette, and opened it without knocking. Just a few feet behind him, Parsons also opened the door and saw several folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle in the middle of the basement floor. One chair sat in the middle of the circle. Nearly all the chairs were occupied, including the one in the middle. Parsons spotted an empty one close to the aisle at the east end of the row and sat down without making eye contact with anyone.

Soon three more people came in then, promptly at eight o'clock, the bearded man seated in the middle chair welcomed everyone in a craggy voice that sounded as if he had done a lot of hollering in his life. Then, after removing a recipe card from the pocket of his windbreaker, he began to read the Friends of Bill W Preamble: "Alcoholic Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experiences, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism ..."

Half listening, Parsons dug his fingernails into his thighs, finding it hard to believe he had really come to this meeting.

*

Not quite a week before, driving home late one night from a waterfront bar he regularly frequented, Parsons nodded off and crashed into a guardrail. He wasn't tired. He was drunk. And he wasn't hurt, except for a cut on the tip of his chin, but he was so startled he couldn't budge for a couple of minutes. All he could think about was, if he fallen asleep a minute earlier, he might well have plowed into the oil truck that passed him on the last turn on the two-lane road. Furiously he banged his forehead against the steering wheel until he drew a trickle of blood.

"Imbecile!" he shouted. "Damn imbecile!"

Isaac was right, he knew now more than ever, as he stared at the damaged guardrail. Numerous times Isaac, who used to work at the waterfront bar Parsons had just left, cautioned him that his excessive drinking might get him into serious trouble someday.

"If you don't hurt yourself, Cullen, you might hurt someone else."

He realized finally he needed to cut down on his drinking, if not stop altogether, before he damaged something more than a guardrail. More than once, Isaac had suggested he attend an Alcohol Anonymous meeting and always he dismissed the idea because he believed he had his drinking under control. Tonight, though, showed he didn't and definitely needed some help if he wanted to survive.

*

After he read the Preamble, Jeffrey, the person in charge of the proceedings, invited the others to recite with him the Serenity Prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

"Now, gentlemen, is anyone here for the first time?" Jeffrey asked, surveying the semi-circle of chairs.

Parsons waited for someone to raise his hand, but no one did so, reluctantly, he raised his hand.

"And your first name, please?"

"Cullen."

"Welcome, Cullen," Jeffrey and the others said in unison.

Shyly he bowed his head.

"And why have you come here this evening, Cullen?"

"I believe I am an alcoholic."

"And why do you think you are?"

"Earlier this week, after one too many drinks, I fell asleep on my way home and crashed my car into a guardrail."

"Were you hurt?"

"No, not seriously."

"But serious enough to make you realize you have a problem?"

He nodded, fidgeting in his metal chair.

"Why do you drink so much?" the person to the left of him asked.

"I don't know."

"You must know," another person snapped. "If you don't, who does?"

He took a deep breath. "For a while, I was in the Army," he began hesitantly, "where I served as a chaplain's assistant. After almost a year in the States, I and the chaplain I worked for were deployed overseas to a country in Africa I'd never heard of called Icris."

"I've never heard of it, either," Jeffrey interjected.

"Anyway, not too long after we arrived in the country, we were flown to this remote outpost for a few days to meet with the troops stationed there. They were a pretty lonely bunch and seemed glad to see some new faces. A few were Catholic so, on Sunday, Father Cahill offered to say Mass for them in this rundown shed that was full of all kinds of tools and munitions. He didn't mind, though, because he believed what was said was what mattered not where it was said." He paused, determined to keep his emotions under control. "All of a sudden, in the middle of the service, one of the

translators at the outpost barged in, screaming "God is Great!", and started shooting his automatic rifle at random. He struck the chaplain right away, shot everyone, except me."

He paused again, his shoulders twitching, struggling to complete what he had to say.

"It wasn't right. It should've been me who was shot, not Father Cahill, not any of the others. It should've been me."

The basement was silent except for a clock ticking in a corner.

"I started drinking a lot after that because alcohol helped me cope with what happened. When I am drunk, I don't think about that awful Sunday morning, and when I am sober, I can't think of anything else."

"I know I have never experienced anything as traumatic as what you have just described," Jeffrey remarked, "and I very much doubt if anyone else here has for that matter."

Intently he stared at the other men some of whom nodded in agreement.

"But all of us, I dare say, have experienced a significant degree of misfortune that compelled us to turn to alcohol to get past it," he continued. "And what we discovered is that alcohol can be much worse than what we're trying to put behind us."

Parsons nodded, gripping his left shoulder to keep it from twitching.

"So, thank you for sharing your experience with us, Cullen."

Again, he nodded, gritting his teeth as his shoulder continued to twitch.

*

The day after the attack, after he returned to the compound at Merope, Parsons was interviewed by two intelligence officers on what had occurred. Then, the following day, he was interviewed by a psychologist, Captain James Grizzard, whose apparent purpose was to evaluate his state of mind as the lone survivor of the unprovoked attack.

"So, how are you getting along, specialist?" he began the interview.

He shrugged. "As well as can be expected, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

He nodded. "I haven't thought about what happened much."

"You haven't?"

"No, sir."

"That's hard to believe, specialist."

Without replying, he took a paper clip from the captain's desk and began to twist it apart.

"If what happened to you happened to me, I don't think I could think about anything else."

"You're not me."

"I am not. That's true."

Parsons continued to twist the paper clip around and around his little finger.

"You know, specialist, you must not feel guilty because only you survived the attack."

"Why can't I?"

"Because what happened wasn't your fault. You weren't the one pulling the trigger that killed the others."

"I should've done something, though."

"What?"

He snapped the clip in half. "Something."

"What, for heaven's sake?"

"I shouldn't have crouched behind the altar," he declared remorsefully. "I should've stood beside Father Cahill then, maybe, he wouldn't have been shot."

"You think the gunman would've shot you and not him?"

"Maybe."

"More likely, he would've shot both of you."

"You don't know that."

"I don't, true, but you don't know he wouldn't have shot you, specialist."

There was not any point in continuing to argue with the shrink, who had no idea what it was like that Sunday morning, so he picked up another paper clip to twist apart.

“Morning, fellas,” Ida, the honey-voiced dispatcher at Mount Castle Ambulance Service, greeted the paramedics. “I just received a report of a sixty-three-year-old male down at 4th and Prescott. He’s in apartment nine. Possible cardiac arrest.”

Parsons tightened his seat belt as his partner, Ross Snitker, switched on the siren then pressed his foot down on the accelerator pedal of the rickety old wagon. They raced down the street, blowing through two red lights, not saying a word to one another because they knew they could not be heard above the blaring siren. Around one corner a panel truck driver, who thought he could keep ahead of them, refused to pull over until Snitker began to beep his horn.

"You stupid moron," he muttered to himself.

Snitker was a gruff man who, even after Parsons got to know him, remained gruff. He was always all business, not the least bit interested in engaging in small talk. His appearance, if not his personality, kind of reminded Parsons of Father Cahill, who would have been just a couple of years older than Snitker.. They were about the same height and weight and shared an intense gaze that at times seemed to stare right through whoever they were in conversation with as if something more interesting was happening elsewhere. Snitker's grip was as firm as the chaplain's which prompted Parsons to ask if he played handball. He didn't, though,

didn't play any kind of sport which he regarded as a waste of time. He earned his strength he told him from working on construction crews for close to eleven years before he became a paramedic.

"So why the switch?"

He thought a moment. "There are a lot of injuries on a construction site, and I don't know why but I often seemed the one taking care of whoever got hurt. And, after a while, I found that a hell of a lot more satisfying than operating a jackhammer."

Parsons agreed. He also found saving lives more satisfying than saving souls. Following his discharge from the Army, he really didn't have any idea what he wanted to do and for a while worked as a cashier at an all-night convenience store. It was a way to earn a living but wasn't something he looked forward to doing for the rest of his life. Driving an ambulance was not anything he had ever really thought about doing until a driver he met at a Friends of Bill W meeting suggested he consider getting qualified as an emergency medical technician. He was sure the work had to be more rewarding than selling groceries, so he enrolled in the required training program at a local community college. After he completed the program, he took and passed the National Registry examination and got his EMT license and went to work for a mid-level ambulance company that covered most of the east side of the city.

Before he took any classes in college, he had assumed all an ambulance driver did was operate a vehicle and transport patients to the nearest hospital. For years, that was all that was required of drivers but nowadays their duties had greatly expanded. Now a driver was expected to be able to provide immediate medical care to the sick and injured. They were paramedics trained to evaluate a patient's condition and do what they could to stabilize the situation and prevent further injury.

*

"Over there," Parsons said, soon after they turned onto Prescott Street. "On the right."

A small stone sign that said Rosemont Gardens sat in the

middle of the lawn outside the main entrance.

Snitker pulled up in front of the sign and, at once, Parsons got out, opened the back of the wagon, and pulled out the nylon medical kit along with a manual resuscitator known as an Ambu bag. Together they rushed through the entrance then climbed two flights of stairs to apartment nine. Snitker knocked on the door and right away it was opened by a distressed woman in her early thirties.

"Please, come in," she said, and after they did, she led them into the living room where her father sat slumped over in an easy chair. To their surprise, he was alert and raised a hand in greeting.

"I don't know what happened but all of a sudden Papa turned very pale and grew short of breath then keeled over into his chair. He had lost consciousness and I was worried he had suffered a heart attack, so I thought I better call an ambulance."

Parsons stepped over to the gentleman, who still seemed a little dazed, and began to take his vital signs. "All seems to be in order," he informed his partner after he finished. "It's unlikely he had a heart attack."

The daughter was puzzled. "What could've caused him suddenly to become so weak and pass out?"

"Does your father have a history of fainting?" Snitker asked.

"No. I've never seen him lose consciousness before."

As he glanced around the living room, he noticed a salad bowl on the coffee table. "Is that your father's?" Snitker asked.

"Yes. He was about halfway through his lunch when he started to feel ill."

"What was in the salad?"

"Oh, let me think," she drawled. "Shrimp and tomatoes and olives and onions and pepper and, of course, lettuce."

"Is your father allergic to shellfish?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Well, ma'am, I am and I know from personal experience that some people can get very ill after eating shellfish. They have stomach cramps, turn pale, become dizzy and confused, and even

pass out sometimes."

"The lettuce might not be any good," Parsons observed. "I know I've had some bad reactions from lettuce that's spoiled."

"You really think what he had to eat for lunch caused him to become sick?"

"It's certainly a possibility."

Sighing, she looked over at her father who seemed as frail as she had ever seen him.

"I'd still recommend that he be checked out at a hospital," Snitker declared.

"If an ambulance wasn't so costly, I'd let you take him, gentlemen. But, instead, I think I'll take him myself."

"It's your prerogative, of course, but he should definitely see a doctor."

"I'll make sure of it."

Quickly the medics gathered up their gear and left the apartment. Of course, they were pleased the woman's father didn't suffer a heart attack or cardiac arrest but at the same time they were disappointed they weren't able to do anything for the gentleman. They just hoped his daughter kept her word and had him examined by a physician.

*

On their way back to the garage the medics were pretty confident with their diagnosis of the cause of the man's ailment, especially Snitker.

"Years ago, I ate this huge bowl of steamed clams, and I don't think I've ever been so sick in my life," he recalled as he steered past a motorbike. "I had all of the symptoms that old man had plus I vomited my insides out for a couple of hours."

"Have you eaten clams since then?"

He shook his head. "I learned my lesson, Cullen. I stay away from shellfish of any kind."

"I've never had any problem with them."

"I never did, either, until that one time and I don't want to

suffer through that again so, as I said, no more shellfish for me."

"It's better to be safe than sorry."

"You can say that again."

They were about half a mile from the garage when they received another call from Ida.

"A woman is reported bleeding at a bus stop on 7th and Dekum."

"Is she conscious?" Snitker asked.

"I don't know, Ross. That's all the information I have."

"All right," he said, switching on the siren. "We're on our way."

When they arrived at the bus stop, they didn't see anyone there which made them wonder if it was a false alarm. Some people, for whatever reason, found it amusing to send ambulances on wild goose chases.

"I suppose we should take a look around and see if we can find any woman in trouble," Snitker suggested.

Parsons agreed. "We're here. We might as well."

"Why don't you go up the street and I'll go down?"

Parsons nodded and out of habit got out the first aid kit. He proceeded slowly, looking from side to side, but all he saw was his own lean shadow. After he reached the end of the block, he started to head back to the wagon when he noticed a young woman across the street braced against the shuttered door of a closed print shop. She was too far away for him to make out if she was injured but, just in case, he decided to cross the street to see if she was the person who needed an ambulance. Clearly, she must be, he soon realized, because she was bleeding from a split lip and her nose was swollen and bent to one side.

"Did you call for an ambulance, miss?" he asked as he approached her.

"I didn't but someone else might've."

"What happened?"

Before she answered, she pressed the back of her left hand

against her lip to reduce the bleeding.

"Here, let me take care of that."

She shrugged and removed her hand.

Quickly he opened the kit, found a bandage, and walked over and put it on the cut which was near the corner of her mouth. Up close, he could not help but think of Greer. This woman didn't really resemble her, but her skin was just as soft and translucent.

"So, now, what happened?" he asked her again.

"I was waiting for a bus and some guy on a bike came by and grabbed my purse," she said, haltingly, as if struggling to recall what exactly occurred. "I tried to keep him from taking it but then he hit me in the face with a closed fist, and I fell down and he took off on his bike with my purse in his hands."

"He appears to have smacked you pretty hard."

"He did."

"I'm afraid your nose might be broken," he told her. "You should have it examined by a doctor to be sure."

"I can't go to the hospital," she said adamantly. "I just can't afford it."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Well, when you get home, you should put some ice on your nose to reduce the swelling."

She nodded in silence.

"You're sure now you don't want me to take you to the emergency room?"

"I'm sure," she sighed, "and thanks for the bandage."

"Of course. I just wish I could do something more."

"You've done plenty, mister."

Not really, he thought, as he headed back across the street. Again, she reminded him of Greer who also was a very stubborn woman who once she made up her mind about something seldom changed it.

The Mount Castle Ambulance Service was located in a former Chrysler dealership that occupied close to half a city block. It had a fleet of seven ambulances but seldom were all of them available at the same time. Three or four were always being worked on by the repair shop around the corner. What was once the showroom of the dealership now served as the office of the ambulance company and a recreation room for the drivers that included a couple of food and beverage vending machines, a ping-pong table, and an enormous television set that almost always was switched to the Weather Channel.

It was a slow morning, with only three ambulances dispatched in the past hour.

Parsons sat in one of the canvas camp chairs, a paper cup of instant coffee balanced on his left knee, waiting to go on a call. Bored, he watched Carlton, one of the senior drivers, dance with a mop in a corner of the spacious room. A few weeks ago, his wife asked him to take dance lessons with her and occasionally, while waiting for an assignment, he used the time to practice some steps. This morning, as he did yesterday, he was practicing the Argentine tango, flicking his heels behind his ankles every couple of steps. He was awkward and tentative, held the mop handle too far away from his chest. Parsons felt sorry for his wife, sure he was likely to

embarrass her on the dance floor.

"Wagon Four," Ida's voice blared through the speaker set up on the wall directly across from the television set. "Male fell off a roof at 3rd and Carruthers."

"It's about time," Snitker grumbled as he closed the Louis L'Amour paperback he was reading.

Parsons got up from his chair and followed his partner out to their wagon.

"I'll bet anything some do-it-yourselfer was trying to scrape some moss off his roof," Snitker speculated after turning on the engine. "Some damn fool too old to know any better."

"Yeah, you're probably right, Ross."

"You know damn well I am."

Parsons nodded, well aware by now that Snitker was not someone you argued with because he never believed he was mistaken.

A small knot of neighbors were gathered on the front lawn of the two-story sandstone house on Carruthers Street, their heads bowed, seeking to comfort the man who fell off the roof. He appeared to be in his late fifties, his hair almost entirely gray.

"Please, let us through," Snitker barked as he and Parsons rushed over to treat the injured man.

"Hello, Doc," the man groaned when he spotted Snitker. "It feels like I busted up my left ankle."

Right away, the medics checked to see if any bones penetrated the skin, but the fracture was closed then they made sure he wasn't bleeding anywhere.

"Is your back sore at all?" Parsons asked while Snitker immobilized the injured ankle with a padded splint.

"Yeah, a bit," the man answered, starting to lean forward.

"Please, sir, keep still," Parsons cautioned him, concerned there might be some damage to his spinal cord. "We'll get you on a stretcher in a minute."

"Whatever you say, Doc. I'm in your hands."

And a couple of minutes later, they strapped the man onto the stretcher and loaded it into the back of the wagon. His daughter, whose forehead was creased with anxiety, sat beside him, gripping the tiny gold crucifix that hung around her neck. They made it to the nearest hospital in under six minutes then hurried out and wheeled the man into the emergency room. His daughter thanked them profusely as she walked beside them.

"I'd like to give you a little something for all you've done for my father," she said, starting to reach into her wallet.

"We can't accept gratuities, ma'am," Snitker informed her immediately.

"Not even twenty dollars?"

He shook his head. "It's against company policy."

"Well, that's a shame," she said, slipping her wallet back into her coat pocket. "Again, thank you for taking care of my father."

"That's what we're here for, ma'am."

*

Parsons lit a cigarette, inhaled slowly, then picked out a pen from the mug of pens he kept on his desk and began to write another letter to Greer. It was the fifth one he wrote to her since returning to Portsmouth.

"I miss you so, so much, darling," he wrote, "and I wonder if you miss me at all. You never write. You never call. I just hope you haven't forgotten me because I know I'll never forget you."

Taking another drag on his cigarette, he leaned back from his desk and stared out the window as the streetlight came on across the street.

When he first saw Greer after his return to Fort Reliance, she didn't seem as excited as he expected. She smiled, to be sure, and embraced him with a tender kiss but her eyes were distant as if she wished to be with someone else. And soon, he learned from her, she started seeing another soldier after he went overseas, an infantry officer nearly twice her age. He hoped to persuade her to leave the officer now that he was back from Icris but she indicated that was

unlikely. The officer provided her security which Parsons couldn't because he had no intention of remaining in the service and didn't have any idea what he was going to do after his discharge. Still, he was determined to get her back and visited her every day at the PX where she continued to work and every other day sent her a greeting card telling her how much she meant to him.

"You don't know this," he resumed writing, "but one night I followed you and the officer out to the lake and watched the two of you make out in his year-old Lincoln Navigator. I knew then it was really over between us but, for a while, I still pretended it wasn't. That was foolish, of course, probably as foolish as continuing to write letters to you that I don't even know if you would take the time to read."

Again, he leaned back from his desk and watched a plane float over the streetlight, wishing Greer was on it ... on her way to get back with him. Then he folded the letter in half and put it in the bottom drawer with the other four letters he had written to her.

*

Shortly after they arrived at the garage, Parsons and Snitker were sent out on a call for a man struck by a bicycle on 8th and Prescott Street. Right away, Snitker wondered if the person injured was Axel and voiced his speculation to Parsons as they climbed into their wagon.

"I was wondering about that too."

"Lord, I hope not," Snitker groaned, switching on the engine. "If it is, this is the third time in the past six weeks we've been called out for him."

"I think it's the fourth."

"Yeah?"

"I believe so."

"Whatever. You'd think the damn fool would've learned to take care of himself by now."

Axel was a derelict who lived in a pup tent on Prescott. Sometimes, when he had too much wine to drink, he would ignore

the traffic lights and cross the street when it suited him. Twice, they had treated him for cuts and bruises from stumbling over his own feet but never from a collision with a bicycle. They were not surprised, though, because they figured he would be involved in an accident someday.

Soon after they turned onto Prescott, they noticed a small gathering of people in the middle of the block and assumed that must be the scene of the accident. They parked next to the crowd and, at once, saw Axel lying on the sidewalk beside a mountain bike whose front wheel was bent in several places.

"Surprise, surprise," Snitker said sarcastically as he got out of the wagon with Parsons who had the first aid kit.

Hurriedly they barged through the crowd, and just before they reached Axel, the cyclist came up to them with his hands in the air.

"It wasn't my fault," he insisted. "The guy just wandered into the crosswalk without even looking one way or the other. I tried to stop but I couldn't and I skidded into him."

"We're not the police," Snitker told the agitated young man. "You can tell what happened to them when they get here."

"Yeah, yeah, but I just wanted you guys to know I wasn't to blame for the accident. Ask anyone here who saw the collision and they'll tell you I wasn't in the wrong."

Not saying anything more, they brushed past the cyclist to attend to Axel whose hands lay still along his side. His eyes were barely open, staring at the limbs of the elm tree directly above him, and his lips quivered in pain.

As soon as he knelt beside him, Snitker could smell wine on his breath. "So where are you hurting the most?" he asked.

"My chest," he sighed. "It hurts when I breathe."

"You have to breathe, sir."

"I know that, but it hurts I tell you."

Suspecting a rib was broken, Parsons gently pressed a finger on the side of his chest and immediately Axel groaned in pain.

"Don't. That hurts."

Parsons withdrew his finger and said to Snitker, "He likely has a broken rib."

"So, it seems."

"There's not much we can do for you here," Parsons informed him, "so we strongly suggest you let us take you to the hospital."

"You can't bandage me up here?"

"If your rib is broken, as we suspect, you don't want anything binding put around your chest that'll limit your breathing."

"Oh."

"So, you agree to go to the hospital?"

Nodding, he again grimaced in pain.

"Surprise, surprise," Sniker said again as he helped Parsons haul the stretcher out of the back of the wagon.

Both of them figured Axel would go to the hospital, as he had the other times they dealt with him, because he knew the ambulance company and the emergency room wouldn't charge him a penny because he was indigent. This very much bothered Snitker who wasn't at all sympathetic to Axel's plight and regarded him as nothing more than a parasite. Parsons felt much differently, however, because he suspected if he continued to drink, he might well end up on the street like Axel. That was something he dreaded more than anything because then he would be completely dependent on others to make it through the day. He would become a target, too, prey to anyone on the prowl.

After dinner, after watching the last three innings of a college baseball game on television, Parsons decided to write another letter to Greer. The letters, not one of which was mailed, had become more of a personal diary.

"Today," he began, "was memorable because Ross and I helped deliver a baby. All the call from Ida said was a woman was sitting on a bench on 2nd and Olive Street in obvious pain. We had no idea what her problem was but assumed from past experience she was likely high on some stimulant drug. To our surprise, though, she didn't appear to be a junkie at all. She had on a dark blue double-breasted overcoat, leather pumps, and a paisley silk scarf. She had a large belly which she held with both hands and right away we realized she was pregnant and about ready to deliver her baby any moment."

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"We told her we were there to help her," he resumed writing, "and offered her some water which she declined. Ross cautioned her to breathe deeply, especially through her contractions, while I went back to the wagon and got some clean sheets and the Ambu bag. Again, and again the woman screamed as she struggled to push out the baby. I didn't know what else to do so I mopped the sweat from her face while Ross kept reminding her to take deep breaths.

Finally, after what seemed like a lot longer than a couple of minutes, the top of a head appeared between her legs. It was as round and shiny as a brass doorknob. The baby wasn't crying, though, and I was worried I might have to use the Ambu bag to force air into the baby's chest but then Ross, who had delivered babies before, swiped a finger along the side of the baby's nose and almost at once the newborn began to howl."

He paused again to take a long drag on his cigarette.

"I've never seen a baby born before and I have to admit it was a pretty amazing thing to see. Still, as you know from past discussions we've had, I really have no interest in becoming a father. I just don't think it's right, for me anyway, to bring a child into what seems to me like a world of fear. I know you think I am ridiculous to think that, but I do and I can't imagine I'll ever think differently. In this world, as I've discovered, it's not even safe to stand at an altar in a church."

He set down his pen and started to light another cigarette when his cell phone rang in the kitchen, and he got up and answered it on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Cullen Parsons?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Hello, Cullen," the gravelly caller said. "My name is Curt Kidwell, and I have been appointed to be your sponsor."

"Sponsor?"

"Yes, sir. Everyone who enters the Friends of Bill W program is assigned a sponsor. This is a member at least a year in recovery whose purpose is to assist others in their recovery."

"I didn't know that."

"I have not had a drink in almost nineteen months."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you," he said, sounding surprised himself it had been that long. "So, as your sponsor, I thought we might meet for coffee sometime this week and get to know one another a little."

"All right."

"What would be a convenient time for you, Cullen?"

He thought a moment. "I don't know if you know it, but I work for an ambulance service."

"No, I didn't know."

"The next three days I'm scheduled to work the day shift so I could meet you any time after six o'clock."

"How about the day after tomorrow?"

"Fine."

"There's a Java Depot downtown on Almond Avenue. How about we meet there at half past six?"

"I look forward to it."

"See you then, Cullen."

Before he could reply his sponsor hung up and Parsons set down his phone and said to himself, "I hope I can stay sober as long as you, Mr. Kidwell."

*

Parsons and Snitker had barely finished taking a young man with a pencil in his ear to the emergency room when they received another call from Ida.

"Male threatening to jump from the twelfth floor of the Bridgeport Hotel on Meadowlark Lane."

"Oh, swell," Snitker groaned, steering with one hand because he held a coffee cup in his other hand. "This could go on and on as negotiators try to talk the guy off the ledge."

"You've responded to jumper calls before?"

"A few and, as I said, this can take a while."

"Did any of them jump?"

"Not one. I guess they just wanted to express how upset they were with how things were working out for them."

Two fire trucks were already parked outside the hotel when they arrived along with three police cruisers. Promptly they got out of their wagon but left their equipment inside because Snitker doubted if any of it would be needed.

"Nearly all falls from more than ten stories are fatal."

"So, what are we here for?"

Snitker shrugged. "To pick up the pieces I guess."

Parsons just shook his head as he looked up at the man threatening to jump from the balcony of his room which was not more than six feet wide. The man sat on the wooden railing with a sign pinned to the front of his white dress shirt that said, "My Life Matters." One fireman was on the adjacent balcony, trying to coax him to go back inside his room, but the man ignored him as he stared down at the large crowd that had gathered outside the hotel.

"He's not going to jump," one of the spectators said loud enough so everyone around him could hear his prediction.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, mister," someone else replied.

"He's been up there close to an hour. If he was going to jump, he would have by now."

"Ten dollars says you're wrong."

"You're on, friend."

Parsons could not believe how callous some people could be, but he wasn't surprised, just disappointed. He was tempted to turn around to see who the bettors were but decided not to because he might say something he would later regret.

"Takes all kinds."

"What's that?" Snitker asked.

"Nothing. Just muttering to myself."

Some twenty minutes later, cheers erupted from the crowd when the guy got off the railing and shuffled back inside his room.

"I guess we're done here," Snitker said, doing an about face.

"Thank God, he didn't jump."

"Yeah."

"You don't sound very pleased."

"Don't I?"

"Nope."

"I hate to admit it but a part of me wanted to see the guy

jump. I know that sounds awful but that's the God's truth."

Parsons was stunned. "Who wants to see someone kill himself?"

"Apparently quite a few people or there wouldn't be such a large crowd here at the hotel."

"I think they were here hoping he wouldn't jump."

"Think that if you like, Cullen, but I don't think so at all."

Parsons followed him back to the wagon, wondering if all the years Snitker had spent as a medic had coarsened him or if that was just his nature. He suspected that was just the way he was, but he couldn't be sure.

*

On the way back to the garage, Parsons noticed, as they approached a crosswalk, the young woman who claimed someone stole her purse the other week. She stood on the corner, seemingly waiting for someone, and didn't appear to be in much better shape than she was when they treated her injuries. Her shoulders were braced against a lamppost, as if she were afraid she might lose her balance if she dared to take a step.

"Hey, let's pull over there," Parsons said, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the pitiful looking woman.

"What for?"

"We treated her not too long ago."

Snitker was confused. "We haven't received a call for her."

"Just pull over, damn it. I want to see if she's all right."

Snitker proceeded slowly through the crosswalk, not really remembering the woman Parsons was so concerned about and stopped in a loading zone in front of the lamppost. Parsons got out at once, but Snitker remained in the wagon.

"Hello," he greeted her.

She nodded, shyly fingering the side of her bent nose which she obviously didn't get repaired.

"I don't know if you remember me, but I treated you for some injuries you received from tussling with a purse snatcher."

"I remember."

"So how are you getting along?" he asked, concerned that she didn't seem able to support herself without the benefit of the lamppost.

She shrugged. "I'm getting by."

"You haven't had any more encounters with purse snatchers I hope."

She shook her head.

"Is anything bothering you? You don't appear to be too steady on your feet."

"I'm just tired."

"You're sure there's nothing I can do for you?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Oh, by the way, my name is Cullen Parsons."

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Parsons."

"And you are?"

"Hessa Hearn."

She just didn't seem to be all there, but he couldn't force her to let him take her to a hospital to be examined so all he could do was hand her one of the business cards the company provided all its medics.

"You need any help, Hessa, just give me a call."

"I'll do that."

"You do."

He peered at her eyes which seemed as still as the buttons on her blouse then stepped back and returned to the wagon.

"So, was anything wrong with her?" Snitker asked as he released the emergency brake.

"I believe so, but she just said she was tired is all."

"But you don't believe her."

"No, I don't. She just seemed in a kind of daze."

"Maybe she's taking some medication."

"Yeah, maybe. I just don't know what's going on with her. Something is, that's for sure, but I don't know what it is."

"Then I wouldn't be surprised if we come across her again."

Neither would I, Parsons thought, as he stared at the idle woman in his side mirror, and again thought of Greer whom he suspected he would probably never see again.

Parsons lit a cigarette then opened the small spiral notebook in which he wrote his letters to Greer. It contained seventy wide-rule pages, and he had used only seven of them and expected he would use several more before he completed his correspondence. After exhaling a plume of smoke through his nostrils, he picked up a pen and opened the notebook to the next blank page.

"I saw your twin yesterday," he began, "and she looked even worse than she did the previous time I saw her. She doesn't look anything like you, to be clear, but she shares your streak of independence in spades. It is difficult to get her to say much, if anything, about herself. I am worried about her, though. I don't know if she is suffering from some illness or is strung out on drugs, but she just appears so listless. I'm surprised she even has the strength to get up in the morning.

"Her name is Hessa which sounds like something you'd name a pet but then maybe it's a nickname she acquired in childhood. Who knows? Anyway, I am worried about her. As a medic, my job is to save lives, and I believe she is someone who definitely needs saving, so I intend to keep an eye out for her. I am not going to become a stalker, let me assure you of that, dear. Hell, I don't even know where she lives. But if I happen to come across her again and she appears as worn out as she did yesterday, I am

going to see if I can do something to help her.

"You know, maybe she's not as independent as I thought, maybe she is what Father Cahill would have called a lamb in wolf's clothing. Someone more inclined to follow others and let them make decisions for her which might not always be in her best interests. I'll have to find out, I guess, if I am ever going to make things better for her."

Setting aside his pen, he closed the notebook, wondering if he would ever see Hessa again. He believed so but he was not sure, not at all.

*

A portly man lay on the floor just a couple of feet outside the entrance to the roller-skating rink at Klickitat Park. He had on gloves and a pair of shiny black skates. His eyes were open but empty and, after Parsons knelt down beside him, he searched for a pulse in his neck. He found one but it was very faint. Right away, he began chest compressions while Snitker got out the mask from the Ambu bag. Skaters, seemingly oblivious to what was going on, whirled past them while the mammoth Wurlitzer pipe organ, which was situated directly above them, played "Roll Out the Barrel." Again and again, Parsons pressed down hard with the heel of his right hand, whispering over and over, "Breathe ... breathe ... breathe."

"I don't know if he's going to make it," Snitker practically shouted above the thundering organ.

"He is. I know he is."

"I don't know, Cullen."

"Breathe, damn it," he demanded, pressing hard but not hard enough to crack a rib.

"And we'll have a barrel of fun," some skater sang along with the organ as she swept by the medics.

In another second, almost as if the stricken man had heard the lyric, he began to breathe on his own and his pulse grew stronger.

"See, I told you he'd make it," Parsons bellowed as he and

Snitker strapped the man onto the stretcher.

"So, you did."

"I just had a hunch."

Parsons was so elated he couldn't keep from smiling as they wheeled the stretcher out of the skating rink with "Roll Out the Barrel" still blaring from the organ. All the alcohol in the world couldn't make him feel as good as he did this moment.

*

That evening, after work, Parsons didn't go back to his apartment but, instead, returned to the skating rink. He hadn't roller skated since he was a youngster, but he was still so elated about reviving the downed man earlier he could barely sit still. And what better way to celebrate he thought then to whirl around and around on a pair of skates.

When he got there, he assumed he could glide around the polished maple wood floor like the other skates but that wasn't the case. It had been so long since he had roller skated that he was very hesitant as he approached the floor. He remembered the correct posture of a skater, his feet shoulder width apart, his knees bent, but even so he proceeded very tentatively. With each step he took he was afraid his skates were going to slip out from under him and leave him sprawled across the floor as other skaters whipped past him.

"Walk like a duck," one of the skating instructors suggested as he gripped the railing for support.

"Sorry?"

With her heels together and her toes pointed out, she moved slowly across the floor.

"Practice moving like this until you feel comfortable enough to take longer strides," she said, "and continue to squat."

He did as she suggested, straining to keep his body centered over his heels, and gradually gained more confidence. Twice he almost fell but was close enough to the wall to brace himself against it and maintain his balance. Clearly, he could not skate as fast and effortlessly as the others on the floor, not now anyway, but maybe

someday he believed if he practiced hard enough.

After nearly forty-five minutes, he shuffled off the floor and returned the skates to the rental desk. He didn't leave the rink, though, but bought a cup of coffee and found a seat in the gallery upstairs and watched the skaters circle the rink. One in particular caught his eye. A slender young man with shoulder length black hair, he reminded him of some of the seminarians he met at Saint Ignatius. He wore a faded red flannel shirt, black suspenders, black jeans, and a Dodgers cap turned around on his head. He was clearly the most skilled skater on the floor who was able to weave past the others whenever it suited him.

Sometimes the young man spun around and skated backward, keeping his toes together and his heels apart, with his arms folded airily across his chest. Even then, he remained the fastest skater on the floor, streaking past whoever was in his path. His lavish smile enveloped his entire face, and as Parsons watched him, he could not help but think the skater expressed the sheer joy that he felt today.

*

Parsons arrived at the Java Depot a few minutes before eight, not wanting to be late for his meeting with his Friends of Bill W sponsor, and sat down at one of the small wooden tables near the large bay window. He didn't know what his sponsor looked like but, on the phone, Kidwell said he would be wearing a suede jacket with fringed sleeves which made him wonder if he worked on a ranch.

He ordered a black coffee which was so strong he had to add a spoonful of sugar to it then another one. Across the aisle from his table, he noticed a bearded man take a flask out of his jacket pocket and add a splash of whiskey into his cup. For so many mornings he had similarly fortified his coffee. It was as natural as buttering his toast.

In another minute, the bells above the front door chimed and he looked up and saw the suede jacket and immediately raised his hand until he got the attention of his sponsor who nodded and

headed over to his table.

"Hello, Cullen," he said, extending his paw of a hand which again made Parsons wonder if he worked on a ranch.

"Hello."

"I'm a little late, I'm sorry, but I had a devil of a time finding a place to park."

"No problem. I haven't been waiting long."

Kidwell did indeed resemble a rancher, with his broad shoulders and strong hands, but to Parson's surprise he said he managed a vintage record shop on the south side of town. After he ordered a latte with whole milk, he detailed the duties and responsibilities of a sponsor, emphasizing that he would always be available should Parsons ever be tempted to take a drink.

"It's an unfortunate fact but folks in our program relapse," he declared, squeezing his hands into fists. "I am one I regret to say. Twice I fell off the wagon but both times I got back on board in a matter of weeks."

"It's a struggle. No question about it."

"A terrible struggle you have to meet with all the strength you can muster if you hope to remain sober."

Parsons took a sip of coffee, hoping his sponsor would be as dependable as he claimed.

"So, did you start drinking in high school as so many of us did?"

He shook his head. "I started in the service."

"Out of boredom?"

"Yeah, at first, but then out of grief."

"Something upsetting happen during your hitch?" he asked.

Not really comfortable talking about it, he took a deep breath then told him about the lethal attack in the makeshift chapel at the combat outpost.

Kidwell was taken back by the revelation and for a moment didn't say a word and just stared at the latte in front of him.

"I'm sure anyone who witnessed such an assault would start

to drink."

"Maybe so."

"No maybe about it, Cullen."

Parsons shrugged, not interested in talking about it anymore, and asked, "So, did you start drinking in high school?"

He clicked his teeth. "Before that."

"Really?"

"Yep."

Parsons took another sip of coffee as he waited for his sponsor to explain why he started drinking so early.

"I grew up near Clearwater Lake, if you know where that is."

"Sorry, I don't."

"It's in the eastern half of the state, not far from Mount Horner."

"I've heard of that."

"Anyway, my father operated a boat rental business on the lake that catered to tourists mainly," he said. "He had canoes and kayaks and jet skis and a couple of speedboats."

"That must've been a fun place to grow up."

"Oh, it was for the most part," he agreed, "but, as you can imagine, there are also drownings in lakes and ours was no exception." He paused, sipping his latte. "Seems like every summer two or three people drowned in the lake. Usually out of carelessness but sometimes intentionally."

Suddenly the door chimed and two guys in clown masks entered the coffee house.

"Sometimes the sheriff would request my father's help to recover the bodies, and he'd fire up one of the speedboats and drag the lake with a pair of grappling hooks. The first time I went on a search with him I was twelve years old. We circled the lake four or five times before the hooks finally snagged the body of a man who apparently capsized a canoe he had rented from us a couple of days earlier. It was the middle of the summer, and the lake water was relatively warm, so the decomposition was well under way."

He paused again to take another sip.

"The man looked like an inflated doll he was so huge. I'd never seen a dead body before, and I almost got sick to my stomach and had to turn away. That's when my father told me to take a slug from his bottle of Jack Daniels. It was also the first time I'd ever tasted alcohol."

"You say you were just twelve?"

He nodded.

"That's young."

"I wish my mind could forget what my eyes saw that afternoon on the lake, but it couldn't except when I drank which is the only reason why I drank. I thought it was something of a life preserver, but it was just the opposite. It was what nearly destroyed me, not the memory of that poor man we hauled out of the water. Mind you, the image of that man still haunts me but now I try to cope with it without a drink in my hand."

Parsons, half listening as his sponsor recalled some of the other recoveries he and his father made through the years, was sure he would never forget seeing Father Cahill shot at that altar. It would haunt him until the day he died.

Parsons breathed on the shiny quarter for luck then leaned forward and tossed it toward the middle of the low crumbling brick wall that enclosed the garage. It landed just inches in front of it but not as close as Carlton's toss. He wasn't surprised. All the times he had pitched coins outside the garage he had yet to pitch one close enough to win. Twice he was positive he had prevailed but then one of the remaining players tossed a coin a fraction closer. The next to throw was Dick Figler, whom everyone called "Shoulders" because his were wider than any of the fire exits in the garage. His toss was even closer to the wall but not as close as Carlton's.

"It's all about give and take, so a former medic here told me once," Carlton recalled as he gathered up the quarters he won. "Winning takes talent but losing gives character."

"To hell with character," Snitker scoffed. "I'd just like to win one of these times."

Me, too, Parsons thought to himself.

Three players, including Snitker, had pitched coins in the next game when Ida summoned Wagon Four through the outside speaker.

"Possible OD in Apartment Two at the Rosewood Terrace."

"Why now?" Snitker, whose toss was the closest of the three to the wall, groaned.

Carlton chuckled. "I told you, Ross. Losing builds character."

"Screw character."

Apartment Two was in the basement of the tumbledown sandstone apartment house. Waiting for them at the entrance was a skeletal guy with long black hair who ushered them into the living room where they saw a woman lying on the floor. Parsons was stunned. It was Hessa. At once, he knelt down beside her and pressed a finger on her neck.

"She's got a pulse," he told Snitker with relief, "but it's pretty faint."

Snitker, nodding, unzipped the Ambu bag.

Parsons then pried open her mouth to make sure the airway was clear, pulled her tongue forward, and began pressing the heel of his right hand on her chest. Snitker placed a mask over her face and began to squeeze the Ambu bag to deliver breaths to the unconscious woman. Her skin was pale and damp, her pupils dilated. Both medics were sure she had overdosed on something pretty strong.

"What happened here?" Snitker asked the guy who let them into the apartment.

He shrugged, fingering the small silver ring that pierced his long nose.

"Well?"

"We were smoking a little crack and all of a sudden she keeled over. I thought maybe she had a heart attack or something as serious. I don't really know what made her lose consciousness."

Parsons continued to perform artificial respiration, imploring her to wake up, and gradually she regained consciousness. Her eyes fluttered in confusion. She didn't seem to know where she was and started to get up as soon as Snitker removed the oxygen mask.

"Please, stay still, Hessa."

"Do you know her?" her companion asked in surprise.

Parsons ignored him as he gently pushed her shoulders back

on the floor. "We're going to put you on a stretcher and take you to the hospital."

"Why?"

"You're not well, Hessa."

"I'm not?"

"Do you remember me?"

She stared at him in silence.

"I treated you for some injuries you said you got from a purse snatcher."

"I never heard anything about you getting your purse snatched," her companion said, glaring at her.

Again, she closed her eyes and, in another moment, Parsons and Snitker strapped her on the stretcher and placed her in the back of the wagon.

"Can I go with you?" the long-haired guy asked.

Snitker took his keys out of his pocket. "Are you a member of her family?"

"I might as well be," he answered. "We've been together close to a year."

He looked at Parsons who shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, all right."

Promptly the guy climbed into the back of the wagon and sat alongside Hessa whose eyes remained closed.

"She's going to be all right, isn't she?"

"The doctors are the ones who can answer that, fella."

"What do you think, though?"

"I'm not a doctor."

"But you must have an idea if she's going to be all right."

Parsons sighed. "Not if she continues on the path she's on."

Frowning, the guy idly stroked Hessa's bare left arm. "You're going to be just fine, kitten. I know it."

"You give her the crack?"

"What if I did? I didn't force her to smoke it."

"You're a real prince, aren't you, pal?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Wouldn't you?"

Snitker leaned back from the steering wheel. "Hey, take it easy, Cullen. We don't want to upset this woman any more than she already is."

Parsons, turning back around, knew his partner was right and did not say another word to the guy whose name he told Snitker was Albie Skaggs.

Minutes later, as they wheeled the stretcher into the emergency room, Parsons informed one of the nurses that Skaggs was not a member of Hessa's family so he would not be allowed into the room. The farther this guy was away from her the better he believed.

*

That evening, after dinner, Parsons sat down at his desk to write another letter to Greer.

"A while back, my partner and I treated the injuries of a young woman named Hessa who claimed she was the victim of a purse snatcher. She had a few cuts and a badly bruised nose. Today we treated her again. She'd overdosed smoking crack cocaine and had a very weak pulse and was unconscious. We were able to revive her, though, and took her to the emergency room of a nearby hospital."

He paused, distracted by some hammering in the unit above his apartment.

"With her at the time was some supposed friend who admitted he gave her the cocaine. His name is Albie Skaggs and, believe me, he looks about what you'd think someone with such a peculiar name would look like. He has long, stringy black hair, a ring through his left nostril, and his hands and arms are covered in tattoos. I, for one, don't believe he is any good for her and the sooner she gets away from him the better. Honestly, I wouldn't be a bit surprised to learn that the injuries she said she suffered from a purse snatcher were actually inflicted by this Skaggs guy. I don't know,

of course, but deep down I believe I'm right. And I can't understand why she has anything to do with the creep. Clearly she has feelings for him, why I have no idea, but I just wish I could do something to protect her from this hick."

Tired, he set down his pen, clasped his hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling as flakes of peeling paint floated onto his desk.

*

Often, after his day shift, Parsons joined Snitker and Shoulders for a beer at a tavern near the bus terminal called "Departures." He continued to go there after he stopped drinking but always ordered a cranberry club soda. Tonight, though, he went instead to Hessa's apartment because he wanted to know how she was recovering from her overdose. He knocked on her door but there was no answer, knocked a couple more times, but still no answer so he turned around and headed back toward the front entrance of the apartment house.

"Hello there."

Quickly he turned around to see Hessa coming down the stairwell.

"Hello," he said. "I knocked on your door, but no one answered so I was on my way out."

"Oh, I had to feed the cat of a neighbor upstairs who's gone to the beach for a few days."

He smiled shyly.

"So, what brings you here, Mr. Parsons?"

"Cullen, please."

She nodded, waiting for an answer.

"I happened to be in the neighborhood," he lied, "and thought I'd stop by to see how you're making out after what happened the other day."

"That's sweet of you."

"So how are you getting along?"

Casually she brushed past him to unlock her door. "Please,

come in, and I'll make some coffee."

"You don't have to do that."

"Don't you drink coffee?"

"I do."

"Then come in. It'll just take a couple of minutes to brew a pot."

He followed her into the apartment which seemed larger than he remembered from the other day and sat down on the couch while she went into the kitchen to make coffee. On the walls were several black-and-white photographs of people in the woods. No one was smiling, though, as if not accustomed to having their picture taken.

"Here," she said, handing him a yellow mug. "It's black. Do you want some sugar or cream?"

"Black is fine."

She sat down on a chair across from the couch, her mug balanced on her left knee. "You're lucky to find me here tonight."

"Why's that?"

"I'm a hostess at an oyster bar downtown."

"Oh."

"The Cloisters. Are you familiar with it?"

"I'm not."

"Anyway, I'm usually there during the week but the weekend hostess asked to switch nights with me so here I am."

"I thought maybe you worked as a photographer."

She glanced at the photographs on the walls. "That's just a hobby."

"They look very professional."

"Thanks. I take a lot of pride in taking pictures."

He took a sip of coffee. "So, how are you feeling?"

"I'm still a little weak but otherwise I'm fine."

"That's good to hear," he said, after taking another sip. "And how about your friend?"

"Albie?"

He nodded.

"He's all right. Nothing ever seems to trouble him. He's always pretty much the same."

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you how addictive crack is, Hessa. Maybe your friend can tolerate it, but most people can't and it ruins their lives."

"Believe it or not, that was the first time I ever smoked crack."

He wasn't sure if he believed her.

"The very first time I swear."

"And I hope the last."

"Definitely."

"I hope you realize who ever gave you the crack is not doing you any favor and is certainly not your friend."

Pensively she circled the rim of her mug with a purple fingernail.

"I know it's none of my business."

"You're right, Cullen," she said testily. "It isn't."

"But I'm concerned about you and don't want to see you in the back of another ambulance."

Silent, she set her mug on the lamp table to her right and stared at the bleak photographs on the walls.

"I don't want you to end up like those people whose picture you took."

"That's not going to happen."

"I pray not."

"It won't."

He bowed his head, tempted to caution her to keep her distance from someone like Skaggs, but decided not to because he figured she would probably tell him again it was none of his business.

"Would you like some more coffee?" she asked, rising out of her chair.

"No thanks. I should be going."

She smiled cryptically.

"Say, would you mind if I came by again some time?"

"Don't you trust me, Cullen?"

You're right, he thought, I don't but, instead, he said, "I'd just like to get to know you better."

"You would, would you?"

"Maybe you can take my picture?"

"Sure. I could do that."

"Take care of yourself now," he advised her as he got up from the couch.

"I'll do that." She touched his left arm then opened the front door. "Good night, Cullen."

"Good night."

He hoped, if he did return to her apartment, it was not to revive her from another overdose. Desperately he wanted to believe she had learned her lesson but then, maybe, the lesson she learned was she was strong enough to return from the dead.

"Wagon Four, I've got a dog attack for you to take care of,"
Ida announced with a cough drop in a corner of her mouth.

Parsons groaned. "Another one?"

"Afraid so."

"A pitbull I suppose?"

"What else?"

"Where at?"

"1404 S.E. Grayling Road."

"This at a house?"

"It is."

Snitker switched on the siren. "We're on our way."

Almost eight minutes later, they pulled into the driveway of a two-story white brick house that resembled many of the other houses on the block except for a towering flagpole in the front yard that was bare. Right away, a woman in baggy painter's pants came out on the front porch. Her eyes were reddened as if she had been crying but she didn't appear injured. No bite marks were visible on her arms and hands anyway.

Snitker stepped toward the porch. "I understand you suffered a dog bite."

"No, not actually."

Puzzled, he looked over at his partner. "Excuse me?"

"I was out in my garden, getting ready to do some weeding, when this pitbull suddenly came out of the bushes. I was stunned. I could barely catch my breath and was afraid I was going to faint so that's why I called for help."

"Did you also call Animal Control?" Parsons asked the still shaken woman.

Sheepishly she shook her head. "I didn't even think about calling anyone else."

"You should have."

"I know but I was just so frightened."

Though tempted to reprimand her, Parsons, instead, took out his cell phone and placed a call to Animal Control while Snitker asked the woman if the pitbull was still in her backyard.

"I don't know," she sighed. "Right after I saw it, I went inside my house and locked all the doors."

"Well, then, I suppose the best thing to do is wait for someone from Animal Control to come and deal with the animal."

"I'm just so afraid of pitbulls," she said almost breathlessly. "One evening a friend of mine was foolish enough to pet one she noticed tied up outside a coffee shop and nearly lost her hand."

Snitker, who shared her fear of pitbulls, nodded in silence. Parsons offered the woman some water, but she declined and returned to her porch and sat down on the bottom step with her hands tucked between her knees.

"Animal Control should be here any minute," Snitker predicted.

"I certainly hope so."

And, before too long, a sand-colored van pulled in behind the ambulance and two officers got out with long catch poles in their hands. They had on thick leather gloves and aviator-style jackets.

Snitker, squinting fiercely, could not believe his eyes. One of the officers was the woman he had expected to marry one day until she abruptly broke off their engagement.

"Carol, how are you?" he asked shyly as he approached

the female officer. "I didn't know you worked for Animal Control."

Flustered, the officer touched the name tag above her breast pocket. "My name is Cassidy, sir."

"What?"

"You must have me confused with someone else."

"You're not Carol Humphreys?"

"No, sir."

"I can't believe it," he stammered. "You look just like her."

"I suppose everyone has someone they resemble somewhere."

He just couldn't believe the woman wasn't Carol. "Do you have a sister?"

"Just a brother."

"I'd swear you were her."

The officer, not knowing what more to say, shouldered her catch pole and headed to the backyard with her partner. Parsons followed them but Snitker didn't budge, still finding it hard to grasp that the officer wasn't Carol.

*

Later that afternoon, at a taco cart where the two medics often stopped for lunch, Snitker still found it hard to believe that the Animal Control officer they met earlier wasn't his former fiancé.

"I've seen people who look alike but that woman could have been Carol's twin," he said. "Damn near everything about her was the same, even the way she wore her hair."

"You must have been pretty close to this Carol woman," Parsons remarked as he dipped a chip into the salsa bowl.

"Close enough that I wanted to marry her."

"Is that so?"

He nodded, pouring himself another glass of sangria.

"So why didn't you?"

"That's a good question."

Parsons, crunching into the taco chip, patiently waited for his answer.

"I had no idea but, apparently throughout our engagement, she had become close to someone where she worked," he said slowly, his eyes fixed on all the cars that sped past the taco cart. "And one day, out of the blue, she returned the ring I gave her and admitted she had found someone else she wanted to be with. I was floored, thought I was going to faint. I tried to change her mind, but her decision was made."

"That must've hurt."

"It did, Cullen, and still does but I learned a valuable lesson," he claimed. "Don't get too close to anyone because there's a chance you'll get hurt. That's something I now fear more than anything. I'm not the least bit afraid of running into a burning building to rescue someone but I am deathly afraid of getting close to that person because of the pain I might suffer. That's just not something I can cope with, not anymore."

*

Sometimes, after dinner, Parsons went for a short walk through his neighborhood in order to stretch his legs. And always, if he spotted a pitbull headed in his direction, he crossed the street because he was every bit afraid of the dog as that woman who called for an ambulance the other afternoon. Tonight, as he headed back to his apartment house, he saw a pitbull half a block ahead of him and coming his way. The scraggy guy who walked alongside it didn't have it on a leash.

"Damn," he muttered to himself.

Despite his fear of the animal, he didn't cross the street but continued to walk toward it. At once, a bead of sweat trickled from under his left arm, and as he approached the dog he could feel his heart thumping against his ribs. Taking a deep breath, he squeezed his hands into fists, ready to defend himself, but the animal scarcely paid any attention to him. He could not believe he had stood his ground for a change but was sure he would not do it again.

Back at his apartment he got out his spiral notebook, sat down at his desk, and began another letter to Greer.

"My partner, Ross, as I've mentioned before, keeps to himself and seldom reveals anything about his past but the other day he surprised me. He saw a woman who reminded him of the woman he had intended to marry until she told him she had fallen in love with someone else. When he told me this he was almost in tears and his voice shook. He admitted he was so devastated by what happened that he was afraid of ever getting close to anyone again."

He paused and lit a cigarette, not feeling it was necessary to remind Greer she had hurt him in much the same way.

"I hate to admit it, but I share his fear. I mean, for as long as I can remember, I've been afraid of getting hurt by doing something wrong, so I often don't do anything at all. I am every bit as isolated as Ross and know, somehow, I have to overcome being afraid all the time. I just have to if I am to survive."

He took a long drag on his cigarette.

"Tonight, I crossed paths with a pitbull and I didn't flinch. Maybe that's a start, dear."

"Wagon Four, there's a man stuck in a pond at Fraser Park," Ida announced through some faint static on her end of the line.

"Is he drunk?" Snitker asked, turning the wagon around at the next corner.

"I don't know, guys, but I wouldn't be surprised."

"Neither would I," Snitker said, winking at Parsons.

Quite a number of people had gathered at the pond, staring at the man stuck there up to his chest, when the medics arrived at the park. One of them, a chunky guy with bristling sideburns, held out a broken pine limb toward the stuck man but it was a couple of feet short of him and the man couldn't budge an inch to grab hold of it.

"Get me the hell out of here!" he shouted when he spotted the medics in their wrinkled white jackets.

Parsons looked at Snitker. "What the hell can we do?"

"Good question."

"Maybe I can wade far enough into the pond with that limb so the guy can reach it."

Snitker shook his head. "We don't need two people stuck in that muck, Cullen."

"I don't know what else we can do."

"Neither do I so all we can do is wait for fire and rescue to

come. They should have an extension ladder that can reach the guy."

"Get me out of here, damn it!"

Parsons looked away from the pathetic figure. "I wonder how long he's been stuck there."

"A while," a woman behind him remarked. "I first heard his calls for help a couple of hours ago when I started folding my laundry."

"Christ," Snitker gasped. "I'm surprised his teeth aren't chattering."

"The pond isn't that cold."

"It is if you've been in it for two hours or more."

"Can't someone help me? Please!"

"I'm going to look for a longer limb," Parsons said out of concern.

"Go ahead, Cullen, but he's quite a ways from shore."

He barely started his search when two police cruisers roared into the park and came to a stop right in front of the pond. Immediately the officers sprang out of their cars with their pistols drawn.

"We couldn't get the guy out," Snitker informed them.

"It's a good thing you couldn't, buddy," one of the officers told him. "This guy escaped from the county jail two days ago and we've been looking for him ever since then."

"No kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" he snapped, shading his eyes as he stared at the escaped inmate.

"What's going on?" Parsons asked when he returned with a slightly longer limb.

"That won't be needed."

"Why's that?"

"That guy in the pond escaped from jail a couple of days ago."

"Really?"

"Really."

In another moment, one of the officers tossed a rope out to the inmate and with considerable effort he and three other officers pulled him to shore. He still had shackles on his legs and stomach.

"You guys can check him out," a bald-headed officer told them, "Before we take him to the hospital."

Snitker took out a thermometer from his first aid kit and set it in the inmate's mouth and, not surprisingly, saw that his core body temperature had dropped below ninety-five degrees.

"He's definitely suffering from hypothermia."

"What can you do for him before we go to the hospital?"

"His wet clothes should be removed."

"That's not possible. Not out here."

"Do you have any blankets we can wrap him in?"

"Yeah, there might be one in the trunk of my car."

"That'll help."

After the officer left to fetch the blanket, the inmate, who was shivering and taking slow, shallow breaths, glared at the medics with harsh cold eyes. "You guys could've got me out of that pond before the cops got here."

"No, we couldn't, mister."

"The hell you couldn't."

Parsons started to offer him a drink of water when he spit in his face and immediately another officer rapped him on the shoulder with a baton.

Snitker handed Parsons a handkerchief to wipe his face. "I believe we've done all we can here."

Parsons agreed. "This is one call I won't soon forget."

"That's for damn sure."

*

It took Parsons a while before he found the Cloisters, which was located in a grungy neighborhood in the north end of town, and when he did, he was stunned. The oyster bar was in what had once been a Catholic church that for years had served immigrants from Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War. A gray stone

steeple soared above the main entrance of the establishment and blinking in the center of it was an orange neon sign that said OPEN.

Though he switched off the engine, he didn't get out of his car but sat there for a while staring at the soaring steeple. He couldn't understand why anyone would convert a church into a tavern. It didn't seem right, seemed sacrilegious in fact. What the owner should have done, he believed, was raze the church then construct his oyster bar. He didn't know if he really wanted to set foot inside the place, but he wanted to see Hessa so, after a few minutes, he got out of his car and followed the flagstone path to the mammoth oak front door. A couple walked ahead of him, their heads pressed together, laughing fiendishly.

The first thing he noticed when he got inside was the looming-stained glass window behind what was at one time the altar but now was a polished white oak bar with a dozen wooden stools in front of it all of which were occupied. Reggae music blared through the speakers above the bar. There were three long wooden refectory tables in the center of the floor and six snug wooden booths along the walls.

"Please, sit wherever you like," one of the servers told him.

"I'm looking for Hessa."

Briefly the server glanced around the room. "She's probably on a smoke break outside somewhere."

Nodding, he went out a side door that led to the back of the building. A security light above the door illuminated a crumbling stone statue of Saint Francis of Assisi. It was surrounded by weeds and, just to the left of it, leaning against an oil drum was Hessa.

"My, this is a surprise," she said, tapping some ashes from her cigarette.

"I came by to have a look at where you work."

"I didn't think you drank anymore."

"I don't but I was just curious. You never told me the bar was formerly a church."

"Didn't I?"

"Nope."

"Hmm," she muttered, after taking another drag on her king-sized cigarette. "I thought I did."

"Seems like it's pretty busy tonight."

"Oh, not that busy, really. We usually do twice as much business on Wednesday nights. I don't know why it's so slow tonight."

He started to step closer toward her when Skaggs suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Time to get back to work, Hessa."

With a slight frown, she stamped out her cigarette with the right toe of her immaculate calfskin boot.

"He works here too?"

She nodded. "He manages the place."

"Is he also the owner?"

"No, but he'd like to be, and once he saves enough money, he hopes to become a silent partner which would be unusual because he's never silent for very long."

"I have to admit I didn't just come by to see the bar," he said as he walked with her to the side door.

"Oh."

"I know you don't work on weekends, as a rule, so I was wondering if you might like to go roller skating with me this Sunday at Klickitat Park?"

"Roller skating?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't put on a pair of skates I bet since I was ten years old."

"It'll come back to you, though."

"I don't know about that, Cullen."

"Well, if you're interested, let me know. My cell phone number is on the business card I gave you the other day."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Do."

"You sure you don't want to come back in for a coffee at least?" she asked, yanking open the wooden door.

"I better not. I have to be up with the sun tomorrow."

"Well, I'm glad you came by and I hope you'll come again and stay longer."

He smiled. "Good night, Hessa."

"Good night and drive safely, which I'm sure is what you always do when you're behind the wheel of an ambulance."

"I try."

After he returned to his car, he inserted the key into the ignition, but he didn't turn on the engine. Instead, curious if Skaggs would be going home with Hessa, he sat in his car until the bar closed. The first employees to leave were four servers, followed by the bartender and some kitchen help. Hessa didn't come out for several more minutes, and when she did, she was alone and got in her car and left. Skaggs was one of the last to leave the bar and he also went directly to his car. He turned on the engine right away and bolted out of the gravel parking lot.

Parsons decided to follow him to see if he headed to Hessa's apartment. He didn't, though, and went in the opposite direction. Still, he continued to follow him, wondering where he was going in such a hurry. He thought maybe to the riverfront where a few of the bars stayed open to four o'clock. But then Skaggs made a left turn, heading toward the east end of town, and right away Parsons suspected he was going to Paradise Cove, a grungy stretch of two long blocks where drugs of all kinds could be purchased. He was right, too, because some ten minutes later Skaggs arrived at the Cove and pulled over to the curb without shutting off his engine. Promptly a guy in dreadlocks stepped out of the doorway of a boarded-up convenience store and leaned across the passenger's window and handed Skaggs a small envelope then stepped back as Skaggs pulled away and roared down the street.

Parsons, driving in the opposite direction, assumed he had bought some more snow to snort. The bastard.

Parsons took another sip of coffee then opened the spiral notebook to write another letter to Greer.

"I've told you before about my newfound interest in roller skating which, I suppose, is but another indication that I still have not entirely grown up. It's fun, though, but I just wish I was better at it. I'm as clumsy as a bear on skates. Every time I take a step I am worried I am going to fall flat on my face.

"I invited Hessa to go skating with me, but she seemed reluctant because she hasn't skated since she was a little girl. I think she might come but I'm not positive.

"As I've mentioned before, I am not the least bit interested in having her as a girlfriend. She is a pleasant person but just not someone I want to have a relationship with. What I do want is to protect her from others who I think are very harmful. Obviously, I can't follow her on a regular basis. Then I might be regarded as a stalker, and she wouldn't want anything to do with me. So, I have to pick my spots when I can watch over her. What I hope, above all, is that somehow I can convince her to keep her distance from people I believe pose a threat to her even if she doesn't recognize it. I am her secret guardian, so to speak, and regard it as my responsibility to keep her safe."

He closed the notebook and took another sip of coffee, wondering if he would be able to fulfill the self-imposed obligation.

*

"Abandoned tire warehouse on fire, Wagon Four," Ida declared. "Squatters might be inside the building."

"This sounds like more of a job for firefighters," Parsons remarked as Snitker turned on the siren.

"Probably, but if there are folks camped out inside the building, the firefighters might be too busy putting out the blaze to care for them."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"There are so many homeless people these days you can find them just about any place where there is some shelter from the rain and cold."

A quarter of the warehouse was already consumed by flames when they arrived just minutes after two lumbering fire trucks answered the call. Smoke poured out of the broken windows, whipping around in the wind like ragged flags on a cruise ship, and shingles bright as stars fell to the ground. Parsons and Snitker got out of the wagon and watched the firefighters soak the building with their powerful hoses. Parsons was not really sure why, but he liked to see things burn, especially big things like warehouses. Maybe because there was always the threat that the fire might spread and catch up with him, so he always had to be on his guard. Any moment he could be devoured if he didn't pay close attention.

"You know if anyone was staying in the warehouse?" Snitker asked the clutch of spectators standing behind the wagon.

"I doubt it," one of them answered. "The doors were always locked."

"A lot of windows were broken by kids throwing rocks at them," another person remarked, "but they are too high up for anyone to enter through them."

"It was only a matter of time before this place went up in flames," a woman said with seeming authority.

Snitker, watching one of the firefighters chop through one of the doors, said, "It appears to be a pretty well-built structure."

"It isn't a question of how solid it is," the woman said. "It's the guy who owns it. This is the third property of his in the past eighteen months that has suddenly caught fire."

"I gather you don't think that's a coincidence."

"Not on your life, mister. It's all about collecting the insurance money. Make no mistake about it."

"Who is the owner?"

"His name is Marvin Mudjuck. He owns a bar in this area, the Cloisters, if you've heard of it."

At once, Parsons spun around to look at the opinionated woman. "Mudjuck, you said?"

She nodded. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that bar of his suddenly catches fire in the next six months. Not surprised at all."

Abruptly, a corner of the roof collapsed in a cloud of fiery cinders.

Now he was more concerned about Hessa than ever and wished he could somehow persuade her to find someplace else to work. If she knew about the suspicious reputation of this Mudjuck guy, he couldn't fathom why she would continue to work for him. There were plenty of places in town where she could find employment.

About half an hour later, after the firefighters managed to get the blaze under control, the medics were informed by the fire chief that no one was found inside the warehouse which was an enormous relief. As they got ready to return to the wagon, Parsons spotted Skaggs watching the fire from the bus stop across the street. He wasn't imagining him there, either, but before he could point him out to his partner, Skaggs stepped back into the shadows. So, he didn't say anything, figuring Snitker would again accuse him of being paranoid, but he had no doubt in his mind Skaggs was standing there all right. And immediately he wondered if Mudjuck, the owner of the warehouse, had instructed him to torch the building. From what that woman said earlier about him it was certainly a possibility.

*

Shoulders, who was nearly twice the age of Parsons, knew a lot about a lot and was not shy about sharing his opinions so the next morning while waiting at the garage for an assignment the young medic asked what he knew about Marvin Mudjuck.

Caught off guard, he said, "That's a curious question."

"Last night, Ross and I got a call to go to a warehouse owned by him that was on fire and one of the neighbors mentioned that was the third building of his to catch fire in the past year and a half."

"So, the neighbor thinks the fires might've been set intentionally for the insurance money?"

"That seemed to be her implication."

"Yeah, there have been rumors he had something to do with starting other fires, but he's never been charged with arson as far as I know."

"Do you think he could've been involved?"

"I very much doubt if he personally set any of his buildings on fire. He's someone who usually manages to keep his hands clean."

"But could he have had someone do it for him?"

Sighing, he slipped his thumbs inside his belt. "I really have no idea, Cullen, but he's definitely a pretty sketchy guy."

"What makes you say that?"

"Three or four years ago, he was arrested for smuggling cigarettes into the state."

"Cigarettes?"

"Apparently, it's become a very lucrative business," he said. "As the legislature continues to raise taxes on cigarettes, the demand for contraband smokes increases. It's a simple matter of economics."

"How much time did he serve?"

"Not a day. He got off on some technicality so I wouldn't be surprised if he's still bringing illegal cigarettes into the state. Otherwise, how can he afford all these properties he owns?"

"It does make you wonder, all right."

"I'm surprised he hasn't been arrested again but I expect he will be one of these days."

Parsons was surprised, too, and could not help but wonder how much, if anything, Hessa knew about her employer's shady past. The next time he saw her he intended to ask her and hoped she was straight with him. He had his doubts, though, and he didn't know why he did.

*

Standing half a step behind her, Parsons slipped his hands around Hessa's waist then gently pushed her across the polished wooden floor. She started to tip back but he tightened his grip and steadied her as they crept along the wall.

"I don't feel stable," she complained. "I'm afraid I'm going to fall."

"You're not going to fall. I'm right behind you."

"Oh, God, I knew coming here was a bad idea."

"You're doing just fine."

"No, I'm not, Cullen."

Gently he steered her around a pair of mittens someone had dropped on the floor then around a crushed paper cup.

"Easy does it," he whispered as they circled the floor. "Remember how relaxed you were as a kid on skates."

"That was years ago."

"After a couple more turns, you'll be able to make it around the rink without my support," he predicted as a couple skating backward streaked past them.

"I doubt that."

"Trust me, you will, Hessa."

About halfway through the third turn, he released his hold of her and slowly and hesitantly she made it around without stumbling one time.

"See, I said you could do it," he chirped, skating now alongside her.

"Yes, you did, Cullen."

"The more you skate the more confident and relaxed you'll become."

Toward the end of her fifth lap, she caught her left toe in a seam on the floor and started to stagger but he caught her and together they completed the turn holding hands. They skated for a few more minutes then got off the floor to get some coffee at the refreshment stand.

"So, would you like to do this again?" he asked, after they sat down at a rickety little table with their mugs of coffee.

"Not on my life," she chuckled. "That's what I would've said when I started but, ever so slowly, I kind of got the hang of it so, yes, I would like to come back. That's the only way I'm going to get any better, right?"

"Absolutely."

"I won't be able to come back next Sunday, though. I'll be out of town next weekend."

"Where are you going, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My boss invited some of us on the staff at Cloisters to his house near Pinecrest Lake. Apparently, some kind of festival is going on there for the entire week."

"That would be Mudjuck."

"Do you know him?" she asked, surprised.

"I was called out the other night to go to a fire that erupted at a warehouse he owns."

"He didn't mention it to any of us at work as far as I know."

"I understand he's owned some other buildings that have also caught fire."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know anything about that, Cullen."

He didn't know if he believed her but decided not to press her on the matter and, instead, watched a limber young skater bend down and slide between the legs of her father.

"All I know is that he's very well-off."

"I heard he was arrested a few years back for smuggling

illegal cigarettes into the state."

"Are you serious?"

"That's what I was told."

"I don't believe it," she said vehemently. "He isn't that sort of person. Not at all."

"Well, if I were you, I'd be careful around him."

She frowned. "I'm a hostess at an oyster bar he owns. I barely have any contact with him. I doubt if he even knows my last name."

"That's probably for the best, Hessa."

"So, you say."

He didn't say anything more about her employer and continued to watch the acrobatic young skater whirl around the floor with her father sometimes on only one skate.

"Drive-by shooting, Wagon Four," Ida announced through the customary static of her phone. "One person struck for sure, might be others."

"We're on it," Snitker replied, switching on the siren.

"This is the third drive-by shooting we've had this week," Parsons sighed. "When will it end, I wonder?"

"Not anytime soon, partner. Not as long as our idiot district attorney, 'Catch and Release Calvin', remains in office. I don't believe he thinks anyone deserves to be put behind bars regardless of their crime."

The apparent target of the shooting, a young Vietnamese man with a wispy Ho Chi Minh goatee, lay dead just a few feet from a hole-in-the-wall noodle restaurant. He was shot twice in the chest and once in the side of the head. The shooter also shot out the plate-glass window of the bus stop in front of the restaurant and two people waiting for a bus suffered minor cuts from the flying splinters of glass.

The woman Parsons treated still had a small piece of glass stuck in the left side of her nose so, carefully, with a pair of tweezers he removed it then swabbed it with an alcohol pad and bandaged it.

"It looks awful, doesn't it?" she asked, still shaken by the shooting.

"Sorry?"

"My nose."

"It received a fairly deep cut so it will swell up and turn black and blue."

"Do you think I'll need to see a plastic surgeon?"

He shook his head. "In a week or so, it should be all healed up."

"I hope so. Years ago, I got rid of a pretty big bump on my nose and I'd hate to have it operated on again."

If I could somehow, Parsons thought, I'd like to get rid of my nose entirely.

Smell was the one sense he wouldn't miss at all. Ever since he could remember he hated the odor of others. Despite all the colognes and perfumes people sprayed themselves with, he was always aware of the dirt and grime that permeated their bodies. Sometimes the smells were so nauseating he had to hold his breath or pinch his nostrils together. He was the only person he knew who didn't mind all the restrictions prompted by the pandemic a few years ago because it allowed him to wear a mask throughout the day without appearing unusual.

*

One morning, as Parsons crossed the parking lot of his apartment house to get into his car to go to work, he spotted another tenant also walking to his car. His name was Daniel Shales. He didn't know him but decided to walk over to him when he noticed a stack of realty signs in the back seat of his Navigator. Quickly he introduced himself then asked if he was a real estate broker.

"I am. Why, are you looking to move out of your apartment?"

"No, not at the moment, but I was wondering if you knew a guy involved in real estate by the name of Marvin Mudjuck?"

"I don't know him personally, but I've certainly heard of 'Marvelous Marvin.' He a friend of yours?"

"No, but someone I know works at a bar he owns."

"The Cloisters."

Parsons nodded as a garbage truck turned into the lot.

"So, why are you asking about him? Does he owe you money?"

"No."

"So, why then?"

"I was just curious," he stuttered. "I understand a warehouse of his caught fire the other night."

"Yeah, a lot of his properties seem to catch fire sooner or later."

Parsons hesitated for a moment, watching the truck remove two heaping shovelfuls of garbage from the dumpster behind the apartment house.

"Why did you refer to him as 'Marvelous Marvin'?"

He frowned. "Because time and again, he snares a property the agency I work for is interested in. You'd think he's the luckiest damn person in the world except, from what I hear, he's not lucky at all at cards."

"He a gambler?"

Shales nodded. "Every other Thursday night he hosts a high stakes poker game in the basement of the Cloisters."

"Is that so?"

"I know a couple of brokers who have sat in some games," he said, unlocking the door of his vehicle. "As I said, it's high stakes, so if you have to ask what the ante is to play, you don't belong there. Only folks with very deep pockets are at the table."

Parsons was not surprised that Mudjuck would have gambling inside the former Catholic church, not surprised in the least, as he watched his neighbor pull out of the parking lot.

*

The weekly Friends of Bill W meeting lasted longer than usual because someone there for the first time spoke for nearly forty-five minutes about the misfortunes in his relatively young life. Everyone in the room had suffered similar difficulties but this guy

went on as if his were unique.

Soon he would learn they weren't, Parsons thought, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"How're things?" Kidwell, his sponsor, inquired as he joined him at the coffee stand.

"All right."

"I haven't heard from you in a while, so I hoped things were going well."

"They are, Curt."

Kidwell poured himself a cup of the strong African blend coffee. "Are you still looking after that young woman you told me about the last time we spoke?"

"I am," he said, somewhat embarrassed. "I don't see her every day, but when I do I try to be discreet. She's aware of my feelings about certain people she associates with and, unfortunately, doesn't share them. So, if she knew what I was doing, she would not be pleased."

"You think she will ever share your feelings?"

"I don't really know but I hope someday she will."

"You can't save somebody who doesn't want to be saved, Cullen."

"I know," he said, thinking of others he had tried to protect. "I know that all too well."

From the basement of the Episcopal church where the Friends of Bill W meeting was often held, Parsons drove to the Cloisters not to see Hessa but to get a glimpse of her boss. She offered to escort him to a table, but he said he preferred to sit at the bar.

"I won't have a break for another hour, Cullen."

"That's all right. We'll talk then."

Smiling, she returned to her post near the entrance of the establishment.

After he ordered a cranberry seltzer, he asked the bartender to point out Mudjuck.

"Why's that? Does he owe you money?"

He shook his head. "I'm just curious to see who the person is who turned a church into an oyster bar."

"That's Marvin over there," he said, raising his right thumb, "standing in front of the fishbowl."

The person he pointed out was short and stocky with bushy eyebrows and arrow-shaped sideburns. His mouth was pencil line thin, his lips so pale Parsons wondered if he had on some kind of gloss. His most noticeable feature was his hair. The top of his scalp was shaved to the bone with only a ring of rust-colored hair covering his head. Parsons could not help but smile because Mudjuck looked nothing as he imagined. He expected to see a rawboned figure covered in tattoos, someone who could easily have been a member of some outlaw motorcycle gang, but the person in front of him resembled of all things a medieval friar. The wrinkled brown hooded sweatshirt he had on resembled a modified cassock that hung almost below his baggy khaki shorts. He had on sandals and white athletic socks and a leather bracelet. All he lacked was a crucifix hanging around his neck.

"Do you want me to introduce you to him?" the bartender asked.

"Maybe some other night."

"He always like to meet new people."

More like new pigeons, he thought, rising from his stool and heading for the door. He would speak with Hessa another time and again try to convince her to find somewhere else to work.

*

The last call Parsons and his partner received the next day was to go to Salmon Field where two softball players collided into one another at a play at second base. One player received a shallow cut on his chin which Snitker quickly cleaned and bandaged. The other player didn't suffer any lacerations but was so dazed from the collision he had difficulty walking in a straight line. They suggested he let them take him to the hospital, but he and his girlfriend refused

so they gave him some analgesics and cautioned him to let his girlfriend drive him home.

"That guy definitely got his bell rung," Snitker remarked as he turned on the engine. "I got a few blows like that when I played football in high school, and it always took me a while to recover."

"I wonder if he'll even remember what happened."

"I doubt it."

Moments later, as they drove past a community garden, a tomato suddenly splattered against the windshield.

"What the hell!" Snitker shouted, veering to the right.

Another tomato then struck the side of his door, then another, and soon a volley of tomatoes followed that turned the side of the wagon almost scarlet.

"Damn kids!"

Parsons wasn't sure. "It's too dark to see who's threw them."

"Who else but kids would think to do this?"

Back at the garage Snitker flipped a quarter to see who had to clean the wagon. As usual, Parsons lost and Snitker handed him a sponge the size of a license plate. Slowly he began to scrub off the tomato stains, recalling as he did one afternoon when he and some other kids in his neighborhood engaged in a tomato fight that left them looking like the survivors of a massive explosion. His arms and hands were soaked, his face and hair too, and he could not take a step without his socks squishing inside his tennis shoes. After that battle, he could never eat a tomato without thinking of that epic afternoon.

"I guess it'll be a while before you'll be eating any tomatoes for dinner," Shoulders remarked as he watched Parsons hose the soap from the wagon.

"More than a while."

"I bet."

Parsons washed off the last remaining suds then shut off the water and rewound the hose.

"Say, have you got any plans for the weekend?"

The past couple of weeks Shoulders had talked about the two of them going rock climbing someday, which was not something he was interested in, so almost before he realized it, he said, "I'm going over to Pinecrest."

"Yeah?"

He nodded.

"I haven't been there in years," he recalled. "It's a nice place to go to get away from all the madness around here. Or so I thought but the last time I was there I hauled some guy out of the lake who fell out of his boat."

"I guess the craziness never ends."

"Apparently not."

After he finished shaving, Parsons towed off the few spots of lather that remained under his chin. Then, before he put the towel away, he stared at his pear smooth face in the mirror. Always, after he shaved, he looked a couple of years younger but not this morning. Instead, he appeared a couple of years older.

He was worried that if he drove to Pinecrest today and Hessa spotted him she might think he was stalking her. He wasn't, not at all, but wanted to protect her from any harm that the people she was with might cause her. He didn't know if she would believe him, though. So, maybe he should stay home, he thought, hanging the towel on the rack beside the mirror. That might be the sensible thing to do but then, if something happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

*

"Damn," Parsons groaned as he drove by another motel with a No Vacancy sign posted outside its office.

He was reminded by Snitker that Pinecrest was always a popular place on the weekend because of its hot springs. But he didn't expect it to be this popular and started to wonder if he would ever find somewhere to spend the night. He approached two more motels and again saw they were full so he figured he should look for a place a ways outside the resort town. And finally, nearly ten miles

west of Pinecrest, he spotted a motel with only two cars parked in its gravel lot. He smiled and pulled up in front of the office which was a two-story log cabin.

"Howdy," the snaggle-toothed desk clerk greeted him as soon as Parsons entered the office. "You looking for a room?"

"I am."

"Well, you're in luck, my friend, because we have some vacancies."

"Yours is the only place I've seen that wasn't full."

"It won't be for long," he predicted. "By supper time we'll be booked up too."

"Is it always this busy around here?"

Jiggling his double-chin, he opened the register book for Parsons to sign his name. "We're always pretty busy, weather permitting, but festival week always brings a lot of visitors."

"Festival, you say?"

"Isn't that why you're here?"

He shook his head as he signed the register.

"Pinecrest was founded sixty-three years ago this week, and for as long as I can remember it's always been commemorated with a lot of festivities."

"Anything in particular?"

"Tonight, some fireworks will be set off behind the hot springs and tomorrow there'll be what's become the annual barrel race."

"I've never heard of a barrel race."

He grinned. "Not many people have who aren't from around here."

"How is it done?"

"As you no doubt know, this is wine country so for the past nine years teams compete to see which one can roll its barrels the fastest over the length of a football field."

"Have you done it?"

"I haven't but a cousin of mine raced in it one year and said

it was a lot harder than he thought it'd be."

"Yeah, a lot of things appear easy until you do them."

"Ain't that the truth," the clerk said, handing him the key to his room.

It was the last one on the right from the office, and as soon as he unlocked the door he was overwhelmed by the scent of ammonia. He assumed whoever stayed here before must have had some sort of accident that took the housekeeper quite a while to clean up. Right away, he took a leak in the stained toilet, washed his hands and face in the stained basin, then drank half a glass of water and unpacked his overnight bag. He was there only a few minutes then got back in his car to drive to Mudjuck's house.

According to his cell phone, it was at the north end of Diamond Lake which he figured should take him not more than half an hour to drive there. That was not the case, however, because the traffic in town was so congested. He wasn't in any particular hurry, though, because Hessa said she would be here the whole weekend. With only one hand on the steering wheel, he crept along the narrow main street, amazed at all the people on the sidewalk. Many of the men wore straw boaters and striped shirts as if they were celebrating the Fourth of July.

Just past a Shell service station, a Jeep Wrangler turned into his lane, and, to his surprise, Hessa was in the passenger seat and Skaggs behind the wheel. They were three cars ahead of him, so he was all but certain neither of them spotted him. He smiled, not expecting to find her so soon. Elated, he slapped a hand on the passenger seat and slowed down even a little more because he didn't want to get any closer to them. He assumed they were going to Mudjuck's place and decided to follow them even though he really wasn't sure what he would do when he got there. Probably just wait nearby until they went somewhere else, he reckoned.

Soon the road narrowed to a single lane as it wound into the woods above the town. The deeper they went into the woods the more concerned Parsons became that he had been spotted, and

Skaggs was going to corner him somewhere. But then, as he swung through a tight curve, a split wooden sign was posted on the left side of the road. "Two Miles Ahead," it said. "Alpine Hot Springs." At once, his grip on the steering wheel relaxed when he realized where Hessa and Skaggs were going.

I should've known, he thought. Hessa mentioned that the hot springs were a popular attraction she hoped to sample if she had the opportunity.

Several cars were in the parking lot, so he was able to park his car well away from the Jeep Wrangler. He had no idea how long people soaked in the waters but assumed it would be at least half an hour so, after a few minutes, he got out of his car and headed up to the half-timber and stone lodge.

"Good afternoon," the clerk behind the massive pine wood desk greeted him as soon as he entered.

"Hello."

"How may I help you today?"

"Well, I thought I'd get a soak."

"Do you have a reservation?"

"No," he said, surprised. "I didn't know I needed one."

"Usually, you don't but during festival time we're pretty booked up," she said. "We have times available on Monday, however."

"I won't be here then."

"Maybe another time then?"

He thought for a moment. "Say, can I look around before I leave?"

"We don't allow gawkers, sir."

"I just wanted to see the layout of the lodge."

"Just a minute," she said and called over an elderly man who was busy adding more logs to the stone fireplace in the lobby. "Peter, this gentleman would like to become acquainted with our facility so I'd appreciate it if you could take a minute or two to show him around."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Peter's been employed here longer than anyone," she informed Parsons, "so he should be able to answer any questions you may have."

"Thank you."

"There are two bathhouses on the premises," Peter said as he directed Parsons through the lobby to a side door that led outside. "The main deck has three hollowed-out log tubs and one wine barrel sized tub and, just a short distance from it, is the upper deck which has a whiskey barrel that can accommodate up to eight people at a time."

"Can I see the bathhouses?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but that will not be possible."

"It won't?"

"The privacy of our guests is highly valued, so we don't allow anyone to enter the bathhouses but our guests."

"I see."

As the guide led him through the grounds of the resort, pointing out one plant and flower after another, Parsons barely listened. He was there to make sure Hessa was all right but, as that was not feasible, he cut the tour short and returned to his car. He decided to wait until she came out of the lodge because he was still determined to keep an eye on her. Shortly, though, he dozed off and didn't awake until close to an hour later when he heard a distinct knock on his window. It was Hessa, peering in at him, with Skaggs half a step behind her. Stunned, he rolled down the window.

"I thought it was you, Cullen," she said, sounding a little irritated. "What are you doing here?"

"I ... I was going to go in for a soak," he stuttered, "but was told I needed a reservation, and all the tubs were booked today."

He could tell from the way her eyes twitched that she didn't believe him and probably suspected he was again following her.

"If you were coming to Pinecrest, why didn't you mention it when I told you I was going to be here this weekend?"

"I didn't know I was coming then."

"You didn't?"

Trying to think of a plausible response, he suddenly recalled the clerk at the motel telling him about a barrel race on Sunday. "Someone I know from work was planning to enter some kind of barrel race held here but one of the members of his team had to drop out so he asked if I would take his place and I said I would."

She smiled, seemingly satisfied with his answer, and glanced over her shoulder at Skaggs. "We're going to be in that race too."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. I've never done it before, but Albie has a couple of times."

He looked at Skaggs whose eyes were riveted on him. "The more you know what you're doing the better the chances are that you'll succeed."

"I hope so," she said, crossing her fingers.

"Well, may the best team win."

"Always," she clucked, stepping back from his window. "I'll see you there probably."

"Yeah, see you, Hessa."

*

Right after Hessa and Skaggs returned to Mudjuck's house, they joined their host on the terrace. He was asleep in one of the lounge chairs, his head resting on his left shoulder. Their bodies were so limp after soaking in the hot tubs they also sat down in the padded chairs. Skaggs lit a joint, inhaled, then passed it to Hessa. As he started to lean back in his chair, he noticed a car parked at the corner of the block. It looked similar to the one Parsons was driving.

"He's back," he said to Hessa in a low whisper so as not to wake up their host.

"Who?"

"Who do you think, babe? That medic."

"You're kidding."

He pointed a finger at the car. "That's his, isn't it?"

She leaned forward. "I don't know. It could be but I'm not sure."

"It's his," he asserted. "What the hell is his problem? He got a crush on you or something?"

She handed him back the joint. "He's got this crazy notion in his head that he needs to protect me."

"From what?"

"Bad influences I suppose."

"That's ridiculous."

"I know it is, darling. I've told him so, but he still keeps showing up every now and again."

"Do you want me to have a word with him?"

"No. That might make him think even more that I need his protection."

"That's ridiculous," he said again, after inhaling some more smoke.

"He means well, I believe, but knowing he's watching over me, so to speak, is a little unnerving."

"You know what he is, don't you? A damn stalker."

She disagreed. "I wouldn't say that darling. His intentions are good I believe."

"He's trouble, Hessa, and he should be dealt with before he becomes even more of a problem than he already is."

"He's not your problem, Albie, so I wouldn't get so worked up about him."

"All his snooping around can become a problem for more people than just you."

"You talking about yourself?"

"Me and Mudjuck and others," he claimed. "So there has to be an end to it."

She sighed, staring at the burning end of the joint. "I'll speak to him again and tell him I don't need to be looked after like a child, but I've told him that before but still he keeps coming around."

"Damn creep."

*

The checkout time at the motel was eleven o'clock but Parsons was packed and ready to leave by nine-thirty. Last night he followed Hessa and her friends from one bar to another, and she never appeared to be in any trouble, so he didn't think it was necessary for him to look after her today. Still, there was always the chance something unexpected could happen, so he decided to watch her compete in the barrel race then head back to his apartment.

The races were held on the football field of the local high school which was just a few blocks from the business district in town. According to the motel clerk, the teams consisted of four people who were required to run from one end zone to the other and whoever recorded the fastest time was declared the winner and received a bottle of wine. Three of the four wooden wine barrels each team was assigned to push were empty, he said, while the fourth one was half filled with water and weighed close to two hundred pounds.

As he approached the red brick high school, he was surprised how difficult it was to find a place to park his car. He assumed there would be some people who came to watch the races but not this many. Swarms, impervious to the traffic, walked down the middle of the street carrying ice chests and picnic baskets. One woman, decked out in a sequin dress, twirled a rainbow-colored umbrella above her towering red hair. And almost next to her, wearing a striped Uncle Sam suit, walked a guy on stilts. Parsons looked all around for Hessa but didn't see her which wasn't surprising in a such a large throng of people.

Eventually, he parked his car on a side street some five blocks from the high school and followed the crowd to the football field. Because of all the congestion he moved slowly and continued to look for Hessa. He was sure she was here somewhere.

"You on a team?" a chunky guy in shorts and a hooded sweatshirt asked as he stepped alongside Parsons.

"Sorry?"

"You racing today?"

"Nah."

"You want to?"

"I haven't really thought about it."

"One of the guys on my team turned his ankle last night getting out of bed to take a piss so we need someone to take his place."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, surprised by the invitation. "I've never been in a barrel race before."

"Really, there's not much to it, friend. All you have to do is push a wine barrel a hundred yards."

"I don't know."

"Come on," he urged him. "It'll be an experience. We're not any good. We're not looking to win. We're just doing it for the hell of it."

He lied to Hessa when he told her he came to Pinecrest to participate in the barrel races so he figured he might as well do what he said.

"All right."

"You'll do it?"

He nodded.

"Great," he said, relieved. "Oh, by the way, I'm Jeb."

"Cullen."

"Follow me, son. The others are waiting under the bleachers at the north end of the field."

In another minute, after nudging past a vendor selling hot roasted pretzels, Parsons entered the rustic stadium and saw that the bleachers on both sides of the football field were packed. Spectators, standing three deep, also lined the field, including the back of the end zones. A five-piece student band was set up in a corner of the east end zone, which served as the finish line, frantically playing one Rolling Stones song after another. To his surprise, even though he was told it hadn't rained for over a week, the field was so muddy it was difficult to take a step without slipping

a little. Then he noticed some students watering the field with fire hoses and assumed they were doing it to make it harder to roll the barrels.

The other two members of Jeb's team were Kirk, a scrawny guy with a handlebar mustache, and Philly, who was almost as short and round as the water-filled barrel he was going to roll. Jeb introduced him and he bumped fists with them then listened as they discussed last year's race.

"The field was a lot more slippery than it is today," Philly recalled. "You could barely take a step without falling on your knees."

Kirk agreed. "It took me a couple days to get all the mud out of my fingernails. I looked like a damn witch, for God's sake, my nails were so dark."

As they continued to reminisce, while waiting for their team to be summoned to the starting area, Parsons continued to look for Hessa among all the other teams assembled under the bleachers but didn't see her or Skaggs or Mudjuck. He wondered if she had decided to pull out of the race. He wouldn't be surprised, nothing she did surprised him anymore.

"We're up," Jeb said some fifteen minutes later when he heard the name of their team, the "Warthogs," called over the loudspeaker.

"Let's make our families proud!" Kirk shouted as they shuffled out from under the bleachers.

Three other teams were also in the starting area, all of whom appeared much stronger to Parsons. One team, who were members of the National Guard, wore camouflage shirts and combat boots. The starter, a pudgy guy who had on a jester's cap, told everyone to roll their barrels to the chalked out starting line.

"Are you ready to race?" he shouted after everyone was on the line.

Several rollers grumbled they were while others, including Parsons, just bowed their heads in anticipation of the contest.

"Race!" he shouted again, blaring an airhorn above his ridiculous cap.

Parsons, groaning, pushed his barrel through the foot-deep mud but only for one revolution then his bare hands slipped across the surface and the barrel didn't budge.

"Damn it!"

"Push with your chest and legs," Jeb, who was already a couple of feet ahead of him, suggested. "Your shoulders, too, if you have to bend over."

He had to because he was practically squatting down on his knees.

"Push! Push! Push!" Kirk chanted. "As if your life depended on it!"

Parsons, gritting his teeth, slowly pressed ahead, his arms and hands and knees caked in mud. He was well behind Jeb but only half a step behind Kirk.

Two of the teams were several feet ahead of them and the other team was right on their heels.

"We can't come in last!" Jeb pleaded. "Not again!"

Several people in the bleachers cheered them on, blaring horns and shaking cow bells. A few even called out the name of their team.

Every couple of steps Parsons had to pause for a moment because his arms and hands ached so much and tried to shake out the pain as if it were beads of sweat, then he resumed pushing his barrel. If not for the encouragement of the spectators, he suspected he might have stopped for good.

"Push!" Kirk hollered again. "Push!"

The finish line was less than forty yards away, but it seemed much farther away than that as Parsons strained to push his barrel through the muddy course.

Gradually they got increasingly ahead of the team behind them but still they weren't sure if they could beat them. According to the rules, every barrel on a team had to cross the finish line before

its time could be recorded. So, because Philly was having such a hard time rolling his barrel, Jeb would leave his barrel every few steps and run back to help Philly advance his barrel. Soon all of them took turns helping Philly who was so exhausted he could barely lift his arms. They had to otherwise there was clearly little chance of Philly making it to the finish line ahead of the other team.

"We can do this!" Jeb insisted, his voice raw from all his hollering. "You know we can!"

Twelve yards, Parsons figured, and he was done.

"Twelve yards!" he shouted, startling himself. "Twelve lousy yards!"

Pushing as hard as he had pushed at any time, he got his barrel across the finish line then hurried back with Jeb to help Philly and together they managed to get his barrel to the line just a few steps in front of the fourth team.

"You know what you have to do now?" Jeb gasped, draping a muddy arm across Parsons' shoulders.

"What's that?"

"Shower," he chuckled. "The showers at the gym here are available to all racers."

"That's a relief."

"There'll be a line," he predicted, turning around to make his way to the field house, "so the sooner you get there the better."

"I'll be along in a minute."

He couldn't wait to wash off all the mud that covered him from head to toe but he stayed back because he thought he might finally catch a glimpse of Hessa. He was sure, if she saw him race, she would come by to congratulate him for completing the course. Slowly time passed, more racers crossed the finish line, and still there was no sign of her or her friends. She must have already finished her race, he figured and headed toward the field house.

ALTAR FIRES

PART FOUR

After he showered at the high school gymnasium, Parsons returned to the football field where barrel races were still going on and looked again for Hessa. Up and down the steps of both sets of bleachers he walked, shading his eyes from the sun with a rolled-up program he was handed when he entered the stadium. He didn't see her or Skaggs or Mudjuck so he then went out to the parking lot and searched for the Jeep Wrangler he saw her riding in yesterday. The only black one he saw, however, had an out-of-state license plate.

Where the hell is she? he wondered, heading back to his car.

He then drove to Mudjuck's house, expecting to find the Wrangler parked in the driveway, but it wasn't there and neither was any other vehicle. And he noticed that the curtains were drawn in all the windows. Even so, after parking his car, he got out and walked onto the porch and knocked on the door four times, but no one answered. Puzzled, he started to walk away then turned back and knocked four more times.

"I don't believe anyone's home," the next-door neighbor informed him as she stepped back from a rose bush she was pruning.

"Apparently not."

"Mr. Mudjuck and his guests left last night."

"I thought he was going to be in the race today."

"Race?"

"The wine barrel race over at the high school."

"I don't know anything about that, mister."

"Do you know what time they left?"

"I'd just gone to bed, so it was right around eleven-thirty."

"That late?"

"Around then, yes."

He was confused because Hessa said she was going to Pinecrest not only to soak in the hot springs but also to participate in the barrel race. So why leave the night before the race? He wondered if she had got injured or become ill and had to go to the hospital. There was only one in the area, so he decided to go there to see if she had been admitted to the emergency room. However, according to the woman at the reception desk, neither Hessa or Mudjuck or Skaggs were patients at the hospital last night. He assumed then she and the others must have returned home but why he wondered again. Something serious must have prompted them to pick up and leave so late in the evening. But what? he wondered. What happened last night?

*

Parsons and Snitker, after treating a young boy who fell out of a treehouse, were on their way back to the garage when they received another call from Ida.

"Wagon Four, an unconscious woman is slumped over on a bench at the east end of Flounder Park," she informed them. "Likely overdose."

At once, Parsons watched his hands close into fists, suddenly worried that the woman might be Hessa. The park wasn't more than six blocks from her apartment house.

"We've got to get a move on," he insisted as Snitker slowed down as they approached a busy intersection.

"We are, Cullen."

"We've got to get there in time."

"Relax, partner. I'm going as fast as I can. We don't want to get in an accident."

"No, no, I know that" he stammered, still wishing Snitker would go faster.

Only a man and an older woman stood over the unconscious woman when they arrived at the park. Parsons, relieved that it wasn't Hessa, quickly relaxed and drew a deep breath as the couple said that the woman appeared to be drunk. An empty wine bottle lay under the bench so he assumed the woman probably was inebriated and gently poked a finger in her ribs. She didn't respond, though, so he poked her again and, promptly, she raised her head and glared at him.

"What're you doing, fella?"

"Trying to see if you're all right."

"You a doctor?"

"I'm a medic."

"Well, I'm fine, thank you very much," she snarled.

"You don't look fine."

"That's your opinion."

"Don't you think you should let us take you to the hospital to make sure you're all right?" Snitker inquired, realizing he didn't need to take out the oxygen mask.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "Can't a person take a nap in a park anymore these days?"

"You're sure now you don't want to go to the hospital?"

"What the hell for?" she demanded. "All I need is some sleep. I don't need more people poking me in the ribs. That's for sure."

She needed more than sleep, Parsons believed, but they couldn't force her to go to the hospital, so they returned to the wagon and headed back to the garage.

"I wouldn't be one bit surprised if we don't get another call concerning that woman in the next couple of weeks," Snitker speculated.

"Probably not."

"No probably about it, partner."

Parsons supposed he should feel disappointed that they couldn't have done something for the intoxicated woman, but he was so grateful it wasn't Hessa on that bench that he didn't know if he could feel any better than he did right this minute.

*

His elation didn't last long, however, because as soon as his shift was over Parsons drove straight to Hessa's apartment and knocked on her door but there was no answer. Again and again, he knocked but clearly, she wasn't there. Next, he knocked on the door of the manager of the apartment house and asked if he had seen Hessa recently and he thought for a moment and said he saw her Saturday morning just before she left for Pinecrest.

"You didn't see her come back?"

"No, I didn't. Why do you ask?"

"I just haven't been able to get in touch with her since Saturday."

"Maybe she decided to stay in Pinecrest longer than she planned. I understand the hot springs up there are pretty popular."

"Yeah, maybe so," he said but he doubted it.

"She'll probably be back in a day or two."

He nodded and walked back to his car and sat there long enough to smoke a cigarette. Then he turned on the engine and drove straight to the Cloisters even though he knew Hessa generally didn't work there on Mondays. He was hoping against hope he suspected.

As soon as he entered the crowded establishment, he was greeted by a hostess he hadn't seen before so he was sure Hessa wasn't there. Still, he sat down at the bar and, after ordering a cranberry soda, asked the bartender if Hessa was working tonight.

"If she is, I haven't seen her."

"What about Mudjuck and Skaggs? Are they around?"

"Skaggs is but I haven't seen Mudjuck yet."

"Where is he?"

The bartender glanced over his shoulder at the banquet room.

"He's in there setting up tables for a bachelor's party tonight."

Without bothering to finish his drink, he spun off his stool and strode into the banquet room where he found Skaggs on a step ladder removing a burnt-out light bulb from the ceiling.

"I'm looking for Hessa."

Skaggs glared at him coldly. "She's not here, doc."

"Where is she?"

"How would I know? I'm not her keeper."

"Aren't you?"

"Hell no!" he barked as he tossed the bad bulb on a seat cushion lying on the floor.

"You were with her Saturday at Pinecrest. I saw you, remember?"

"Yeah, so what? That was Saturday and this is Monday."

"You were supposed to be in that barrel race, but you didn't show up, did you?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Hessa wasn't feeling well so we went back home early Sunday morning."

"You did something to her. I know you did."

"Don't die on that hill, chum. That's ridiculous."

"You're a liar."

"You better watch who you're calling a liar, doc."

Parsons gritted his teeth. "You know where she is and I want you to tell me right this minute."

"If I did know, and I don't, I don't think I would tell you because of the way you're coming at me. You seem to be becoming unhinged."

"Tell me, damn it!"

"Get out of here, doc. Get in your ambulance and leave me the hell alone."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me."

"You better before I have to throw your ass out of here."

"I'll leave when you start telling me the truth."

Skaggs, seething, jumped down from the ladder, crushing the light bulb with his left foot. "Leave, asshole!"

"Not until you tell me what happened to her."

Skaggs reached for a cheese board leaning against the back of a chair and swung it at Parsons who ducked out of the way. He then lunged at him, and both men fell to the floor, knocking over the ladder. Angrily they traded blows, with Parsons getting the worst of it, until two servers rushed into the banquet room and separated them.

"Get him the hell out of here!" Skaggs demanded, wiping away a trickle of blood seeping from just above his left eyebrow.

The servers did as they were told and seized Parsons by his arms and began to lead him out of the banquet room.

"And never let him back in here!" he shouted. "You hear that, doc? You come back here you'll wish you'd never been born!"

*

As he sat down at his desk to write another letter to Greer, Parsons held a damp cloth against his swollen left eye which Skaggs had tagged with a roundhouse right hook. He sat still because his sides hurt whenever he moved. He hoped Skaggs was suffering as much as he was, but he doubted it because Skaggs seemed the sort of person who had been in lots of fights.

"I have terrible news to tell you," he began the letter. "That girl I told you I'd been kind of watching out for has disappeared. I have no idea where she's gone and neither does the manager of her apartment house although he thinks she might've gone on a vacation somewhere. I doubt it, though, because she would have mentioned it to me. I'm sure she would.

"Earlier this evening I went to this oyster bar where she works but usually not on Mondays and, not surprisingly, she wasn't there even though she was scheduled to work tonight. This guy, Skaggs, who is a so-called friend of hers, was there and I asked him where she was, but he claimed he didn't know. He's lying. I know

he's lying. He and another guy were with her on Saturday night. I followed them to a couple of bars then figured I'd seen enough and left, and I suspect something happened to her later that night. She was supposed to participate in some charity race on Sunday, but she never showed up for it."

He paused, gradually releasing the pressure on the washcloth.

"I should've continued to keep an eye on her Saturday night until she returned to the place where she was staying then maybe I could have prevented whatever happened to her. I let her down just as I let Father Cahill down. It was my job to protect them and I failed. Others, I know, will say it isn't my fault but they're dead wrong. I was their guardian, even if they weren't aware of it, and I could not keep them safe."

Angrily he yanked the cloth from his eyes and flung it on the floor.

"Idiot!" he admonished himself. "Damn stupid idiot!"

Parsons paused in front of the central police station as a man in handcuffs was escorted through the two huge oak doors by two officers in riot helmets. Hessa had been gone for at least two days, so he believed it was incumbent upon him to file a missing person report. He started toward the doors then paused again, not sure if he wanted to file a report, because somehow that made it seem more likely than ever she had suffered some serious misfortune. Probably at the hands of Skaggs and Mudjuck he was all but certain.

"What can I do for you, sir?" the freckled sergeant at the front desk asked curtly.

"I'd like to file a missing person report."

"How long has this person been missing?"

"Two days."

"Please, take a seat over there," he said, glancing at the wooden bench next to the water cooler, "and a detective will be with you shortly."

He sat down at the end of the bench which was also occupied by a floppy-eared man who held a string of chimney-red rosary beads in his left hand.

"It won't be shortly."

"Pardon me?"

"Whoever is on duty at the desk always says someone will

see you shortly but you're lucky to speak with someone in half an hour."

"Really?"

"That's why I carry these prayer beads with me. It helps to pass the time."

"I take it you've been at the station more than a few occasions?"

The man, fingering the beads, arched his eyebrows. "More than I can count I'm afraid."

"Is that so?"

He nodded. "Why are you here, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I haven't been able to locate this woman I know, and I figured I should file a missing person report."

"Oh."

"I've never filed such a report before."

"I hope you have more success than I've had."

"Is someone you know missing?"

As he shook his head, he let go of the beads and they fell in his lap. "Chrissy, my youngest daughter."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She wasn't gone more than a day, and I filed a report down here. That was nearly nine months ago, eight months and two and a half weeks to be precise, and she still hasn't been found."

Parsons stared at the distraught father whose hands started to tremble in his lap.

"I come to the station just about every other day to ask if anyone has found out anything and am always told no one has as of yet. I know they consider me a nuisance, I know that, but I don't want them to forget about my Chrissy. I'm afraid that after they entered her name in NamUs, the national data base for missing persons, they won't look for her anymore. But I want them to keep looking and believe by coming down here on a regular basis I can keep the pressure on them."

"Of course."

"It's just too damn easy to forget about people you have no connection to."

The more Parsons listened to this man the more discouraged he became and made him wonder if he also would be returning to the station time and again.

"Mr. Parsons."

He looked up at a short, slender man with a vague mustache.

"I'm Detective Steadman," he said then, before Parsons could say anything, the detective looked over at the other person on the bench. "Hello, Charles."

"Hello, detective."

"I'm sorry but I have nothing to report to you today."

Charles slipped his beads into the side pocket of his windbreaker. "I just don't want you to stop looking for my daughter."

"I won't," he promised then looked back at Parsons. "So, if you'll come with me, sir."

He led him to a scarred wooden desk in a corner of the spacious room of scarred desks, invited him to sit down in a metal folding chair, and sat across from him in a swivel chair that squeaked whenever he moved to his right. It took a moment for a blank missing person report to appear on his computer screen.

"I understand you want to file a missing person report."

"That's right."

"This person a relative of yours?"

"No, sir."

"A close friend?"

"Well, not really," he admitted. "She's just someone I got to know a few months ago."

"She's not your girlfriend then?"

"No."

"Well, what can you tell me about this acquaintance of yours?"

He hesitated, realizing how little he really knew about Hessa, then gave a brief description of her to the detective.

"Do you have a recent photograph of her?"

"I do not."

"Any photograph?"

"Sorry."

"That's unfortunate."

"I know."

The detective then asked him one question after another that Parsons was unable to answer.

"I'm afraid you really haven't given me much information to work with," he remarked, leaning back from the computer screen.

"I'm sorry, detective, but I've told you all I know."

The detective crossed his legs. "Since you clearly don't know this woman all that well, what makes you think she's missing?"

"She's not at her apartment. She hasn't been to work. Others I've spoken to haven't seen her recently."

"Granted, she's gone but lots of so-called missing persons are just folks who want to get away from wherever they are for whatever reason. Maybe she's one of these people. Maybe she just had enough of the life she led here and decided to go somewhere else and start over."

"So, you don't believe me?"

"Oh, no, I do believe you think she's missing but it's just that going away isn't the same as missing."

"You're not going to look for her then?"

"I didn't say that" he said sternly. "Of course, we'll do all we can to locate her, but I just want you to know she might well be someone who doesn't want to be found. Someone, as I said, who wants to start over somewhere."

Certainly, that was a possibility, Parsons conceded, as he got up from his chair and walked past Charles who still sat on the bench with his rosary beads. But he didn't believe for a moment that Hessa

left on her own accord. She might not have told him if she did do that, but she would have told her landlord and some of the people she worked with at the Cloisters. Of that he was all but certain.

He supposed the detective would enter Hessa's name in the national data base, just as Charles predicted, and not do anything more so there was no point in coming back to the station every few days to find out if they had found out anything. Clearly it would be entirely up to him to find her.

*

"A pedestrian pinned under a telephone booth, Wagon Four, at 9th and N.E. Turbot," Ida declared. "Likely fractured legs."

"We're on it," Snitker replied, switching on the siren.

Parsons tightened his seat belt. "I didn't know there were any telephone booths left in town."

"Oh, there are a few but not that many."

"I can't remember the last time I saw one here."

As soon as they turned onto Turbot, they saw the overturned telephone booth. It was a vintage red English call box, stationed in front of a fish and chips restaurant so they assumed it was nothing more than an ornament and not at all functional. Two servers from the restaurant stood over the pinned woman who was clearly in agony and groaning loudly. A minivan, which had smashed into the call box, was nearly on the sidewalk, its engine still running. The driver, however, was nowhere to be seen. Quickly the servers stepped aside as the medics set a stretcher beside the call box.

"Help me," the woman pleaded when she saw the medics.

"That's why we're here, ma'am," Snitker assured her.

"Please, help me. My legs hurt something awful."

"We have to get her on the stretcher," Snitker said, "but, before we can do that, we'll have to lift up the call box."

Parsons looked at the servers. "Can you give us a hand, guys?"

They agreed and stood on one side of the call box and Snitker and Parsons stood on the other and, on the count of three, they lifted

the box high enough to allow Snitker to pull the injured woman onto the stretcher. Both her legs were bleeding, especially the left kneecap, and her left ankle was twisted almost halfway around.

She attempted to look at her legs once she got inside the wagon, but Parsons pressed her head back because he was afraid, if she saw the extent of her injuries, she might faint.

"You'll be at the hospital in less than five minutes," he said as Snitker turned on the siren. "You'll be in good hands there."

They arrived at the hospital in four minutes and promptly carried the woman into the emergency room where two orderlies transferred her from the stretcher to a rickety gurney.

"She'll be lucky if her ankle isn't broken," Parsons said as he and Snitker walked back to the wagon.

"Oh, it's broken, Cullen. I have no doubt about that."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"I just hope to hell they catch the driver who crashed into the call box."

"I can't believe he just ran away. He might've killed that woman."

"He probably stole the minivan."

"He probably did."

They were about to cross the street when Parsons spotted Mudjuck heading toward the main entrance of the hospital. In his hand he carried a bouquet of daffodils. At once, Parsons wondered if Hessa was a patient and he was going to visit her.

"Hey, you go ahead," he told Snitker. "I see someone I know. I'll only be a minute."

"Don't take any longer because I'm getting pretty hungry."

"I won't."

"Mr. Mudjuck!" he called out as he strode toward the stocky man.

Startled, he spun around, clutching the flowers against his chest.

"Are you going to visit Hessa?"

"Pardon me?"

"Is she a patient in the hospital?"

He squinted at Parsons. "Do I know you?"

"I saw you and Hessa at Pinecrest last Saturday."

"We've never met, though?"

"We haven't," he answered, pausing not more than a foot and a half from him. "So, is that who you're going to see?"

"Well, no, but I don't think it's any of your business, chum."

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Hessa Hearn."

"How the hell would I know?"

"Because you were with her Saturday night and she hasn't been seen since."

Suddenly, a siren blared from around the corner of the red brick hospital.

"Where did you take her?"

"I didn't take her anywhere."

"You took her to Pinecrest so where did you take her after you left Pinecrest?"

Mudjuck, clucking his tongue, turned around and started to head toward the main entrance.

"I asked you a question, sir, and I expect an answer."

"She met some people at a bar we were at Saturday night and went off with them and never came back to my place. We waited for her to return the next morning, but she never did so we left and came back here. That's all I can tell you."

"I know you know more than that. I know you do."

"You don't know anything."

As he watched him walk away, with a few of the petals falling out of his hands, Parsons remained convinced that he and Skaggs were somehow to blame for her disappearance. He didn't know what they did but he was sure they did something to her.

Parsons stared at the nearly empty bottle of Irish whiskey he set on his desk not more than a minute ago. Jameson's was Father Cahill's favorite brand of whiskey because of its smooth, mellow flavor which went down very easy. He introduced the whiskey to him and often in the evening they would trade shots in his office at Fort Reliance. At first, Parsons found it much too strong and had to close his eyes when he swallowed it but, gradually, he came to enjoy it and always ordered it whenever he was at a bar with other soldiers.

Warily he circled a finger a couple of times around the cap then drew it away without removing the cap.

After he stopped drinking, he almost threw the bottle out but decided not to, because of all the fond memories it recalled of Father Cahill. All he had to do was take just a sniff and he would be right back at Fort Reliance listening to one of the chaplain's hilarious stories about his time in the seminary.

Again, he stroked the cap of the brown bottle.

He was so frustrated about not being able to find Hessa that he was tempted to take one small sip as if that would alleviate his frustration. He knew it wouldn't but still he hoped it might and slowly unscrewed the cap and poured himself a shot. He didn't pick it up, though, just stared at it as he had stared at the nearly empty bottle. Father Cahill, who had a drinking problem he refused to

admit, would knock back the shot without hesitation but Parsons believed, if the chaplain knew his assistant had a serious problem with alcohol, he would urge him to resist the temptation. Father Cahill was someone who always looked after him which made Parsons more remorseful he wasn't able to do the same.

*

His cell phone rang three times before Kidwell answered it.
"Yes?"

"Curt," Parsons said in a hushed tone. "This is Cullen."

Kidwell took a moment before he said anything, worried that Parsons had relapsed. "How are you getting along, my friend?"

"Not well," he admitted. "I nearly took a drink last night."

"Why's that?"

"Do you remember me telling you about this young woman I've been sort of looking after in a rather clumsy way I'm afraid?"

He didn't but he said he did.

"I've lost her."

"What do you mean you've lost her, Cullen?"

"I don't know where she is," he answered. "She's just vanished."

"She has to be somewhere."

Parsons sighed. "I'm worried something bad might've happened to her."

"What makes you say that?"

He then told him about the shady people she was with on Saturday night before she disappeared.

"Have you spoken to them?"

"I have and they claimed not to know where she is, but they seemed very defensive as if they knew more than they said."

"What about the police? Have you said anything to them?"

"I filed a missing person report but I'm afraid all they are going to do is put her name in some national data base of missing persons and be done with her."

"What makes you think they won't do anything more than

that?"

Again, he sighed. "I don't have any evidence that something happened to her ... that she even left against her will."

Kidwell, wondering if Parsons had indeed jumped to conclusions, did not say anything.

"If a person wants to go away, this detective told me, it's their choice and not anyone else's. That's true but what if it isn't their choice at all but someone else's? That's something that has to be determined."

"Which is why it should be left to the police, Cullen. That's their job. You can't do it for them."

"Maybe not, Curt, but I am going to have to try because no one else seems to care what happened to this young woman."

"Do what you think is best, my friend, but always keep in mind what's best for you, too, and that's to stay clear of alcohol which can only make matters worse."

Parsons set his phone on the table, wishing now he had never called his sponsor who was even less encouraging about his prospects of finding Hessa than Detective Steadman.

*

"Wagon Four, there's a cowboy loose in Otter Park," Ida announced with a chuckle. "He's got a rope and is trying to lasso people there."

Snitker smiled at Parsons as he switched on the siren. "I assume he's had more than a sarsaparilla to drink."

"Seems likely."

The park, which was only a couple of city blocks in size, had a lopsided merry-go-round, a pair of swings, and a wading pool full of paper cups and bags. Right away, they spotted a man in a crumpled western hat on the other side of the merry-go-round. A lariat was slung over his left shoulder. He appeared a little unsteady on his feet so they assumed he was indeed intoxicated. When they got within a couple of feet of him, he grabbed the lariat, spun it above his hat, and attempted to lasso Parsons who ducked out of the

way at the last moment. Furious, he rushed the cowboy and tackled him to the ground and the guy, braying loudly, grabbed his left wrist.

Snitker was stunned. "What the hell are you doing, Cullen?"

"I'm just not in the mood to be toyed with."

"I don't care what you're in the mood for," he replied.

"You're here to help someone not make his situation worse."

Knowing he had overreacted, Parsons held out a hand and helped the cowboy to his feet.

"I'm sorry about that," he apologized to his partner who examined the cowboy's left wrist. "I just haven't been myself lately."

"So, I've noticed."

All he thought about the past couple of days was Hessa. He didn't have any inkling where she was and didn't know if he would ever find out and was so frustrated it was difficult for him to concentrate on anything else. He knew this couldn't continue or he might well injure someone he was called on to help. He had to get his head straight or else ask for a leave of absence before he did commit some critical error.

*

Parsons stared at the glowing tip of his cigarette which was almost as bright as the orange neon OPEN sign in the front window of the Cloisters. Then he flicked the ash into a paper cup on the passenger seat of his car and took another long drag on the bitter cigarette. This was the second night this week he had parked outside the oyster bar. He knew it was a waste of time, knew he was deceiving himself, but he hoped he might spot Hessa leaving the restaurant after it closed. He didn't see her the other night he was here and he doubted if he would see her tonight. He wished he could go inside the place, then he could ask the help if they had any idea where Hessa was, but he knew as soon as he went in, he would be escorted out by some behemoth security guard. So, he sat and watched people enter and leave, hoping against hope one of them would be Hessa.

Minutes later, shortly before closing time, a clearly inebriated woman wobbled toward the parking lot then, just before she reached it, stopped and hiked up her denim skirt, squatted down, and relieved herself on the stone pathway. Disgusted, he looked away then, in another moment, he felt his car rock a little and looked up and saw that the wobbly woman had fallen against his trunk.

"Sorry," she muttered as she leaned against his window.

Nodding, he realized she was not much older than Hessa who he was sure would never be so crude.

"Can I have a smoke?"

He rolled down his window and held out his package of cigarettes.

She took one then clumsily kissed his hand. "You're a good man, mister."

He didn't know about that but smiled and rolled up his window. Then he looked at his watch. The restaurant closed in another five minutes then, as he did the other night, he would stick around for some twenty minutes then leave. Only a few minutes passed when he saw a server Hessa had introduced him to one evening come out the front entrance. Her given name was Kate, but he didn't remember her surname. Immediately he got out of his car and approached her as she headed toward her car.

"Kate."

"Yes," she said, glancing over her shoulder.

"I don't know if you recall but Hessa introduced us a few weeks ago."

She smiled but clearly didn't remember him.

"I wonder if you might know where she is?" he asked, stepping in front of her.

"That's a good question. I haven't seen her at the restaurant this week and I was wondering where she was myself."

"You didn't ask anyone?"

"I did but they had no idea, either."

He exhaled slowly. "I filed a missing person report."

"You did?" she said, surprised.

"I'm worried something's happened to her."

"Why do you think that?"

"She hasn't been back to her apartment since she spent the weekend in Pinecrest."

"Maybe she's just taken a few days off."

"If she did, she wouldn't turn her phone off."

"No, you're right. She was always yakking with someone on her phone."

Anxiously he laced his fingers together. "So, you don't have any clue to where she might be?"

"I'm sorry I don't."

He hesitated for a moment as she unlocked the door of her car. "You wouldn't happen to have a recent photograph of her, would you?"

"I don't think so," she said, after opening her door. "We weren't particularly close, see, just co-workers is all."

He nodded in disappointment.

"Oh, wait a minute. I might have a picture of her on my phone." Quickly she took her phone out of her purse and scrolled through the gallery of photographs. "As a matter of fact, I do," she said excitedly and showed him a snapshot of Hessa kneeling beside a chocolate labrador.

He smiled because Hessa was smiling.

"That's my pride and joy which Hessa liked almost as much as I do so one day I took a picture of her with Riggles."

"Could you send this to my phone?"

"Of course."

He had never seen her look happier than she did in this photograph.

"If you find her, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"You'll be the first one," he promised, "because you're the first person who's been the least bit helpful to me."

"Best of luck."

He nodded and returned to his car where he sat for a few more minutes, just staring at the photograph that was now on his phone.

Early the next morning, before he drove to the garage, Parsons sent Detective Steadman the photograph of Hessa that Kate sent to his phone last night. To his surprise, the detective didn't acknowledge receiving the photograph, so he sent it again during his lunch break and the detective thanked him right away. Because he happened to have the next day off, Carlson having asked him to switch days with him, he decided to return to Pinecrest to see if anyone recalled seeing Hessa on Saturday night.

No one at the first three clubs he visited recognized the photograph he showed them. One bartender seemed annoyed that he would even ask such a question.

"We get so many people coming in here during festival week that it's flat out impossible to remember any of them. They're all a damn blur."

At the next club he went to, "One-Eyed Jacks," he found a barmaid who did remember Hessa.

"She wasn't here that long," the barmaid recalled, "and was very quiet at first then all of a sudden she went haywire. She started hollering about I don't know what and even tried to stand on top of the bar."

He was stunned. "Are you sure you're talking about the woman in this photograph?"

"One and the same, mister. The change in her behavior was so drastic it was as if someone had put something in her drink."

"You think that could've happened?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised because she changed so drastically."

"What happened to her?"

The barmaid shrugged. "These two guys she was with took her out of here kicking and screaming and they never came back as far as I know."

"Was one guy tall and thin and the other short and heavy?"

"That was them all right."

"Do you know where they went?"

"I don't."

"Well, thanks for the information."

She nodded. "She isn't in some kind of trouble, is she?"

"I don't know. That's what I intend to find out."

He walked back to his car more discouraged than ever because he knew for certain now that Mudjuck lied to him when he said Hessa left with some people she met at some bar. He and Skaggs were the ones she left with, not anyone else, so he had to know what happened to her.

Hick, he fumed, as he unlocked his car door. Damn lying hick.

*

Two days later, after transporting an injured motorcyclist to the hospital, the medics received another call from Ida who reported a woman was stabbed in the north end of town.

However, before she could give them the address, Snitker said, "At Amber Jack Circle, right?"

"Right you are, Ross."

"Something bad is always happening over there."

"Don't I know it."

"All right, we're on our way."

"Drive safely, guys."

They arrived at the Circle in not quite six minutes and, as soon as they got out of the wagon, a bearded guy in a weathered letterman's jacket approached them with blood on his sleeves.

"I don't know what happened, but I found this woman who said someone stabbed her. She was bleeding from her left arm."

"Where is she?" Parsons asked, quickly surveying the rundown Circle.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I called 911 and told her to wait for an ambulance to come but she didn't want to wait and took off running across the street."

"Why didn't you follow her?"

"I thought I should wait for you guys to get here."

"Which way did she go?"

"She headed north toward the old water tower."

Snitker looked at Parsons. "We better go and see if we can find her."

The bearded guy raised his hand. "I'll go with you."

"Suit yourself," Snitker grumbled, still not understanding why the guy didn't go after the woman in the first place unless he was the one who stabbed her.

Heading north, Parsons kept to one side of the street and Snitker to the other with the bearded guy a few steps behind him. They passed one pedestrian after another, asking if any of them had seen a woman who was bleeding, but none of them had seen the woman. Then, as he approached a crosswalk, Parsons saw her---not the injured woman but Hessa who stepped out of a nail salon.

"Hessa! Hessa!" he shouted as he sprinted across the street.

She didn't turn around but headed toward a bus stop near the corner. He ran as fast as he could and, just when he was within arm reach of her, she glanced over her shoulder, and he saw she wasn't Hessa but someone quite a few years older. He stopped at once, breathing heavily, realizing once again he had imagined something that wasn't there. Embarrassed, he returned to the wagon where a

squad car was parked next to it and Snitker and the bearded guy were talking with an officer who wore mirrored sunglasses. He didn't bother to join them because he just didn't feel like talking to anyone, he was so disappointed. Seemingly, this past week, he thought he saw Hessa in one place after another, but it was all in his imagination.

*

That evening, sitting in front of his television with the sound turned off, Parsons decided to post the flyers he had of Hessa all around town. He doubted if it would do much good, but it was worth a try at least. So, the next day, after he finished his shift, he drove to a print shop just down the street from the garage and had a hundred copies printed of the missing person poster he composed late last night. Above her picture, in black capital letters, it said MISSING PERSON and below her picture, in much smaller letters, he listed his cell phone number as well as the number of the police station Detective Steadman gave him. He didn't have much personal information to add, other than her complexion and height and approximate age, so the main thing he said was she was last seen Saturday night in Pinecrest.

The first place he put up the flyer was in her neighborhood, particularly around her apartment house, then posted close to a dozen near the Cloisters. Sometimes during a call for an ambulance, if he had the time, he taped a flyer to a utility pole or a lamppost. He even placed flyers in the windows of a few shops and bars.

"You think you'll ever get a response?" the owner of a tattoo parlor asked after he received his permission to display a flyer in one of his windows.

"I hope so but who knows?"

"I've let others put such signs in my windows about missing cats and dogs and I've never had one person tell me they found their missing pets so after a couple of months the signs fall down and I don't bother to put them back up."

"I promise you if I find this woman I'll let you know."

"Do, pal, otherwise, as I said, the sign will fall off, and I won't be replacing it."

"I understand."

For two and a half weeks, he didn't receive one telephone call in response to his flyers then, around ten-thirty-one evening, a craggy voice called about the flyer.

"I've seen it."

"Sorry?"

"The flyer you put up," he explained. "I've seen it all over town."

"Have you seen the woman in the photograph?"

"Nope. Can't say that I have."

"So why are you calling me tonight?"

"To tell you I'm sick and tired of seeing them and the next time I see one I swear I'm going to tear it down."

"You better not."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Please, mister, don't. This woman needs to be found."

"I'll do whatever damn thing I please."

The caller then hung up and left Parsons listening to silence on the other end.

Early one evening, as soon as he got off work, Parsons drove to the Cloisters and parked his car right in front of the main entrance. He didn't get out, though, but leaned back in his seat and lit a cigarette. He knew, if he attempted to enter the oyster bar, he would be escorted out, but he wasn't there to go inside the establishment. Rather he was there for another reason. He wanted to take pictures of both Skaggs and Mudjuck and intended to wait inside his car as long as he had to for them to appear.

Time crept by, causing him to smoke one cigarette after another. More than once, he was tempted to call it a night and come back another time but then he lit another cigarette and did not budge. He kept thinking of Hessa and believed it was his responsibility to do all he could to find her. He waited there for nearly an hour before he saw Skaggs approach the main entrance and immediately, he snapped his picture. He waited almost as long for Mudjuck to appear and snapped his picture then put his phone in his pocket and returned to his apartment.

The next day he went downtown to the central library and made prints of the photographs and later that evening he prepared another flyer to post around town. This one featured Skaggs and Mudjuck. Above their photographs, in huge black letters, it said, "THEY KNOW" and, just below that, in smaller letters, he added

"Where Hessa Is." His phone number was listed at the bottom of the flyer.

Pleased, he held the flyer up to the light and smiled, sure these would garner the attention of those two hicks.

*

They had finished treating a bicyclist who had taken a nasty spill when switching lanes when Parsons asked his partner to give him a minute before they headed back to the garage.

"What for?"

"You'll see."

He then fetched his backpack out of the wagon and pulled out one of his new flyers and showed it to him.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's something that could get you in some serious trouble, Cullen."

"These guys know something they're not telling about Hessa, I believe, and I don't want them to get away with it."

"You also don't want them coming after you."

"I'm not afraid of them," he lied, aware he was always afraid of something or other nearly every day.

"You're not really going to post that, are you?"

"You're damn right I am," he said, taping the flyer to the side of a bus shelter. "Why else do you think I made it?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

*

That evening, after dinner at a taco cart, Parsons drove to the roller-skating rink where he had not been since he went there with Hessa. He didn't rent a pair of skates, though, but sat at rink side, in a creaking bamboo chair, sipping a cup of bitter black coffee. The organ music was so thunderous tonight he felt he had to keep a hand on the small table beside him, so it didn't rattle.

He knew it was a waste of time, but he wondered if she might be here, perhaps on the arm of one of the instructors, trying to get more proficient to impress him the next time they skated together.

He had looked for her everywhere else, seemingly, so he figured he might as well look here. He stayed for almost an hour, watching one skater after another glide past him, and didn't see her or anyone who even resembled her.

Before he left, after getting the permission of the rink manager, he pinned both of his flyers to the bulletin board to the right of the rental desk.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize her," the attendant said as he looked at the flyers.

"She was only here a couple of times, but she always enjoyed herself."

"I hope you find her."

"So do I."

*

Parsons woke to the sound of his phone ringing on the nightstand. Groggy, he reached for it, and as he did, he saw on the clock next to it that it was almost two o'clock in the morning.

"Yes?"

"You better stop, friend."

"Sorry?"

"You better stop putting up those posters."

"Says who?"

"I'm just letting you know for your own good. You better stop right now."

It was the same craggy voice that called a week and a half ago, but it didn't sound like Skaggs' voice or Mudjuck's.

"Who is this?"

The voice snickered. "Someone who has your interests at heart."

"Of course you do."

"I do, friend, and I am advising you to let her go."

"Who is this?" he asked again.

The caller hung up so abruptly that Parsons wondered if he had imagined the call.

*

Whether the late-night warning was real or not, Parsons continued to put up both flyers, usually after dinner before it got dark. Not surprisingly, he found himself returning frequently to the neighborhood where the Cloisters was located so that before long flyers were posted on nearly every block. He believed if anyone was to provide any information concerning Hessa it would be someone who lived there.

One evening, as he tacked the flyers to an elm tree, he heard footsteps behind him and, just as he was about to turn around, he felt a sharp blow across the back of his neck and fell to his knees. Then there was another blow to the left side of his head, and he keeled over and was kicked again and again in the ribs until he lost consciousness.

When he woke up, he knew right away he hadn't imagined the attack. His neck burned, as if ringed with hot coals, and his ribs were so sore they hurt each time he took a breath. It was pitch dark out, except for a flickering streetlight on the corner. He was tempted to call Snitker for help, then remembered he was out of town, so he staggered back to his car and sat there until he felt he was sound enough to drive.

It was quarter to eight, according to the clock on the dashboard, so he was knocked out close to an hour.

"Damn."

He started to head back to his apartment then, after a couple of blocks, changed his mind and drove to the garage. He figured whoever was on duty tonight could patch him up before he went home.

"Christ, what in the world happened to you, son?" Carlson asked when he limped into the Day Room where Carlson and Figler were watching a college baseball game on television.

"I got mugged."

"You sure as hell did," Figler said, rising out of his easy chair.

"Did the mugger take anything?"

"Just my backpack which was full of my flyers."

"He didn't take your wallet or watch?"

Wincing, he shook his head. "All he cared about was stopping me from putting up anymore flyers."

"Did you go to the police?"

Again, he shook his head, wincing even more. "What's the point? I didn't see who mugged me and all he took were my flyers."

"Still, you should report it."

"I'll think about it, he said, suspecting the police wouldn't be any more successful in finding the mugger than they were in locating Hessa.

"You want us to take you to the emergency room?" Figler asked, tapping a wooden tongue depressor against his left arm.

"Nah."

"You're sure?"

"I am," he replied then asked Carlton to bandage up his ribs, certain that at least one was fractured, and to give him some analgesics for his splitting headache.

"You through now putting up those flyers?" Figler asked while Carlson wrapped a bandage around Parsons' ribs.

"Nope."

"You're not?"

"Not until I find out what happened to Hessa."

"But aren't you afraid whoever jumped you tonight might do it again?"

Of course I'm afraid, he thought, but he was not willing to admit it to Figler or anyone else. "I'll survive."

"So, you say, Cullen."

"Yep, so I say."

*

Parsons intended to report to work the next day, but Carlson insisted he take the day off to heal up so he did and slept until noon. Then, after making a cup of instant coffee, he sat down at his desk

to write another letter to Cassidy.

"I am not at work today because I got mugged last night," he began. "I have no idea who attacked me but I'm pretty sure it was someone who objected to the missing person flyers I've posted around town. I suppose they think beating me up will intimidate me and stop me from putting up any more of them. To be honest, I am afraid of being attacked again but that's not what's going to keep me from putting up more flyers. What is, dear, is that I don't know if they are doing any good. I've yet to receive one positive lead as to the whereabouts of Hessa. Not even one!"

He paused to take a sip of coffee.

"I hate to admit it, I really do, but it seems unlikely I'll ever see her again. I suspect she's been killed for whatever reason and buried in some place far, far away. I just hate to think that the people involved in her disappearance got away with it and just wish somehow I could make them suffer for what they did."

*

The next three nights, before taking a bath to soak his sore ribs, Parsons drove out to the Cloisters and parked each time in a space that enabled him to see the main entrance. He supposed he went there in the hope of seeing Hessa appear in the doorway even though he knew that would never happen. He did spot a couple of young women who resembled her and started to get out of his car until he realized his mistake. Then he sat back in his seat, lit another cigarette, and continued to look for her among all the patrons who entered and left the oyster bar.

On the fourth night he went out to the Cloisters he didn't park in the designated lot but on a side street so he was not able even to have a glimpse of the main entrance. It didn't matter, though. The previous three nights he had stayed an hour or so but tonight he stayed in his car until the restaurant closed at midnight. Then, to be sure no one was still inside, he waited another hour then got out of his car with the Sports page of a rolled-up *Times* tucked under his left arm, opened his trunk, and took out a plastic jug full of gasoline.

Quietly he closed the trunk, looked all around, then made his way to the back of the oyster bar. He peered into two of the windows, again to make sure no one was inside, then splashed the gasoline across the back door. With an audible sigh, he lit the newspaper with his cigarette lighter, waited for it to catch fire, then threw the torch against the wooden door. A flame as bright as any of the stars out tonight slithered across the door. Smiling, he watched until the door burst into several flames then walked away, wishing there was something more he could do to alleviate his disappointment with himself.

EPILOGUE

"Wagon Four," Ida intoned. "A man in Turbot Park fell off a jungle gym. Possible concussion."

"We're on it," Snitker replied.

"Drive safe, you hear."

As he switched on the siren, Snitker looked over at Parsons. "I don't know if you heard but I saw on the news last night the remains of a woman were found in an apple orchard near the river."

"No, I didn't hear."

"I wonder if it could be Hessa."

"I doubt it."

"Could be, Cullen."

He didn't reply but stared out the window at an elderly woman who made the sign of the cross as the wagon sped toward her.

"You never know."

"Over the past eighteen months the remains of three other women were discovered near the river by people out walking their dogs and not one of them turned out to be Hessa so I very much doubt if it's her."

"You can't give up hope."

Oh, I can, he thought, and I have.

A panel truck ahead of them refused to move over and

Snitker blasted the driver with his horn.

He was all but certain she would never be found. Skaggs and Mudjuck made sure of that, the hicks. He thought when they went to prison earlier this year, Skaggs for distributing a controlled substance, Mudjuck for smuggling cigarettes, they might cut a deal with prosecutors and reveal what happened to Hessa but neither said a word about her. For so many months he held out hope she would be found but that never occurred so he refused to hope any longer because all it did was torment him.

Sometimes, when he happened to drive by the Cloisters, which still was a heap of rubble and burnt wood, he thought of Hessa but other than that she seldom crossed his mind. Hope was so cruel, always just out of his reach. He was too afraid to hope anymore because he knew it would only destroy him. So, he decided Hessa was someone he had never met. He had to, otherwise he could never forgive himself for not protecting her.

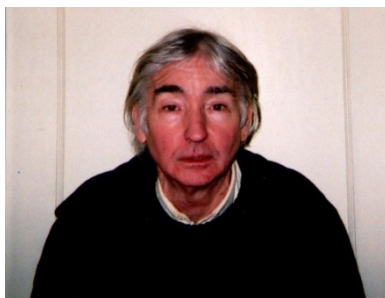
DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR CLUBS, CLASSES, OR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

- 1) Chapter 1: Was the abuse Parsons suffered from his foster mother the start of his sense of fear or was he someone who was always fearful?
- 2) Chapter 3: When the altar caught fire was this a confirmation of Parson's pervasive sense of fear or just something unexpected that occurred?
- 3) Chapter 5: Was Parsons ever really interested in purchasing the expensive watch at the PX or did he just want to get acquainted with the cashier?
- 4) Chapter 10: Was Parson's concern about being sent out to the remote outpost a particular fear or a manifestation of his general sense of dread?
- 5) Chapter 12: Parsons was not injured in the attack that killed Father Cahill and was upset because he couldn't protect the priest. Was this an expression of survivor's guilt? Did he think he should have perished too?
- 6) Chapter 19: Why was Parsons so protective of Hessa? Was it because he wasn't able to protect Father Cahill?
- 7) Chapter 21: Was Parson's anxiety about Mudjuck based on particular acts or did he regard Mudjuck as the personification of evil that must be confronted?
- 8) Chapter 25: Why does Parsons continue to write letters to Greer? Did he still want to stay in contact with her or was it a way of expressing his own thoughts on paper as a kind of personal diary?
- 9) Chapter 29: Did Parsons set the fire to punish Mudjuck or to overcome his own sense of fear?
- 10) When did Parsons first become so afraid?
 - i) Was it during his time in a foster home or overseas in a combat zone, or as an emergency medical technician?

- 11) What is the significance of Parsons' relationship with Hessa?
 - a) Is she someone he actually wants to protect from harm or is his concern motivated by the survivor's guilt he feels after the death of Father Cahill?
- 12) What is the author's point of view?
- 13) Does the author present Hessa as someone who really needs to be protected or is she merely an excuse for Parsons to overcome his guilt and his pervasive sense of dread?
- 14) What does fire symbolize? Is it destruction or salvation? Is it hope or failure? Is it the beginning or the end?
- 15) How is Parsons like Father Cahill?
- 16) How are the two men different?
- 17) Do they both have faith or do they pretend to have it? Do you have faith or do you pretend to have it? How so?
- 18) Compare the behavior of Parsons before and after the death of Father Cahill.
- 19) Compare the character of Parsons at the beginning of the story when he spent a week at a seminary and at the end when he became an arsonist.
- 20) Hypothesize what might have happened if Parsons remained a chaplain's assistant.
- 21) The overall theme of the story is how one is able to overcome fear. So, if Parsons continued to serve in the Army, would he still be a fearful person?
- 22) If the moral of the story is that fear can be overcome, is that realized when the former church is set on fire? Or is the fire nothing more than an expression of personal anger? What would symbolize the expression of your anger?
- 23) Was the commission of arson worth the cost? Was it a solution of any kind?
- 24) Did Parsons succeed in overcoming his sense of fear or did he merely deceive himself?
- 25) Had you been in Parson's position, would you do what he did or would you choose another way of coping with fear?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, T.R. Healy was baptized a Roman Catholic and attended eight years of parochial school. Following his graduation from Johns Hopkins, where he studied International History, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and served as a medical corpsman.



As for what led him to write this novel, Healy states, “Not all people are afraid of the dark but I was as a child growing up in a household bristling with anger and resentment. And, as I grew older, the darkness seemed to become more and more visible. It was not something I simply imagined. What I saw were not monsters and goblins but ordinary people who could present just as much of a threat. The novel was written to show how someone copes with fear. He can no longer pull the covers over his head as if he were still a child but must contend with it and try not to surrender to his worst instincts.”

To contact TR Healy, please use the contact box on ShelteringTreeMedia.com.

OTHER BOOKS BY TR HEALY

Red Right Hand. London: Golden Storyline Books. 2025.

Cruel Earth. Ohio: Offbeat Publishing. 2023.

Scratch. South Carolina: Gator House Publishing. 2019.

A Time of Times. New York: Tailwinds Press. 2018.

Red Weather. Maine: The Tri-Screen Connection. 2015.

Caught in the Cold Snows. Maine: The Tri-Screen Connection.
2013.

Partial Survivors. New York: The Write Deal. 2013.

Ancient Shadows. Colorado: Flarefont Publications. 2012.

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Here's a simple guide to help you leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, ShelteringTreeMedia, or any other book review site.

1. What to Write in a Review

Your review does *not* need to be long or complicated.

A few sentences is enough.

You can share:

- what you enjoyed
- what you learned
- how the book made you feel
- who you think would benefit from it
- your favorite part or takeaway

You do **not** need to summarize the entire book.

2. How to Leave a Review on Amazon

Step 1: Go to the book's Amazon page

Search for the title or use the link provided by the author.

Step 2: Scroll down to "Customer Reviews"

Click **"Write a customer review."**

Step 3: Choose a star rating

5 stars = excellent

1 star = poor

Step 4: Write your review

A few sentences is perfect.

Step 5: Click Submit

That's it — your review is live.

✓ 3. How to Leave a Review on Goodreads

Step 1: Log in to Goodreads

(You can create a free account if you don't have one.)

Step 2: Search for the book

Click on the correct edition.

Step 3: Click the stars to rate the book

This alone counts as a review.

Step 4: Click "Write a Review"

Add your thoughts and click **Save**.

✓ 4. How to Leave a Review on ShelteringTreeMedia.com

Step 1: Go to the ARC tab on ShelteringTreeMedia.com

Step 2: Scroll down to the Review box

Step 3: Fill in the form

Step 4: Click SUBMIT

ARC Team members will be sent a coupon once the review is posted under the Book Review blog.

✓ 5. Tips for Helpful Reviews

- Be honest
- Be kind
- Be specific
- Keep spoilers minimal
- Share how the book impacted you

✓ 6. Why Reviews Matter

Reviews help:

- authors reach new readers
- bookstores and libraries decide what to carry
- online algorithms recommend the book
- readers discover books that nourish their spirit

Your voice truly makes a difference.

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